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## REMEMBERING LÁSZLÓ ORSZÁGH (NOV. 8. 1907, SZOMBATHELY–JAN. 27. 1984. BUDAPEST)

*Országgh László professzor kézjegye mindmáig érezhető az anglisztika és az amerikanisztika számos ágazatán. Senki sem tud megtanulni angolul az ő kétnyelvű szótára nélkül, amely az Akadémiai Kiadó valóságos bestsellere lett; 437 oldalas monográfiája, Az amerikai irodalom története (1967) mindmáig használatos; a Hungarian Studies in English című évente kiadott folyóirat pedig, amelyet ő alapított 1963-ban és szerkesztett tíz éven át, az egyetem egyik fő exportcikke lett, mely folyamatosan tájékoztatta a nemzetközi tudományos közösséget a Kossuth Lajos Tudományegyetemen zajló anglisztikai és amerikanisztikai kutatómunka állásáról és minőségéről. Végredeletében Országgh professzor az egyetemre hagyományozta hatalmas könyvtárát: azóta az „Országgh-gyűjtemény” mind a hallgatóknak, mind a kutatóknak a rendelkezésére áll. Országgh professzor egyik legfontosabb öröksége azonban az az emberi tartás és tudósi példa, amelyet hallgatói elé állított.*

**Kulcsszavak:** egyetemtörténet, Országgh László, amerikanisztika, amerikai–magyar kapcsolatok

*REMEMBERING LÁSZLÓ ORSZÁGH. László Országgh was an educator in a varied and exceptionally broad sense of the word. Throughout an intense professional career and a lifetime of prolific achievement of over half a century he turned out to be a man of many talents, as well as an intellectual of numerous vocations and avocations: secondary-school teacher, university professor, lexicographer, a teacher of English studies and American literatures, as well as the founder and initiator of the discipline of American Studies in Hungary.*

**Keywords:** university history, László Országgh, American Studies, Hungarian-American relations

László Országgh was an educator in a varied and exceptionally broad sense of the word. Throughout an intense professional career and a lifetime of prolific achievement of over half a century he turned out to be a man of many talents, as well as an intellectual



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of numerous vocations and avocations: secondary-school teacher, university professor, lexicographer, a teacher of English studies and American literatures, as well as the founder and initiator of the discipline of American Studies in Hungary. Indeed, as we are going to see, our rough and ready list could be, cumulatively speaking, enhanced by dozens of additional listings and identifying tags could be applicable in his case. As it will be soon evident, we will have to ask some further queries to see what propelled him and pushed him forward to generate increasingly more knowledge in the service of the community of students and for the benefit of his fellow scholars. Thus, importantly, what assures him what seems to be a permanent place in the *Portrait Gallery of Educators*? Ultimately we will have to pose the inescapable question who Országh really is, was and has been for generations of students, scholars, and the international community of professionals. What indeed made him possess an indubitably firm commitment to those in his environment.

If we wish to ponder the tenor of Országh's manifold scholarly and administrative (organizational and logistical) achievements, we can choose a highly economical mode of public input: available evidence that comes to us through tradition. For instance, memorial plaques. These, in various sources, offer succinct orientation pertaining to the man and his work. Three such monuments will be briefly considered here. Firstly, on the second floor of the impressive main building of the University of Debrecen campus can be found the Institute of English and American Studies. One classroom has been set aside and named the László Országh Seminar Room. On the hallway next to the entrance door there is a black marble plaque with the following minimalist inscription (words and numbers are segmentized by //) Országh László//(1907-1984)// Former professor of English of Kossuth University's English Department//compiler of dictionaries//an outstanding Hungarian scholar of English//a pioneering initiator of American Studies in Hungary.

Secondly, on October 27, 2007, another national memorial plaque was unveiled in the country. This ceremony, attended by a large crowd, took place at the gate entry of Budapest's 12, Balaton street, a place where Országh resided for decades before his death, and which also became kind of Mecca for a number of former colleagues, disciples, faculty, and university managers, who came to meet Országh in his own home for an exchange of ideas, professional advice, personal reassurance, whatever.

The key-note speaker was the University of Debrecen's Professor Zoltán Abádi-Nagy, who used a poem by the contemporary poet Dezső Tandori as a vehicle of entry to harness Tandori's questions. "For ours is the kingdom" – after Dezső Tandori and the Lord's Prayer, free. In the virtuoso Tandori poem "Mert miénk az Országh" (Because my country is my country), the up-and-down world of László Országh's time is presented, with an Országh-view of the world and a wordy diagnosis of civilisation.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ABÁDI NAGY Zoltán. „Mert miénk az Országh”. *Magyar Szemle*, nr. 11–12. (2007), 157–161.



*László Országh used to live in this house. He was professor of the English Department of Debrecen's Kossuth University, editor-in chief of the Dictionary of the Hungarian Language. Founded American Studies in Hungary and was also a literary scholar. Erected in 2007 by his students, the University of Debrecen, the Institute of Linguistics of the Hungarian Academy, and the Academy Publisher.*



The site of a third celebratory event of this kind was Országh's hometown, Szombathely, where the city funded and organized the unveiling of a marble plaque on the outside wall of the professor's one-time home. In accordance with the professor's final wish, his remains were to find eternal peace in the family crypt located in the lower section of the church of the Salesian order.



*In this house was born László Országh (1907–1984),  
Philologist, dictionary writer, university professor of English and English Language Literatures,  
at the centenary of his birth.*

*Erected by the City of Szombathely*

In the February 25, 1984, issue of the daily paper entitled *Magyar Nemzet* (Hungarian Nation) the following text was printed: “Professor László Országh is dead. Perhaps there is no need to explain who he was. He was a first-rate linguist, a literary historian, a scholar of English, the beloved teacher of the one-time Eötvös Collegium. It would be quite a task to have to list all his books and periodical studies. His dictionaries have become legendary.” Although he had strong ties with Szombathely, the exemplary master lived the largest part of his life in two Hungarian cities: Budapest and Debrecen.

He came from an old, established family. His father, László Pekker, was a lawyer by training, was elected urban representative, then served as chief prosecutor as well as chair of the Meliorative Society. In 1925 the family decided to adopt the name *Országh* out of respect to the parents. He received his primary and secondary education in his hometown. Already in these early years his interest in foreign languages became increasingly more conspicuous. He studied Greek and Latin, as well as German, also French as an extra study option and took English as a private class. At the age of ten, he later reminisced, he received from his mother Schmidt’s small Latin-Hungarian dictionary, and while turning the pages of this useful present his first emphatic questions pertaining to dictionary-making were taking shape.

His university studies were launched at Eötvös College, which was the home of Hungary’s elite education, then, in the academic year of 1930–1931, he received a

scholarship to pursue his studies at Rollins College, Florida, a private American institution belonging to Winter Park, where in seminars offered by the literary historian F. L. Pattee he studied topics pertaining to the American literary culture.

His scholarship in the U.S. also made it possible for him to do extensive research in the Library of Congress and a number of other public libraries. In 1935, with his dissertation complete on the topic of issues in literary historiography, he received a Ph.D. from Budapest's Péter Pázmány University. From 1937 he was professor of Eötvös College, from 1942 he became chair of the Department of English of Budapest.

His tutorship at Eötvös College, a place where he himself had been trained, should be regarded as particularly significant, arguably the most significant of his teaching posts, not only for the subjective reason that it meant to him something like a homecoming, but chiefly because the College provided an inspiring, congenial environment and conditions ideally suited to his character and turn of mind. The number of those he taught there, during a period shorter than his term of professorship in Debrecen, was, no doubt, very small, almost negligible in comparison with that of the students who attended his various lectures and classes at the two universities mentioned. The groups he had for tutorials at Eötvös College generally consisted of no more than three or four persons each, and it happened once that for a whole academic year he had a "group" of only one freshman. A tutorial class as he conducted it under such circumstances, had the intimate atmosphere of a small workshop, with all participants, teacher and pupils, working in a spirit of co-operation, and mutual confidence, moreover, mutual respect, without feeling it necessary to reconcile conflicting opinions and to reach a consensus.

"He himself never forced his view on others, but by stating and arguing his point with utmost clarity, and patiently listening to other people's opinions, he set an example. As a truly great teacher, he transmitted a great deal of useful knowledge not only within the sphere of what could be defined, strictly and professionally speaking, as his 'subject'."<sup>2</sup>

In 1946 he was invited by the University of Debrecen to assume the chair of the English faculty, with the facilities of the Debrecen Department of English, which had been established eight years earlier by Sándor Fest and with much of it rather damaged during World War Two. Excluding the seven or so years of forced interval, when the Ministry of Education from the academic year of 1950 on closed it down for political reasons, the teaching of English at the Debrecen Department of English, Professor Országh, until his retirement in 1968, played a decisive role in the professional life of the University of Debrecen, then called Kossuth University.

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<sup>2</sup> RUTTKAY G. Kálmán. „To the Memory of László Országh”. In “The life and work of László Országh (1907–1984). A round table” *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* (HJEAS), vol 4, No.1/2, 1998. 367–406.



Throughout his academic career as teacher, Országh was proud of the years he had spent teaching secondary-school children. Even as an elderly professional, he took pleasure in attending the (language) classes taught by his one-time, younger disciples. He also maintained a large-scale correspondence with young teachers and school-children. From 1932 to World War Two he taught in Budapest's Érseki Katolikus Gimnázium ("Érseki" was one of the three high schools in Budapest that offered English in its curriculum), the present-day Rákóczi Gimnázium. He liked to reminisce his years spent as a secondary-school teacher.

He was capable of mobilizing extraordinary energies for classroom situations and worked hard, not sparing himself. "Laci,"<sup>3</sup> a friend of his remarked after auditing one of Országh's classes—"I cannot believe my eyes when I look at you. You are a joyful and quiet person. However, when you enter the classroom, you turn into a lion." Once he made the following remark to a would-be teacher: "Mark my words, young man. He who does not have to change at least two sweaty shirts per day, does not deserve to be called a teacher."

Imre Székely, a quondam pupil of Országh's, made this observation: "Országh" was a 'modern' teacher. In the 1930s one could seldom find a teacher who would hold a large portion of his spring and autumn classes in the schoolyard, in the open air. He also tried to modify the routine evaluation practices of the contact classes. At each language class he would focus on two or three pupils who were expected to perform for a grade, but he would also involve the rest of the class in joint activity. He made the teaching of the new vocabulary especially appealing by making bits of cultural history part of the lexical unit being taught as modern and lifelike secondary-school textbooks gradually saw print. From 1939 on throughout half a decade five language textbooks were published. Országh authored and co-authored altogether five volumes within the textbooks for secondary school project.

Part of his accomplishment as reflected in a dozen years in the 1950s and the 1960s was to oversee, as editor-in-chief, the project aimed at bringing out the Dictionary of the Hungarian Language. Many people consider this to be Országh's *opus grande*. The last part of this enormous, seven-volume dictionary, of which the last volume saw print in 1962, comprises in 7,416 pages and in 60,000 word-entries the standard vocabulary of the Hungarian literary and public language. It was partly due to this successful project that he was awarded the Jubilee Gold Medal of the London Institute of Linguistics, while he received the Hungarian Linguistic Society's memorial medal named after Miklós Révai<sup>4</sup>.

In his language teaching books and dictionaries it was Országh who – among the first in the word – introduced the phonetic alphabet of the International

<sup>3</sup> "Laci" (Leslie) is the diminutive form of László (Ladislav).

<sup>4</sup> Miklós Révai (1750–1807): Piarist monk, linguist, professor, the founder of Hungarian historical linguistics

Phonetic Association, used by now the word over in language courses as well as dictionaries. The most noticeable qualitative change when compared with its predecessor – notably Yolland’s English-Hungarian dictionary which counted as a standard work for 40 years – or even other contemporary bilingual dictionaries was the adequate selection of vocabulary. Critics of new dictionaries usually pick out words not included in the dictionary under review. For, they do not always seem to realize what a hard – if not impossible – task it is to select for inclusion the “most important” or “most frequent” (say) 40,000 English words out of a word-stock of nearly one million. The reason why Ország’s selection proved a success was that apart from choosing up-to-date dictionary-sources to rely on the widely read into present-day English, and recorded words in actual use from all walks of life, from all layers and registers of both spoken and written English. And that he did in the right proportion: he excluded hosts of obsolete and far-fetched words and compounds giving a coverage of a number of fields of knowledge such as electronics or engineering. In his selection however, Ország was careful not to discard literary words, for, he had the widest possible audience in mind. In other words, he was user-oriented in all aspects of lexicography... He was decades ahead of his time because he fully well knew the difference between what is called in today’s lexicographic jargon: dictionary of comprehension and dictionary of production. By writing on the theoretical aspects of lexicography he became internationally known. He took a great interest also in the origin and history of Hungarian words borrowed from transmitted by English. His last major opus in Hungarian lexicology was a monograph on the English elements in the Hungarian vocabulary.<sup>5</sup>

Judged by the professional standards of both the domestic and the international standards of scholarship, his enormous output left behind as part of the “Printed Legacy of Ország” is awesome. The updated bibliography of his work amounts to 215 items, the list itself comprising seven monographs and an equal number of textbooks. However, these publication figures appear to be even more telling if the multitude of material is translated into printed pages. The qualitative indexes are indicative of an exceptional commitment and activity. If we deduct from the overall number of pages the sum 13,114 (which is the sum total of pages standing for the English-Hungarian and Hungarian-English dictionaries of various sizes and editions), the transaction will leave us 5,837 printed pages for his other writings. This latter batch will include his book-size monographic studies such as *Az angol regény eredete* (The Origins of the English Novel [1941]), *Shakespeare* (1944), *Az amerikai irodalom története* (A History of American Literature [1967, 1997]), *Bevezetés az amerikanisztikába* (An Introduction to American Studies [1972]), *Angol eredetű elemek a magyar szókészletben* (Elements of

<sup>5</sup> MAGAY Tamás, “Chronica László Ország” *Aca Linguistica Scientinarium Hungaricae*, Tomus 34 (3–4), pp. 289–292 (1984)

English Origin in the Vocabulary of Hungarian [1977]) and other, edited volumes can also be classified in the first batch of the remaining group: for example his 400-page *Szótártani tanulmányok* (Dictionary Studies [1966]). The third group is made up of longer and shorter studies, textbooks, anthologies, prefaces, forewords, and afterwords, lexicon items, authors' portraits, critical remarks that go with publications, and so on.

„An overall survey of his works shows that he was keenly sensitive to what was modern in the way of topics and methods in his branch of learning, and the same time knew well that there were traditions worth upholding. One such tradition, handed down by some of his pioneering Hungarian forerunners was the study of contacts between Hungary and the English-speaking world; and he was aware that though all parties concerned could profit from the results, the task of doing the actual work fell to Hungarian scholars.”<sup>6</sup>

In 2007 Országh's biographer Lehel Vadon made the following observation regarding Országh's range as research scholar and promoter: Professor Országh first of all considered himself to be a teacher, and that is what he indeed was through and through, in the noblest possible senses. His personality ideally synthesized the teacher as such in the most unique manner. He was a prime arguer and decision maker in confrontational situations and his pedagogical insightfulness and his profound knowledge of the human spirit joined to hone his didactic and educational sensibilities. He was capable of being calculatingly determined and polite at the same time. He tended to be reassuring regarding others, but he was always ready to impact on others through example and self-discipline. He could inspire his disciples to attain new heights. The needy and the worthy usually received all the help and support from him. Behind his abstaining manner, cool elegance, deep-lying humour and, when necessary, smarting irony, there lurked an exceptional civility and educated humane inner core. His enormous knowledge and humane essence made him a firm believer in the unchangeability of the meaning of words.

The depth of his university lectures, and more typically of his seminars, his crystal-clear arguments, his personal attraction offered a lifetime of models for a whole generation of Hungarian students and would-be teachers. He was a teacher of principles with a firm belief in the unchangeability of words and thus in his own mental and political sovereignty.

In response to queries such as who Országh was, the answer most often takes the form of a rapid-fire enumeration of catalogue items: he was a linguist, a lexicologist, a lexicographer, a knower of high-power cultural alphabets, a diagnostician of meaningful cultural contacts between nations and ethnic communities, and more. We can find dozens of high-power configurations. What really amazes cultural experts is

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<sup>6</sup> RUTTKAY "To the Memory...", 367-406.



that in Országh's mechanism of appeals the evidently more powerful phenomenon does not tend to extinguish the apparently weaker image or configuration of this sort in Országh's thinking. Thus, for instance, his appeal as a bridge-builder does not seem to downgrade Országh's magnetism as a *européer*. It is thus clear that we are at this point talking about the distribution of energies pervading multilingualism and multiculturalism.

He loved to surprise—often astonish—the audiences of his lectures with his unexpected turns of phrase or idea. And then there was the László Országh whose every utterance was impeccable, and who could listen to what was being said with unrivalled interest. For others who knew him, it was Országh's personality and individuality (the oft-mentioned 'Országh phenomenon') that made him memorable.

As regards the general personal impact of his average appearance exercised on his contemporaries. An old high-school pupil of his, decades later, saw him as follows: "Országh was tall, with a straight posture, his brown hair slicked back and somewhat reminiscent of the fashion of the 1930s. He dressed simply yet smartly: well-pressed trousers and an English tweed jacket were his school clothes." He was a gentleman in the noblest sense of the word. In the case of Professor Országh, status and role were in perfect harmony, he looked, spoke, and acted like a professor. Besides, he probably had a profound effect on many people, and we can be sure that he changed the lives of many people by his personal example.

On 24 January, 1979, a presentation ceremony took place at the British Embassy in Budapest in the presence of invited distinguished Hungarian intellectuals. The importance of Országh's role as a cultural bridge-builder was recognised by the British government when it bestowed on him the well-earned British award.

It must have been an unbounded satisfaction for him that on that day in January, when he thanked the British for their recognition in English at a reception hosted by the British ambassador Richard Parson, who was acting on behalf of the British government, he did not fail to mention that more than 1 million copies of his dictionaries had already been sold.

His name is preserved in his own works, in the professional academic establishment of the specialists he appointed (the famous "Országh School"), in the László Országh Award, the Fulbright Országh Chair (the only American visiting professorship in the world, the only American studies professorship named after a non-American), in the László Országh Collection of American Studies, now in the possession of the University of Debrecen's University and National Library (DEENK), in the László Országh Walkway of the University of Debrecen's main campus, as well as in the memories of those who knew him.

On getting acquainted with the life and work of Professor Országh, in the mid-1990s one of the Fulbright Visiting Professors teaching in Debrecen offered this statement by way of brief comment:

“what a dynamite he was!”. “Long before my first visit to Hungary, I had already associated the name of László Országh with the study of American Literature. For Howard Mumford Jones, one of the commanding American American literary lectures on the successive histories of American literature: ‘Doubtless there exists somewhere a thorough survey of the problem of American literary history, but the only work I have seen is in Hungarian by Orszagh Laszlo, *Az amerikai irodalomtörténet-írás fejlődése*’ (Jones, Howard Mumford. *The Theory of American Literature*. 1948. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1965.). I’m not sure that Jones’ study can itself be said to have satisfied the requirements of a ‘thorough survey,’ and it was almost forty years before an ampler survey appeared. His important pioneering effort to trace the historical development of the various attempts to write the history of American literature had, in fact, been preceded only by what he described as Orszagh’s ‘suggestive’ book. And I must add that this Hungarian who had anticipated Jones was not yet thirty when his book was published in Budapest in 1935. By the time I arrived in Hungary in April 1980 to participate in the first international conference on American culture to be held in Budapest, I had learned as well of Orszagh’s great achievements as a lexicographer of the English language in Hungary. I glimpsed him once or twice - a tall, slightly stooped, pale man supported by a cane, moving with slow dignity through the crowd. But we did not meet until the following February when, as a Fulbright lecturer, I had returned to Hungary and was invited by Kent Bales, my Fulbright predecessor at Eotvos University, to join Orszagh and himself for lunch at the Margitkert restaurant on Rozsadomb hill. At the appointed time, I stood on the hill before the restaurant and could see Bales and Orszagh walking across the bridge from the Pest side. There had been no new snow since December, but it was cold and windy as they slowly ascended the hill. Standing there above the Danube, I thought again of the curious fact that it was a Hungarian who had written the first history of the histories of American literature. Yet I now knew also that this same Hungarian had been named a Commander of the British Empire, the highest honour bestowed by the Crown upon those who are not Englishmen, and had been so honoured for his making of an English-Hungarian dictionary that is primarily British in its standards of usage. ....

Orszagh’s decision to study instead in the United States occasioned surprise and dismay among his teachers in Budapest, who thought him both odd and misguided in choosing not to carry forward his education in England. But he held fast to his unconventional choice; and in 1930-1931 attended Rollins College, a good liberal arts school in Florida, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. He travelled extensively in America, accumulated books and notes, and acquired in his characteristically thorough way a detailed knowledge of American history and literature, of American customs and attitudes. In our conversations, I was always impressed not only by his broad understanding of American culture

but by the depth and particularity of his insights. At a time in Hungary when the authority of British English and British literature was unquestioned, Laszlo Orszagh was very likely the first Hungarian scholar in the field of English to study in the United States and to gain a professional knowledge of the American language and of American literature... When he accepted the chairmanship of the English Department at Debrecen in 1947, Orszagh was strongly inclined by his own interests and education to give American literature much fuller exposure than it had previously received in the Hungarian universities. Indeed, to this day, Debrecen's English Department is widely recognized in Hungary for the size and quality of its commitment to American studies. If there were no adequate American literature textbooks, Orszagh himself prepared some and stimulated the production of others. Through his seminars and the many theses he directed, through collaborative undertakings with younger colleagues, Orszagh directly educated more than one generation of students who knew American literature in addition to English literature. Through some of his first students, like Laszlo Kery and Kalman Ruttkay, he indirectly influenced yet other generations of students. When his students - and, subsequently, their students - became teachers of English in high schools and the several kinds of collegiate institutions, they -were far better prepared to teach both of the major national literatures written in the English language - Hawthorne as well as Hardy, O'Neill as well as Shaw - than were the graduates of the narrower English curriculum before Orszagh's reforms were quietly but definitively set into motion. In Charlotte Kretzoi's sophisticated history of colonial American literature, in Zoltan Abaai-Nagy's faithful translations and lucid analyses of post- 1950 experimental American fiction, in Zsolt Viragos's well-informed investigation of Black writing in America, and in the work of many others whose countless reviews, articles, books, and translations have generated the rich soil in which American literature has flowered so abundantly in Hungary since 1950, there is much that in one way or another derives from Orszagh. To have had the privilege of meeting Orszagh was to recognize that the scholar's choice is not inescapably between knowing one thing exceedingly well and knowing many things only superficially. Orszagh, as lengthening acquaintance made it increasingly evident, knew many things exceedingly well. He was a better Americanist perhaps than any of his academic contemporaries; and his scholarship in the field of English philology and literature was equally magisterial, supreme both in its distinction and its influence... He was, in Henry James's fine phrase, 'one of the people on whom nothing is lost.' He seemed ready for anything; his wide-ranging outlook culminated in penetrating insight and shrewd judgement."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> SIMON Myron, "A Fulbrighter's Memory of László Orszagh". *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 4.1.2 1998. pp. 407-411.



*Angol szakosok 1966. májusában.*

*Students majoring in English in May 1966*



*The teaching faculty of the Department of English in the 1960s*



*On his retirement, in 1968*

*László Országh: A Personal Memoir*

I had known László Országh for more than half a century. He had been my teacher though I never learned anything from him. His first job was to teach English in my high-school—the Érseki Katolikus Reálgimnázium, known also as the Rákóczianum— where that language was a compulsory subject in the last four years of an eight-year curriculum. It so happened that I never attended classes. By a special arrangement (*magántanuló*) I had to present myself once a year for a comprehensive, thus rather difficult, examination, but I was dispensed from school attendance. In the last year of high school, with the dreaded final examination, the *érettségi*, approaching, Országh sent me word to the effect that if I continued with my former practice, I might be faced with difficulties. I ignored the warning with its ominous undertones. Yet in the course of the examination there was no resentment in Országh's attitude towards me. He



examined and judged me with perfect objectivity and gave me the grade “2” which at that time—translated—meant “good”. I do not think I deserved any better. Following our graduation banquet, a nice black-tie affair, Országh (who was but nine years our senior) joined, some of us in eating the traditional bean soup served in the small-hours in some restaurants of Budapest. We happened to sit side by side and he asked what I intended to do now, with my secondary education behind me. I told him that I wanted to become an orientalist. “Ah”—said he—“in the Eötvös Kollégium I had known one man with the same ambition. First he went nuts, then he killed himself. An interesting case.” We gazed at each other over the bean soup in the dusky dawn, Országh erect, as always somewhat aloof. “I hope you’ll make it: Lajos Ligeti seems to have succeeded”, he concluded. This was the first time I heard mentioned the name of the young professor who, a few months later, started on the thankless task of teaching me at the university. My next encounter with Országh was in the summer of 1956 when I bumped into him in the corridor of the Nyelvtudományi Intézet in Budapest. He recognized me, remembered our conversation over the bean soup and asked what had become of me. He was carefully dressed, with a type of hat not much in favour at that time, and greeted people with the amazingly obsolete “*van szerencsém*”. For some years prior to that time English studies had been frowned upon in Hungary and Országh devoted his splendid talent as a lexicographer to the monumental task of editing the big Hungarian-Hungarian dictionary, the *Magyar Értelmező Szótár*. He must have suffered immensely in the course of the previous, unpleasant years and, quite clearly, handled me with great caution. By the time we next met, in the Fall of 1963, his reserve had evaporated. To my, and his own, surprise, he turned up in Bloomington, Indiana, with—if I remember correctly—a Ford Fellowship. He stayed at Indiana University for a certain period and amazed everyone with the vastness of his knowledge and his superb command of English. I remember an evening in the home of Professor Cady—a respected expert of American literature—where he displayed his mastery of the subject in a modest, almost casual way. At that time, in 1963, my colleagues at Indiana University were not used to receiving scholars working “behind the Iron Curtain”, and could scarcely believe that an expert in American literature of Országh’s caliber might exist in those regions. I think it is safe to say, that Országh had little sympathy for the Hungarian political system of the first half of the 1950s. Yet, even when provoked, he did not allow himself to be drawn into any political discussion, he did not criticize, he never complained, not even to me. By then both of us were in a period of our lives when the age barrier no longer existed; two middle-aged men who were exchanging views on a great variety of subjects. I had just built a solitary house in the woods which he and I walked together. He loved the place, and his familiarity with nature was a cause of constant surprise to

me. Trees, flowers, ferns, animals, rocks—he recognized them all and gave their names in English, Hungarian, and Latin. He also impressed me with his deep understanding of American life. Before World War II, Országh applied for, and received a fellowship which took him to Florida. This stay in the United States left an indelible mark on Országh. He acquired a feel for what America really is, an understanding of how the system works. I have never met any Hungarian with a similar grasp of American culture—in the widest sense of this term.

From then on, and for many years, we kept in touch. He asked me to help his students to come to America, and as a result of our joint efforts, a number of young Hungarian graduate and post-graduate students could spend a year or two at Indiana University, teaching Hungarian and acquiring direct experience of American life. In the Summer of 1983, during some negotiations between my own and Debrecen University, I noted with pleasure that on the opposite side of the table I could count three young scholars who had some training in Bloomington. Országh was a bachelor, not particularly friendly or outgoing, and his cool detachment led some to believe that he knew little of what happened in Hungarian society beyond his own circle. This was not so. Országh was something of a gossip, with an astounding knowledge of trivia about almost any one in Hungary. I once asked him in a letter whether he could give me some information about a certain Mr. X, a not particularly famous person. Országh was in California with no means of obtaining information concerning the gentleman. Yet Országh's reply was immediate and began with the sentence "I don't know Mr. X". This curt statement was followed, by a detailed, witty description of Mr. X's public and private life, with thumb-nail sketches of the background of the wives he had, why and how he divorced, and numerous data on his family, habits, jobs he held, etc. Every time Országh recommended someone, or when I asked him about a student, he always provided information on the background, family, etc. of the person in question. Although verbally he could make rather devastating remarks, his immense good will towards the younger generation shone through all his letters. Perhaps sometime, after I have followed Országh where he has now gone, some students will write a short notice on our correspondence. After his retirement our contacts became less frequent... He sent me his article on some English words in Hungarian with the remark that it constituted his scholarly swan-song. He died in the year in which my old class celebrated the 50th anniversary of their graduation. We missed him at that reunion and many of us had many stories to tell about him. Országh played a close hand, but he played it straight and well. I respected and liked that man.<sup>8</sup>

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In honour of his life's work and his figure, the Hungarian Society for the Study of English was founded the László Országh Prize in 1997, and the first prize was officially announced and awarded at the European Anglistics Society's conference in Debrecen, in the same year. The László Országh Prize is awarded to a Hungarian or foreign lecturer or teacher of English who has made an outstanding contribution to his fields of study bearing the name of the professor, especially the history of English literature, American studies and linguistics.<sup>9</sup>



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