

Remembering Albert Szent-Györgyi

Honoured Guests!

The scientific world, our town and the universities of Szeged have suffered a sad loss. The Nobel Prize winner, Professor Albert Szent-Györgyi, honorary free citizen of Szeged, honorary doctor of our universities, who achieved worldwide fame for Hungarian science, died on October 22, at the age of 93. We have lost an extremely versatile man and an outstanding scientist who worked in Szeged for one and a half decades, a former lecturer, Dean and Rector of our universities, a friend of the young and a humanist peace fighter. He investigated the secrets of life, but was finally defeated physically by old age.

We pay respectful tribute to the man and scientist, his rich, creative life, and his humanity. I ask you to pay tribute to Professor Szent-Györgyi's memory by standing in silence for a minute.

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There has scarcely been a Hungarian scientist, about whom so much has been written and whose death was remembered on five continents, as Albert Szent-Györgyi. The volume of writings about him shows the many sides of his rich personality and give us insight into his thoughts about life, science and his humanistic principles. After his unexpected death, the writings about him suddenly multiplied. A summary of his work in Szeged is to be published soon.

Our commemoration today cannot be free of repetitions, but we wish to present the professor and scientist to our guests through the reminiscences of a former student and coworker, the chairman of the town council and the two universities. The name of Professor Szent-Györgyi has become inseparable from the town of Szeged and its universities. The most enlightened sons of Szeged battled for a century to establish a university and then to retain it. The exemplary willingness to make sacrifices and the pride of the town did not fail in achieving this goal: in less than two decades the university rid itself of its transplanted character and became an organic part of the life of Szeged. The sacrifices of the town for the university largely served the purposes of the medical faculty. The establishment of these clinics as well as the research institutes in Dóm Square did not only mean modern development in the inner city, but also contributed greatly to the improvement of public health in Szeged. There was no institution in the town that directly or indirectly could have served the town to the same extent as the university. The collapse following the defeat of the Hungarian Soviet Republic and the Treaty of

Versailles turned Szeged into a frontier town setting back all the economic and cultural boom that had characterized preceding decades in the town. Thus the sacrifice made in the University's interests also made restore the former cultural role of the town and to re-establish it as the cultural center of the southern part of the country. Economic stagnation and unemployment, student poverty and a lack of teaching staff, antisemitic riots and the hatred of other nations, social inequality and rigid traditions awaited Professor Szent-Györgyi on his arrival in Szeged from England.

It was at the suggestion of Kunó Klebelsberg that the University Council invited the already internationally known young scientist who as a young man had studied everything that a biologist can study to raise the scientific reputation of the University and to fill the Chair of Medical Chemistry. Earlier he had studied and carried out research work in Pozsony, Bratislava, Prague, Berlin, Hamburg, Leiden, Groningen, Rochester and Cambridge. The fame of his research spread through international scientific circles. He was 33 when at the international congress in Stockholm his name was mentioned three times in the presidential opening speech, more frequently than anybody else's. At the age of 35, in 1928 in Cambridge, he discovered a substance, which later in Szeged turned out to be vitamin C; this discovery made him one of the best-known scientists in the world.

Professor Szent-Györgyi moved to Szeged in September 1930 and at the very first sight he contradicted all pre-conceived ideas of scientists. He was a cheerful athlete, full of energy and with a thirst for action. At the same time he was sensitive to the arts, especially music, an embodiment of the university of body and soul, an embodiment of kalokagathia. The bust of Szent-Györgyi by Gábor Vágó represents him in the style of the classical statues of athletes. In old photos we see a man deep in thought or relaxed in the arts. His modernity, his being different, surprised those around him. His sincerity and informality, irrespective of who he had dealings with, developed in the atmosphere of the bourgeois democracies, gained him friends and created critics. The group of his young coworkers became at once a large family and an enthusiastic team with a freedom of thought and errors, but working hard together as equals. His institute was a small island of democracy in the sea of semi-feudal Hungary drifting towards fascism.

Success followed success. In 1931 he discovered vitamin C. At this time he was already an internationally known scientist, he was receiving many invitations to lecture abroad, and was a member of many Hungarian and foreign scientific institutes and societies. The substantial support of the Rockefeller foundation was of great help to him in the difficult conditions in this country. In his first years in Szeged he devoted himself to research, but he played an important role also in ensuring the continued existence of the Medical Faculty in Szeged. During the term in office of Minister Bálint Hóman, Klebelsberg's principle of decentralization was replaced by uniform standardization of the cultural activities and increased control. Many departments first of all in the provincial universities fell victim to the new cultural policy and the economic restrictions. In the budget of 1932/33 the economic pressure envisaged a reduction of 70 departments and the closing of the University of Szeged, or at least the closing of the Medical Faculty in Szeged. The accusing and threatening declaration of Professor Szent-Györgyi played an important role along with the protest of the town of Szeged in thwarting Hóman's plan. Professor Szent-Györgyi threatened to leave the country if the faculty was closed.

Together with István Rusznyák and others he discovered vitamin P and used it in therapy, which earned him new domestic and foreign recognition and distinction.

Then on 28 October 1937 he won the still unique distinction in our country, the Nobel Prize. The first Nobel Prize in this country greatly increased the interest of foreign scientists in the scientific work going on at the University of Szeged and an increasing number of them visited the clinics and research institutes here. The name of the town and of its university became known throughout the scientific world, and this was all the more appreciated by the citizens of Szeged because it was connected with the typical product of the region, the paprika of Szeged. As Rector József Gelei said at an extraordinary session of the University Council, "...I regard the merits of Szent-Györgyi in many respects as merits of Szeged. His education broadened here partly through the help he gave to his students in research, partly through the paprika of Szeged, and I myself would like to stress that Szent-Györgyi's rising reputation is closely connected with the fact that he was invited by the University of Szeged, and that Szeged is a world-famous centre of paprika production. The honour that Szent-Györgyi has achieved in being awarded the Nobel Prize results also in glory to our University which sheds a favourable light on the scientific activity going on here."

At the council session of the Medical Faculty Szent-Györgyi refuted the glory with his usual modesty, saying that he was helped by two great forces. "One force is that which called our University into existence: it overwhelmed me with kindness and love and created favourable conditions for scientific work, true to the principle that a small nation has to maintain and defend itself with the weapons of culture. The other force is the friendly affection that has always surrounded me in the Faculty and which dispelled my worries and created a calm atmosphere for me. Therefore the recognition I have just received is due not to me in the first place, but to the University, which supported me, the circle of friends who made my work possible, the great ideal community, the aim of which is to get to know the unknown and to serve the country in a peaceful cultural struggle."

His gentle pacifism manifested itself first in his radio talk of 6 November 1937, which later developed into a fight against fascism and a bold peace struggle against the Vietnam war and atomic war when he was older.

"People of science", he said, "work first of all for peace. From their scientific discoveries they unfortunately forge most often the means of destruction, which then destroy the very results of science. I firmly believe that the principle of peace will sooner or later be victorious."

He went to receive his Nobel Prize as an honorary freeman of Szeged. Perhaps not a few people in the world learned from the press and the radio that there was a small town on the banks of the Tisza River whose young university had given a Nobel Prize winner to the world of science. The professor taught also at the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Science. Thus it was that this Faculty conferred on him the degree of honorary doctor in 1938. In the spirit of enthusiasm following the high distinction decisions were made to eternalize the name of Szent-Györgyi and the memory of the Nobel Prize (naming a square after him, building the Szent-Györgyi villa, a statue, etc.), but besides the formalities of the honours conferred on him the people of Szeged kept the memory of the glorious day in their hearts. In spite of allurements abroad and at home, Szent-Györgyi remained in Szeged; he wanted nothing but the love of his fellow-citizens.

He took up another branch of research. In the study of the oxygen uptake of muscle tissues he achieved such important experimental results that it was on their basis that Hans Krebs discovered one of the most important chemical transformation processes in the organism, the citrate cycle, which is rightly named

after Szent-Györgyi-Krebs cycle. It is superfluous to stress in Szeged that Szent-Györgyi's work still inspires hosts of researchers.

After the return of the University of Kolozsvár in 1940, he became the first Rector of the newly established University of Szeged. During his term of office he introduced several democratic reforms, fought against the drift toward fascism at the University, founded his democratic youth organization, created a club for the youth, and his students played Hamlet on the university stage. Szent-Györgyi broke down the barrier between teachers and students and set an example to the country for the development of a more democratic, more attractive student life. His reform proposals for the middle schools and universities were boldly progressive. On account of his progressive ideas he was attacked more and more sharply in parliament and in the right-wing press, which also affected his health. In 1942 he became leader of the resistance group named after him and in 1943 he conducted talks with the British in Istanbul about Hungary changing sides. He was placed under police surveillance, persecuted by the Gestapo, and Hitler demanded his extradition. After the occupation of Hungary by the Germans he was obliged to go into hiding.

On January 10, 1945, Soviet soldiers brought him out of hiding and he and his wife became the guests of the Soviet high command. On February 9 he visited Szeged, but from April 27 he was already Head of the Institute of Medical Chemistry at the University of Budapest. Thus the direct contact between Professor Szent-Györgyi and the University of Szeged was broken for a long time. In the capital he carried on wide-ranging political and scientific political activities, then from 1947 he worked in the US as director of the Myological Research Institute of the Naval Laboratories at Woods Hole. His connections with Szeged were at this time limited to correspondence. From the sixties on, news of his scientific results and of his writings in the interests of strengthening peace arrived more and more often, and the Hungarian press, radio and television interviewed him more and more frequently. He came home in 1973 and on October 12 the degree of honorary doctor of Szeged University of Medical Sciences was conferred on him. Two moments of the touching event characterize the warmth of his perpetual connection with Szeged. In his speech he said: "... I am honorary doctor of several universities, but the present distinction, the present diploma, is doubly precious to me due to the fact that it is given to me by my own country, my own university. I still don't have a house on the Tisza riverside. My house stands beside another great water, I am now working in another country. My work belongs to the whole of mankind, but I seize this opportunity to declare that I am a Hungarian and I feel I belong to this country...". About the celebration he wrote in the guest book of our University: "What made this celebration particularly brilliant was not the pomp and circumstance, but the warm affection, which is the highest human value. This ceremony was one of the most outstanding events of my eventful life, for I have never met with so much affection, appreciation and warmth."

Ladies and Gentlemen!

It would be unworthy of the memory of Professor Szent-Györgyi to limit ourselves only to remembering. Our University has never forgotten its world famous scientist, and work has been going on for years to immortalize him in Szeged. At scientific conferences we have often dealt with his work. The last international congress associated with Szent-Györgyi's name was held only in August this year. In our teaching we have often remembered him and used his scientific results. Within the framework of the Festival Weeks in Szeged we mounted an exhibition in our central office building. A full account of his work in Szeged has been compiled and published in an abridged form, and the Szent-Györgyi monograph is to be published soon. The assignment of a place for the rich material of documents and objects of our Szent-Györgyi memorial museum and its standing exhibition is to take place in the near future. According to the plans of my predecessors, the late Rectors, and in agreement with the decision of the Rector's council I announce that we have asked that our University be allowed to bear the name of Professor Szent-Györgyi.