

## **A citizen of Szeged had the honour of winning the Nobel Prize**

### **Honoured Guests!**

It is nearly six decades since Albert Szent-Györgyi became Professor and Head of the Institute of Medical Chemistry at the University of Szeged. He was a citizen of this town for fifteen years and after the Liberation in 1944 he was its guest, most recently and unfortunately for the last time in October 1973, when he came to the inauguration of the Biological Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and when at the same time the title of honorary doctor of his former university was conferred on him.

The people of Szeged received the elderly scientist with great respect, affection, and joy, — the man in whom they saw, not without justification, a son of our town, for Albert Szent-Györgyi had given many signs of his attachment to Szeged. At the degree ceremony he declared: "I was glad to come back to my home country to visit those places where I used to live and work, to meet those with whom I used to work, and to see what has become of my students. My coming had also another purpose: I wanted to recharge the batteries of my emotions. I wish to strengthen the ties that link me with Hungary and the University of Szeged." At his home in Woods Hole in 1981 he recalled the time he had spent here: "I went to Szeged to work there. The conditions were assured, with everything there together: the laboratory and the coworkers. Besides this quiet was needed, which I also found in that place. I always like to think back on the years I spent there." We were, of course, very glad to read these words of his.

In our country only Szeged has had the honour of having a Nobel Prize winner; an excellent scientist, who achieved a great deal of the results which this distinction recognized in the course of the scientific research work he carried out here, and who found the material of his sensational discovery in the typical product of this region, paprika. He himself said that his study of paprika was the key to his success.

It would of course be silly to think and boast that what the genius discovered here is thanks to the merit of Szeged. Yet it is surely permissible and understandable — although chance also had a hand in it — that Szeged should be proud of Albert Szent-Györgyi and that it should consider his work here as a scientist and university professor a fact, an event and a triumph in the cultural history of the town. It is clear that in this reciprocal relation between Szent-Györgyi and Szeged it is the town of Szeged that has more to be thankful for because it was through Albert Szent-Györgyi that the world learned of another aspect of Szeged, namely that important scientific work is going on here for the benefit of mankind, and it was through him that the fame of Szeged reached many places where until then the people had not

even heard of this town, and its fame grew where the people had not previously known in which corner of the world it was to be found.

Amid the enthusiastic celebration of the people of Szeged and the young people at its university, at the extraordinary general assembly of the city council the Nobel Prize winning scientist became the freeman of the city, the scientist who — as we can read in the minutes of the assembly — “earned fame for the town of Szeged” and carried on research “under difficult circumstances in a hostile, turbulent period, when misdirected science made life precarious”. In his reply Szent-Györgyi said among other things: “It is gratifying that the people of Szeged have taken a liking to me; I have also taken a liking to the town, which has given a home to the University”. Already in the statement he gave to the press his desire for peace is apparent, which he expressed so many times, in many places, and in many forms: “It is creative work and not destruction that leads to the prosperity of nations.”

Ever since, the citizens of the town have been cherishing the memory of our popular scientist faithfully. This faithfulness to the memory of the professor of our University is well exemplified by the noble initiative that has developed under the auspices of the Szeged University of Medical Sciences and under our watchful eyes. Its aim is to collect any documents, objects, and intellectual material connected with Albert Szent-Györgyi, especially from the years of his stay in Szeged and his links with this town. Hundreds of gifts, of greater and lesser importance, yet certainly valuable data, carefully guarded or long mislaid treasures have come into the hands of our zealous caretakers (Tibor Szabó and Andor Zallár) and into the collection of the Szent-Györgyi Memorial Museum now in preparation. Many other signs also show how much sympathy accompanies this noble enterprise even on the part of those who themselves can contribute nothing more than their interest and attention.

The City Council of Szeged is preparing with carefully and responsibly its plans for how the city and its inhabitants should show their gratitude to their freeman, Albert Szent-Györgyi. We wish to make a lasting contribution to the memory of this great man.

The thought comes to us involuntarily: What is it that gives rise to such wide interest? It is certainly not only local patriotism or pride that this giant in the field of science history was connected with our town. I think there is much more behind it: the charm of an extremely colourful renaissance-type personality, a great thinker with a universal interest in the things and problems of the world, one who captivates the minds of millions with his clear truths by introducing them to the secrets and facts of the world, nature and society.

I think the secret of this extraordinary popularity, if it can be called a secret, is Albert Szent-Györgyi's behaviour as a human being, his modesty, purposefulness, his vitality even in old age, his persistence, or at least the purity of his mind, his solicitude for mankind, and his wise humanism. In his works he stress that science is for man and for humanity. We may say that he worked according to this principle throughout his long and successful career. We may call this view of life and science humanitarian, but also public and political. If we examine the content of his humanitarianism, it can best be linked to the humanism of the period of Enlightenment in its progressivity and scientific basis. His philosophy agrees with Marxism in many ways, but in at least as many others it differs from it. What however cannot be denied is his devotion to human progress, the cause of peace, and the need for peaceful coexistence of the nations.

On reading his writings, statements and speeches we can admire with what persistence the thought of the social responsibility of the scientist recurs in them

from his youth right up until the twilight of his life; the thought of how research or technical progress benefits man or turns against him. Time and time again this raises worries and doubts in him. "Man has only been able to free energies, but has not yet learned how to use them" he says in one of his writings. This recognition, his mind open to the world and to its horrors, led him to make repeated warnings of the dangers of nuclear weapons. This was what brought him into opposition with his extreme right-wing fellow scientist, Ede Teller, also of Hungarian origin and known as father of hydrogen bomb. This was what led him to protest to Nixon in a sharply worded letter against the war in Vietnam and against other adventures as well as the craze of the armaments drive. A thought occurs to him and he expresses it in words: "What is the good of research? Should science not be halted till mankind grows up, which is absolutely necessary to ensure that it can handle the power gained by science?" It is the optimistic, responsible scientist that speaks out in Szent-Györgyi when he rejects this alternative because he believes that the progress of science promises a way out of the problem. Other, earlier stages of Szent-Györgyi's career also give proof of his social and political devotion. With his unusual sensitivity he felt the approaching danger of fascism and war. His statement made to the newspaper *Népszava* when he was going to receive the Nobel Prize is proof of this. In November 1937 he said: "The man of science in the whole world today... is concerned with the question of peace. Our work, our endeavours are in vain if from our discoveries the means of destruction are forged and the fruit of our peaceful work is destroyed by a world conflagration. ... There is a frightening political tension today, although there could be enough room to live in and food to eat for everybody. Only we ought to respect each other more and we ought to believe in the power of love and construction more than in the power of destruction."

He voiced a similar warning when the Nobel Prize was handed over to him and in his statement made on Stockholm radio. There can be no doubt that his words referred to the danger of Nazism when he said: "The causes of the present tensions and hatred are not in the human soul ... we ought to believe more in the power of love than in the power of violence. We ought to pay more attention to the slaughter of people even if it is called war." Then in conclusion he said: "Nations can stand not only one above the other, but also peacefully side by side." The humanitarian-thinking scientist proclaimed here the necessity of the power of love, but he could also hate, and the constraint of history, the threat of fascism prompted him to dangerous actions. His activity at the University of Szeged proves this, and his acceptance of this constraint took him out of the laboratory and the world of university education into the world of politics. His activity at the University of Szeged proves this, and his acceptance of this constraint took him out of the laboratory and the world of university education into the world of politics. His activity at the University of Szeged, his educational and youth political reform program, the creation of a united, progressive youth organization, were only the first stage in this development, because of which he was sharply attacked in parliamentary debates and in the press, although progressive press organs and such persons as Lajos Kassák and László Németh supported him.

From 1941 he took an active part in the bourgeois antiwar movement. He was an active member of the Szent-Györgyi Organization. It was on this basis that he went on his adventurous mission to Turkey with the aim of establishing connections with the Anglo-Saxon powers. It was thus that he came into contact with Prime Minister Miklós Kállay, with István Bethlen, who was a background influence in

Hungarian political life at the time, and he even came into contact with the Governor, Miklós Horthy.

Best known to the public in the resistance record of the professor is his mission to Turkey. Historical research has unveiled, though not fully, the role that he played in the movement led by Imre Alpári, former justice of Heves county, and István Fráter, councillor of the Ministry of the Interior, and in which Szent-Györgyi was considered for the post of Prime Minister during the political period after the planned landing of British and American forces in the Balkans. The public similarly knows little of the fact that on his return from Istanbul and at the suggestion of the British Intelligence Service, it was on his initiative and with his active participation that the movement led by Alpári and his group began to form an armed wing, the organization of armed action groups, which came to a tragic end.

The scientist, who changed from research work to politics, was obliged to go underground after March 19, 1944, that is after the occupation of Hungary by the Germans. For a time the Swedish Embassy granted him asylum. Then, when the Gestapo discovered his hiding place, he went into hiding elsewhere and lived in difficult circumstances, in danger of his life, and was in the vicinity of Városliget when Liberation by the Red Army came in 1944.

After 1945 he took an extremely active part in the reviving Hungarian democratic public life. As he writes in his reminiscences, he was convinced that he had a mission: "I must help the crushed Hungarian culture." He did his share in the effort to reorganize the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and sharply criticized the learned society, which had earlier found its worthiest leader in Archduke Joseph, and declared that the organization was to a large degree responsible for the national catastrophe. He was of the opinion that the Academy in its composition, in its organization at that time, did not represent the founder Széchenyi's conception and that it could become the "citadel of independence and progress" only by reorganization.

Szent-Györgyi was also the founding president of the Hungarian-Soviet Cultural Society. At the invitation of Soviet scientists he visited Moscow (where he had already been in 1935) and, as we can read in the interview he gave to the newspaper Szabad Nép in August 1945, he returned from there with very favourable impressions.

Knowing his efforts for educational and pedagogical reforms, we cannot be surprised at the fact that he readily accepted a leading post in the National Council of Public Education. His proposals made for a democratic transformation of the school system are valid even now. He helped to develop the movement of people's colleges. He took part in, and spoke at, the third congress of the Hungarian Communist Party. The subject of his speech was of course science, support for research work, and the relationship between scholarly activity, democracy, and society.

He lived and worked in the liberated country for one and a half years, then in 1946, on a ski tour in Switzerland, he decided not to return home. Exploration of the causes is yet to be made. What we already know — he himself said so — is that one of his friends was arrested, but the political events of the coalition period, the trend of the political development also alarmed him.

He left Hungary and settled in America. His attitude towards his country changed with the passage of time. In the years of the cold war his position became even precarious. But the policy of his chosen home, the craze of the armaments drive, the murderous, destruction war in Vietnam with its cruelty, all these roused his conscience and directed his attention again to Hungary.

He never disowned his Hungarianness or Hungary, nor did his home country disown him. He was a Hungarian scientist and he professed to be one. "I am a Hungarian now as ever and my home country is Hungary" he said. He first came home in 1973. On this occasion he also came to Szeged, as I have have mentioned. Then in 1978 he was member of the delegation which brought the crown of Saint Stephen home from the United States.

Several of his works have been translated and published, his statements on radio and television were heard by millions, and his compatriots could become acquainted with his views, his work and recent research also through these channels.

In 1983 the Presidential Council awarded him the Banner Order decorated with rubies. Unfortunately this distinction could not be handed over to him in Hungary.

His death is a great loss to the whole of mankind. His departure is particularly sad for our small country, for this nation, on which the glory of his success shone for a long time. It is a great sorrow for us, people of Szeged, who have lost in him a great man who was intimately connected with us. His eventful and successful career, his love of life and humankind, his deep humanism must be an example to us who have a noble obligation: the preservation of the memory of this great man and the handing down of his memory to succeeding generations.