

## The character of Albert Szent-Györgyi

### Honoured Audience!

Having been given the privilege of delivering the closing speech of this session, I find it hard to add anything to all the merits that have been mentioned by the various speakers about Albert Szent-Györgyi's career, scientific results and his long and deep friendship with our town. Still, we may gain a more complete portrait of the man himself if I conclude with an attempt to show something of the character that belongs not so much to a world-famous scientist as to an extraordinary man.

Today we have heard of Albert Szent-Györgyi that his view of life was close to the humanism of enlightenment. He would, however, not only wisely observe the ferment of life around him but he always strived to change it. He wanted to live a complete life, bravely risking, when necessary, his convenience and security. In this sense, he can be viewed as a renaissance-type individual with the touch of a polyhistor: he was not only a scientist with a range of knowledge covering anatomy to theoretical physics but also a scholar of the humanities ranging from poetry to practical politics.

We have heard that he was an optimist. Let me add a little colour to this undoubtedly true statement. It is also true in the sense that he always radiated optimism around him. But he did have some moments in his life when he was left alone with science and the responsibility for his country. He was aware of what the great Italian philosopher, Gramsci, had formulated in the following way: "In certain situations optimism is the utmost cowardice." Everyday optimism would have urged him to strive for survival for during both the first and the second world wars. But he did not do that. He tore himself free of the catastrophe of the war risking both his life and honesty. And a quarter of a century later he was the first scientist in the country who bore the risk of mortal danger in order to try and help his home country. His epic adventure reminds us of Attila József's lines: "I set off against gods — with no trembling heart — in a slight white garment". Albert Szent-Györgyi's bravery — *nomen est omen* — was that of the dragon-killing knight who knew he might lose the battle but still attacked the dragons: the Nazi Empire, and years later, the monster of cancer.

We have heard here about Szent-Györgyi as a patriot, about his relationships with his home country, that of a stone cast upwards. He spent half of his life far away, still there are few Hungarians who can have done more for the fame of their country than Albert Szent-Györgyi. Nowadays it sounds anachronistic to talk about the Hungarian Genius, since earlier this notion was linked with retrograde and harmful national self-importance and pride. Still, we can scarcely doubt that the best spirits which every nation produces are firmly rooted in her material presence

and historical past. In this sense Szent-Györgyi has embodied the Hungarian Genius; and this does not conflict with what he writes in his reminiscences: "I have betrayed feudal Hungary", nor does it conflict with the fact that he spent more than four decades abroad. The reflection of his true feelings towards his country is expressed in his face beaming with happiness in the photos taken in the seventies on the two occasions when he visited Hungary, which are exhibited in the Assembly Hall of the university. We shall preserve in our memory as a symbolic fact his last homecoming when the crown of our King Stephen was returned.

And he was a citizen of the Globe not only during the fifteen years he spent in Szeged as a beloved townsman among the inhabitants of our town but also in the years abroad. In the intervals between his journeys he would, besides the exact sciences, amuse himself with culture and sport — the other two great gifts of antiquity. His love for mankind mingled with anger, much in the same way as Biblical prophets and great Hungarian poets loved their nation. At the age of 77 during the war in Vietnam he wrote his famous book for the young entitled "The Crazy Ape" in which he confronts pure ideas with the madness of militarization. In this book he writes: "Mankind has reached a crossroads, and is confronted by two road signs pointing in opposite directions. One of these is symbolized by the happenings at My Lai. It points towards a dark world, dominated by military-industrial complexes and conducted by fear, hatred and distrust. ... The other road sign points in the opposite direction. It would lead man to a sunlit, peaceful and clean world, marked by good will, human solidarity, decency and equity, and free of hunger and disease, with a place for everyone."

Szent-Györgyi did not spare himself and fortune rewarded him with a long life full of results. Let me bid farewell to him with some words from Tennyson's Ulysses which he could have chosen as an *ars poetica* for his career:

"... all time I have enjoy'd  
Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those  
That loved me, and alone; ...  
... I am become a name:  
For always roaming with a hungry heart  
Much have I seen and known; cities of men  
And manners, climates, councils, governments,  
Myself not least, but honour'd of them all;  
...  
I am a part of all that I have met;  
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'  
Glams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades  
For ever and for ever when I move.  
...  
... every our is saved  
From that eternal silence, something more,  
A bringer of new things; and wile it were  
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,  
And this grey spirit yearning in desire  
To follow knowledge, like a sinking star,  
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought."

Hereby the Memorial Session for Albert Szent-Györgyi, the Hungarian Nobel Prize winning scientist, the outstanding citizen of Szeged, the great professor of the Szeged University is adjourned.