

Remembering Albert Szent-Györgyi

Honoured Guests!

It is known that his years as professor in Szeged were the peak of Albert Szent-Györgyi's career and influence. An occasion like this — that is, when I have an opportunity to talk about my Master — is always a responsible and honorable duty.

This day, when Szeged University of Medical Sciences is being renamed Albert Szent-Györgyi University, not only has confirmed that he is one of the greatest sons of our country, but also that the University wishes to continue his work towards progress in science, cognition of truth, the training and education of the young, and cultural development in Hungary.

As a disciple and freshman I was lucky to work with him just at that period. Allow me to talk about my personal memories and how the University — first of all students — can and should follow his lead.

I was eighteen when Albert Szent-Györgyi asked me, a first year student, whether I felt like working at his Institute. During the years of training he checked my work personally, and in the next laboratory I could see myself how he worked with his co-worker dr. Ilona Banga. I am not going to talk about professional memories but about him as a human being.

The Professor talked to me as well as to other young research workers as if we had been his equals. And it was easy to get used to this and follow his example.

In the beginning of the 30's from a formal, hierarchic and authoritative atmosphere I entered a wonderful new world. Respect here was paid to one's work and human values and not to one's rank.

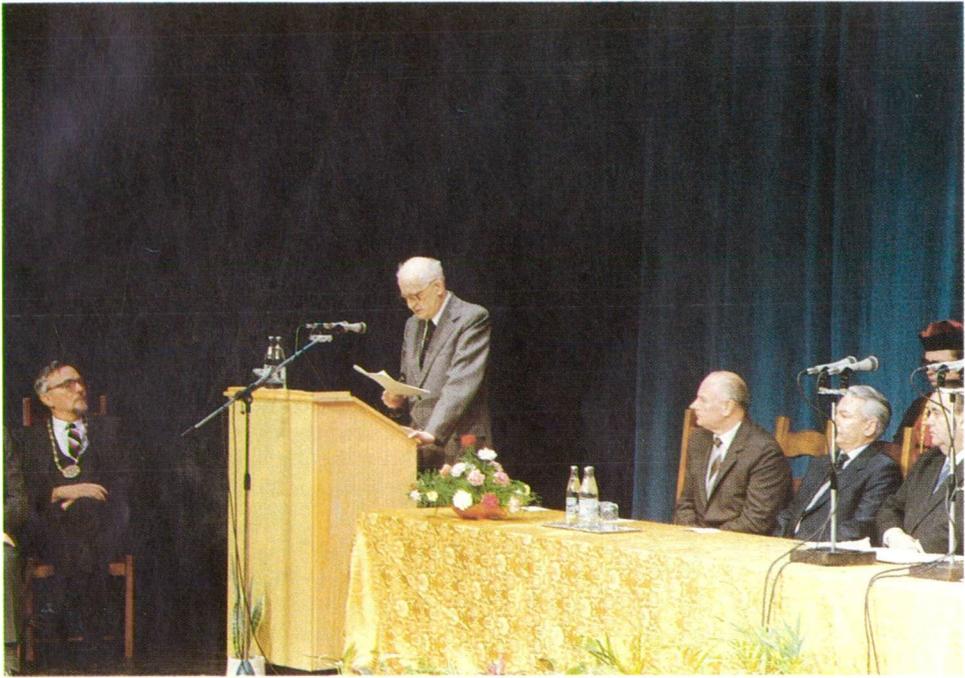
With the passing of years, we the younger generation started to contribute to the progress of research in the Department and two new elements could be observed. These were in contrast with those prevailing at other neighbouring Departments in Dom square. One of these elements was that whenever a new result was achieved Szent-Györgyi asked me to set it down in the form of a scientific paper. After long contemplation and "gnawing on the end of my pencil" I prepared the article and presented it to the professor. After a couple of days he gave the paper back in a form which was definitely more intelligible and logic than my original version. On the top of the paper my name appeared only, although the original idea and the final version of the manuscript came from the Master. One proof of Szent-Györgyi's greatness was that he never put his name on any paper the experimental results of which were not his own work. After four or five years, naturally I also learnt to come up with ideas and then put the results down comprehensibly. By then only minor amendments were necessary.

I feel it important to relate another of my memories. For Professor Szent-Györgyi the search after scientific truth, the recognition of hitherto unrevealed facts and relationships was a credo, the aim of his life. It happened many times that when he arrived in the laboratory in the morning he would immediately start to talk about his new ideas with whichever of his co-workers he happened to meet. He never expected them to respond merely with a remark on how interesting his idea was: rather he wanted to hear objections and arguments. He highly appreciated it if someone added new and constructive thoughts to his ideas. This kind of human contact, free of any kind of authoritativeness, was the most wonderful and in fact the most fruitful way of searching after scientific truth.

Albert Szent-Györgyi was a man of success. Nobel Prize winner George Wald wrote about him recently: "Szent-Györgyi with his life work deserved three Nobel prizes". I suppose there have been very few scientists in this century about whom this could be said. But whoever thinks that he had an easy life is making a great mistake. It was no easy at all. From his youth he had to cope with more and more problems. He was really lucky to survive two World Wars. As a beginner he had serious financial difficulties after graduating from the University, until he became a research worker with a subject of his own in the laboratory of the famous Professor Hopkins. When he was invited to the University of Szeged this facilitated him in finding coworkers and broadening his research field. Financial conditions, however, were not provided and he had to fight for funds. His political view was opposed to the class in power and he was always envied and criticised by many.

Albert Szent-Györgyi was an extremely inquisitive man. He was interested in a great many things outside the scope of his research field, such as literature, music and the fine arts as well as social and political problems. I shall not go into details, since his works and writings are accessible. But in one context I feel it important to recall a memory, which may have a beneficial impact on the attitude of our young people.

As the Rector of the University of Szeged during the 2nd World War, he tried to introduce a new mentality but very soon after he was forced into illegality. In the years after the liberation of Hungary by the Soviets he invested vast energy in research management and the reorganization of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Disillusioned by the policy of the personal cult his fate became the bitter life of immigrants. We were happy to welcome him in our country again at the age of 80. Then the whole country could witness his wisdom. He had a really hard life but nothing could prevent from reaching the peaks of science. The message of his teaching — "Only he who fights for the truth again and again, is able to create" — will always be remembered.



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