

István Apáthy's Career

On the 125th anniversary of the birth of István Apáthy, prominent figure of Hungarian neurohistology, it is worthwhile to look back on the course of life that this even by international standards gigantic personality finished here in Szeged. His career began in Budapest, culminated at Kolozsvár, and ended in Szeged, in „Smaller Hungary”, which had sunk into lethargy after the dictatorial peace treaty of Trianon. Where did he start from and how far did he go is still an exciting and bewildering question. The following three lectures try to give the answers. My task is to elucidate the background.

Apáthy's father, István Apáthy, Senior, was a true romantic hero à la Jókai. At the age of 18, as a Piarist seminarist, he was touched by the wind of the revolution of 1848: he left the order, joined the army, and worked his way up to the rank of first lieutenant, went into emigration, was imprisoned, was released, then studied law, became a lawyer, university professor, rector of the Budapest University, and member of parliament. Such was the man in whose family István Apáthy Jr. was born in 1863, and it is no wonder that his whole life was determined by the romantic life of his father.

István Apáthy Jr. studied medicine and received the medical doctor's diploma in 1885. Soon after this, he went on a study tour and found a researcher's place at the Biological Station in Naples, which he visited several times in the course of his life. It was there that he began his neurohistological studies, which led to the discovery of the neurofibrils. Shortly after his return home, he was appointed professor and head of the Zoological Institute of Ferenc József University of Kolozsvár. He was 27 when he occupied his chair, which he developed into one of the leading scientific centres in Europe by nearly thirty years of arduous work. Alongside with other subjects, histology was taught there to the medical students with the result that when the University was forced to transfer its seat to Szeged in 1921, almost all the professors and assistants of the Medical Faculty were Apáthy's pupils, among them also Albert Gellért who, as head of the Anatomical Institute, was my predecessor and who often mentioned Apáthy's histology lessons, where the professor himself directed the work of the students with the microscope and checked the students' drawings after microscopy rather strictly.

During his years spent in Kolozsvár, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences elected him corresponding member, and the Belgian Royal Academy of Medical Sciences elected him foreign member. It was also there that he suffered the great disappointment that the Nobel Prize Committee did not award the medical Nobel prize to him, but to his great rival, Santiago Ramón y Cajal. Therefore, 1906 was a

turning point in Apáthy's life: he turned his seemingly inexhaustible energy to the solution of social problems, took an active part in the freemason movement, and became more and more a representative of national liberal radicalism. Mihály Károlyi took notice of his activities, and although Apáthy did not accept the portfolio of Minister of Education, a few days later he undertook his last, tragic political commission: the Károlyi government appointed him High Commissioner of Transylvania. "I wish there were a hundred Apáthys in this country", sighed Károlyi. Apáthy went to Nagyszeben to discuss the fate of Transylvania with the commander of the royal Romanian troops, but the meeting never took place. The Romanian armed forces arrested him with the charge of treason and condemned him to death. The sentence was later changed to life imprisonment out of "clemency". After one and a half years the Romanians were obliged to set him free as a result of the pressure exercised on France by the international scientific world. Yet another blow awaited the physically and psychologically broken Apáthy — at home the white regime stamped him a "traitor". He went back once more to the research station on the Mediterranean "to see Naples and die" in the strictest sense of the word. But even that was not what it used to be. He began to organize the Department of Zoology at the University transferred from Kolozsvár to Szeged. He dies a few months later, on September 27, 1922 at the age of 59. He is buried here, in the Belvárosi Cemetery of Szeged. There was no one among the then lords of the Academy willing to say a funeral oration over the grave of one of the greatest scientists of his age.

Apáthy's career is symbolical, as is also the fact that today's commemoration is being held in the hall of the Apáthy Student Hostel of the Albert Szent-Györgyi Medical University. Let me conclude this commemoration with one of Apáthy's famous saying valid to this day and worth keeping in mind for ever: „The great nations elevate their sons, the small nations must be elevated by their sons.”