

Tamás Váradi at seventy: the London years

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It is difficult enough, in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, to recall what life was like even a year ago, let alone a generation ago, in the final decade of the twentieth century. This is especially true of life in tertiary education in the UK, where changes have been extraordinarily rapid and what detailed documentary evidence remains is unusually sparse. I hope, therefore, that I will be forgiven for offering more background than might be expected in this celebration of my good friend Tamás Váradi's years of teaching in London.

The bilateral cultural agreement between Great Britain and Hungary in force between 1964 and 1998 provided for a teacher of Hungarian to be placed at the only university in the country that at the time offered a full degree in Hungarian, namely the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES), then an independent constituent institute of the academic umbrella known as the University of London and, since 1999, part of University College London. The first to hold the post of *lektor* was the English literature scholar Péter Egri; by my reckoning Tamás was the ninth such native speaker dispatched to help SSEES students primarily with their spoken Hungarian language skills, arriving in 1991 and staying until 1995. Just to clear up a common misconception: SSEES never had a Hungarian department (*magyar tanszék*) as such, only teachers of language and literature – during Tamás's tenure these were myself and Daniel Abondolo –, with Hungarian history being the responsibility of László Péter in the department of history, and aspects of Hungarian sociopolitics being taught by George Schöpflin, who held a joint post at SSEES and the London School of Economics. Tamás compiled a useful factual outline of the Hungarian teaching then offered by SSEES (Váradi, 1993). Although this brief article was preceded in the same volume by my historical piece contextualising Hungarian studies in London (Sherwood, 1993), this latter study has now been superseded

by an article I co-authored with my successor at SSEES (Sherwood and Tarsoly, 2008).

In the years immediately after the fall of communism in 1989, Hungary enjoyed what proved to be an all-too-brief surge of interest in the West and this manifested itself at the level of tertiary education, too: my files show that in 1991-2, Tamás's first academic year at SSEES, there was a record number of 21 students of Hungarian, at various levels and taking various degrees, and the institution was honoured with a visit by the first president of post-communist Hungary, Árpád Göncz, in November 1991. As a matter of fact, the director of SSEES, the scholar of Finnish Michael Branch, sent a memorandum to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry in 1993, proposing the establishment of a Hungarian Centre at the School, though in the end nothing came of the idea: by that time the window of Western interest in the former Soviet satellites was already beginning to close. Meanwhile, despite a considerable teaching load, in 1992 Tamás helped to establish and run a Hungarian Seminar for the relatively large numbers interested in matters Hungarian, and he was also enterprising and energetic enough to launch a Hungarian film club at SSEES in 1994.

It was always a pleasure to work with Tamás, whose rapport with the students was legendary and whose professionalism as a teacher had been honed by an apprenticeship in a Hungarian secondary school – unlike some of the *lektors* assigned to SSEES during the communist era, who though in the best cases outstanding university teachers of English, were – in many of the worst – lightweight journalists with no teaching qualifications, or undistinguished university folk who sent secret reports to the Hungarian authorities about SSEES teachers and the students studying Hungarian at SSEES (I have seen them).

Perhaps the most significant academic activity of Tamás's in London – in addition to the perfecting of his superb command of English – was his invaluable assistance with a one-time pet project of mine, the London Learner's Dictionary of Hungarian. It should be remembered that we are speaking of the years that were still largely B.C., abbreviating in this case 'Before Computers'. My idea was based on the hardly surprising recognition that the bilingual dictionaries of English and Hungarian were necessarily designed to help the very large numbers of Hungarians learning English and much less the very limited number of English-speakers likely to be interested in learning Hungarian. Unsurprisingly, an entirely

different approach is needed for the latter group, and Tamás's burgeoning computer linguistic skills were essential in formulating this, as outlined in our joint article (Sherwood and Váradi, 1993). Although I published a further article (Sherwood, 1997), on the treatment of co-verbed verbs (more traditionally 'verbs with verbal prefixes') in the proposed dictionary, it is, of course, no fault of Tamás's that, after his departure, the closing of the above-mentioned window, and not least the relentless expansion of online dictionaries based on increasingly massive computer corpora – the exploitation of which, as we know, went on to become one of Tamás's main fields of expertise – this project was one of those to fall by the wayside.

It gives me great pleasure to have this opportunity to place on record Tamás's contributions to Hungarian studies in London and, in congratulating him on his seventieth birthday, to wish him many more years of active and pleasurable research in the areas of linguistics to which he has already contributed so much.

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