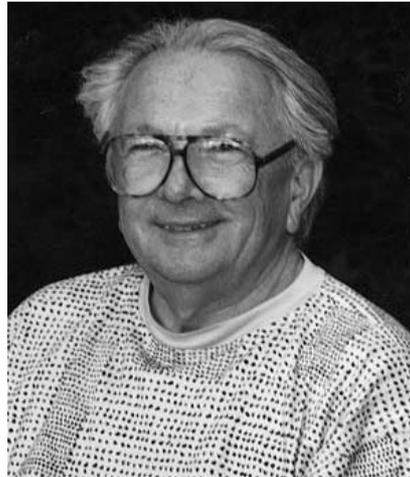


## László Orlóci: portrait of a scientific educator



László Orlóci dedicated his famous textbook *Multivariate Analysis in Vegetation Research* (1978) to “Ferenc Tuskó, Forester and Educator”. While his Hungarian teacher may not have succeeded in turning him into a forester (at least in the classic sense), his career as an outstanding educator is unquestioned. Many of the authors publishing in this first issue of *Community Ecology* were students of Prof. Orlóci, including myself.

László was born in Esztergomtábor, Hungary, in 1932. Since he developed interest in forestry in his childhood, for him it was a natural choice to attend the Forestry Highschool, and then the University of Forestry, Wood Industry and Mining in Sopron, western Hungary. The dramatic events that the Russian troops crashed the young Hungarian Democracy in 1956 forced the entire forestry faculty to escape first to Austria and then to Canada. Thanks to the Canadian government, a Hungarian section was formed at University of British Columbia, Vancouver, where László obtained his M.Sc. and Ph.D. degrees. He spent 1964-65 as a postdoctoral researcher at the University College of North Wales (Bangor), where he benefitted greatly from discussions with another famous teacher, P. Greig-Smith. It was an exciting and productive time: other researchers at Bangor during this period in-

cluded M. Dale, M. P. Austin, and P. Juhász-Nagy. His research interest was in relating vegetation pattern to mathematical phenomena. One paper from this period, published in the *Journal of Ecology*, is a citation classic.

László moved back to Canada to take up a faculty position in the Department of Plant Sciences, University of Western Ontario (London), where he quickly gained a reputation as a leading world authority on classification and ordination theory and methodology. But his interests were always much broader and more dynamic: the book *Multivariate Analysis in Vegetation Research* exemplifies his efforts to achieve integration and comprehension in his chosen field.

A review of Prof. Orlóci’s career over the last several decades reveals a changing emphasis in research interests, as is expected of a productive scientist. He has published numerous papers in the areas of information theory (motivated by his compatriot Alfréd Rényi), the partitioning of variance and information into orthogonal components, the invention and development of “character set types” (which he elaborated jointly with his wife Márta), the implication of non-linear species responses to environmental factors, the application of Markov processes to de-

scribe succession, and the identification of chaotic phenomena in nature. These works have been published in a number of important scientific journals, including *Nature*, *Ecology*, *Journal of Ecology*, *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, *Vegetatio*, *Journal of Vegetation Science*, *Coenoses*, *Canadian Journal of Botany*, and *Systematic Zoology*. This impressive body of work also resulted in a number of titles and awards. Chief among these is Prof. Orlóci's election to the Royal Society of Canada and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He was also selected as INTECOL's distinguished statistical ecologist at the VI<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Ecology in Manchester, and received an honorary doctorate of science from the University of Trieste, Italy.

Prof. Orlóci's success in teaching students is a direct consequence of his fascination with the subject matter. Whether a problem is trivial or complex, he likes to help by revealing the underlying aspects of the problem. For a long time, László had to await advances in computational performance to fully benefit from the numerical methods he had developed. I still remember the day he showed me a collection of old calculating machines at the University of Western Ontario. At one point he stopped in front of a calculator that could perform a series of arithmetic operations in a pre-defined order, a sort of slow-motion computer of the sixties. "I bought it", he told me, "and I thought, it was a breakthrough". Mainframe computers (we all hated these) were only a temporary breakthrough. I forgot the name of the man at Bangor who obtained a so-called test data set from which he tried to extract around fifty (I believe) eigenvalues manually. As soon as appropriate computers were available, they checked the results. László's comment: "It was all wrong!"

In 1980, László bought his first personal computer, the famous Apple II. For him this really was a breakthrough, as it made his work accessible to almost every-

body. Insiders tell me that he spent a full winter at home in front of the tiny Apple II screen, adapting the powerful DEC-BASIC programming language to the restricted instruction set of Apple-BASIC. The successful accomplishment of this difficult task was celebrated with an Apple-and-Port-party at his home. László's efforts were not fully understood by all his guests, but the highlight of the evening was his demonstration of how a file could be 'scratched' from a diskette using a specific command. The extremely penetrating queek of the floppy disk was so unexpected that the applause was overwhelming.

László Orlóci has never been a friend of paperwork, as it keeps him from pursuing more fruitful work. He enjoys teaching, particularly upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses. His research has taken him around the world, to study vegetation in China, Canary Islands, Hawaii, South America, as well as the deserts of the United States and the boreal forests of Canada. But there is another motivation for travelling: education. László has organized and/or contributed to over eighty courses, seminars and invited lectures throughout the world. Indeed, his contributions to special 'summer school' events have probably reached more young scientists than any of his publications. Participants may have forgotten some of the content of his lectures, but they always remember the fascinating teacher who enjoys his field of research "because it makes fun".

This first issue of *Community Ecology* is warmly dedicated to him by his friends, colleagues and students.

Otto Wildi