

OBITUARY

Denis Sinor

(April 17, 1916–January 12, 2011)

On January 12, 2011, in his home in Bloomington (Indiana), Denis Sinor (Sinor Dénes) peacefully passed away. He was 95 and had lived an extraordinary life. He was always proud that he was born in Kolozsvár, one of the great cities of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. He was not yet 3 years old when the Monarchy disappeared for ever. Growing up in Budapest, he frequented the catholic gymnasium but he was interested only in Latin and English. Two German-speaking grandmothers helped extend his language competencies. The son of a well-to-do family, he spent his summers in Switzerland, where he polished his German and learnt French.

In 1932 his family moved to Makó, a small town in Southern Hungary. As a private student, he disposed of extra time and read sometimes instead of learning. His maturity examination was of medium result, and he matriculated at Budapest University, then named after the Archbishop Peter Pázmány. He intended to learn Ancient Near East and Religious studies but soon came under the influence of two great scholars. Julius (Gyula) Németh was the chair of the Department of Turkology; Louis (Lajos) Ligeti taught Mongolic studies and Sinology. His professors acknowledged the excellent capacities of their new student and accepted his straight but not always polite manners. On their recommendation Sinor was awarded the best scholarships of the time. He won the Mahler-prize, annual scholarships for the years 1936/37 and 1937/38, and the Jubilee Scholarship of the Capital Budapest in 1937. He passed the examination for teachers of German and Hungarian but vowed never to use his diploma. Without even telling his professors, Sinor moved in the fall of 1937 to Berlin. He thought that in Berlin, where Németh had learnt Turkology, he would learn more than in Budapest. The Hungarian Institute in Berlin was a meeting place of young scholars at the time. Sinor got free entry to the world famous collection of the German Turfan expeditions. The study of the original Old Turkic texts mainly with Buddhist contents opened a new world for the young man. Here he wrote his first publications, which appeared in two leading journals, *Tung Pao* and *Ostasiatische Zeitschrift*.

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The political situation was worsening in Berlin and Sinor turned home. His professors accepted the prodigal son and he could soon finish his PhD dissertation on Buddhism at the Old Turks. Though his dissertation was accepted and published ('A középázsiai török buddhizmusról' [On Buddhism among the Turks of Central Asia], *Kőrösi Csoma Archivum* Ergänzungsband I, 1939, 353–96), he never defended it. Thus he later became honorary doctor of the University of Szeged without having PhD.

It is not very clear why he left Budapest University for the second time. He moved to Paris, and went to the teachers of Ligeti, his professor in Budapest. Hungary was in the last month of neutrality in World War II and he managed to find a job. He got the temporary teaching post earlier owned by Aurélien Sauvageot, and taught Hungarian for a living. All his remaining time he devoted to Paul Pelliot, the world famous professor of the College de France, Sino-Mongolist, the adored teacher of L. Ligeti's. He showed up in classes of Marcel Granet and Paul Demiéville. His new professors accepted him; he became member of several scientific societies. He read papers at their regular meetings.

The German occupation of Paris brought about a turn in his life. The *Sicherheitsdienst* detained him as a suspicious person. After he got free, he left Paris for the countryside and joined the *Résistance*. On the occasion of a later conference in Paris, he took me to the small village southwest of Paris that had been liberated by his small fighting group.

After World War II, he returned to Paris but could not find his place. A call from Oxford University was the way out. He taught Hungarian there. When I asked him whoever learnt Hungarian after the beginning of the Cold War, and what job perspectives they had, he answered that all kinds of enterprises were happy to engage people with their knowledge of Hungarian. For instance, the Shell Corporation welcomed people who were able to learn this difficult language. People who had learnt Hungarian were expected to solve more complicated things in the world of oil.

The British élite wanted to keep its leading role in the world and, among other things, organized world conferences in several branches of science. In 1954 they gave home to the International Congress of Orientalists. Sinor became the Secretary General of the Congress. The leading personalities of Oriental studies met him, and he got acquainted with all kinds of VIPs in Oriental studies. From this time on he played a leading role in international activities, in institutions like the UNESCO. It was due to his influence that Altaic studies, the studies on Inner or Central Asia, got their due place in the system of Oriental studies.

Six years later he was present in Bonn where a small group of scholars formed a permanent international conference for the study of the Altaic world. The name of the group, Permanent International Altaistic Conference, was suggested by him. He chose this name because its acronym was PIAC and *piac* in Hungarian means 'market' (from the Italian *piazza*). He considered the Conference to be the market of scholarly achievements and the place of exchange of thought, a meeting place of younger and older generations. The PIAC met yearly and opened an extraordinary possibility to several kinds of research. We, young Hungarians, could take part in the meetings from 1964, and only with the help of Sinor. At these meetings I met such excellent scholars as N. Poppe, von Gabain, Jahn, Boyle, Bawden, Heissig, Cincius, Menges, Richard and many others from the elder and the then younger generation.

In 1962 Tom Sebeok invited Sinor to Bloomington. He organized the teaching of Altaic studies, founded the Department of Uralic and Altaic Studies, and laid down

the fundamentals of the Asian Studies Research Institute later named Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies. Soon he became member and then one of the leaders of two American learned societies, the Association for Asian Studies, and the American Oriental Society. In 1963 he got federal funding for the Inner Asian and Uralic National Resource Center of which he was the director until his retirement.

Already before his arrival in America he restored his contacts with Hungary. He had long correspondence with his former teachers and also with their disciples. He helped their work with invitations, scholarships and by sending them books. For people living in growing isolation behind the Iron Curtain his activity was of immeasurable importance. He visited Hungary with his French passport, evading the problems of US–Hungarian relations. In the early summer of 1971, we organized the yearly PIAC meeting in Szeged. Ligeti was the chair and Sinor the secretary general. The most eminent scholars gathered in Szeged. The only exception was a small group of West German scholars who believed one of our Hungarian colleagues who had misinformed them that in Szeged there would be something happening “against the West Germans”. The same colleague also gave notice to the Hungarian Ministry of Interior that in Szeged an “anti-Soviet meeting” was going to be held. All this was in vain. The PIAC meeting was a success and the University of Szeged decided to give Sinor an honorary doctorate. He came for the ceremony in September of the same year. In Budapest he suddenly realized that his gown was somehow left in his hotel in Vienna. It was a most difficult task to go to Vienna and bring his gown to Szeged, but it was there on time.

In 1979 he achieved what everybody thought was impossible, and would think so even today. He organized an endowed chair for Hungarian studies in Bloomington with the money of the communist Hungarian state. The finances were secured through the Hungarian Academy of Sciences to avoid any criticism from the Soviet Union and its Hungarian vassals. The chair is still in existence, and has had excellent Hungarian professors who earned a high reputation for the institution.

Sinor led the Department until 1981, and the research institutes until 1986, but took part in their activities practically until his death. Even in wheelchair he visited the Department and was very glad with his new study on the first floor of Goodbody Hall.

He made his name known in Turkology, Mongolic studies and in the studies on the Manchu-Tungus languages. He wrote several papers on the history of the Hungarian language, on the prehistory of the Hungarians, the question of the travels of Friar Julian in 1234 and 1235. His activities included attempts to inform a broader readership. Western academics saw Hungary with his eyes. He authored articles of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, the *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* and many other works. He sent letters to the editors of *The Times* and *Washington Post* and he also wrote about the American university system in the Hungarian newspaper *Magyar Nemzet* in 1973. The way he expressed his views was not always polished, but in every case polite, sometimes provocative, but always helped to clear the way ahead.

His contribution to our science will have to be analyzed in another paper, but we have to mention at least a few of his important publications. *History of Hungary* (London & New York, 1959, reprinted in 1976) gives a good overview. *Introduction à l'étude de l'Eurasie Centrale* (Wiesbaden, 1963) is a very useful introduction into the literature of the field and an overview of the state of the art. It was based on the catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, then the best collection on the

topic. His university textbook *Inner Asia. History, Civilization, Languages. A Syllabus* (Bloomington & The Hague, 1969, third printing 1987) is an indispensable tool for students and teachers.

It is in thematic volumes that one can find the best of his papers. Some of his articles on the Hungarian language were published in his *Tanulmányok (Nyelvtudományi Értekezések 110, Budapest, 1982)*; his papers on historical problems in *Inner Asia and its Contacts with Medieval Europe* (London, 1977); further collections are *Essays in Comparative Altaic Linguistics* (Bloomington, 1990), and *Studies in Medieval Inner Asia* (London, 1997).

He edited more than a dozen books, among which I would highlight only two: *The Uralic Languages. Description, History and Foreign Influences* (Leiden, 1988), and *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia* (Cambridge, 1990). Both books are and remain for a time the basic works for orientation in the most important achievements of Uralic and Inner Asia studies.

Anniversary, jubilee volumes on the occasions of his birthdays show the growing impact of Denis Sinor. W. Heissig et al. edited *Tractata Altaica* (Wiesbaden, 1976) on the occasion of his 60th birthday. Ruth Meserve compiled a Sinor bibliography commemorating his 70th birthday (*Denis Sinor. Bibliography*, Eurolingua, Bloomington, 1986). This small volume comprises also a biography written by Meserve, and papers by Leo Solt, Jean Richard, Péter Hajdú and Giovanni Stary discussing his merits in Uralic, Turkic, Mongolic and Manchu studies, his achievements as professor and organizer in Bloomington.

In 2006 we celebrated his 90th birthday in Berlin. He was not only present but in a good spirit. His amiable personality, his always-joking mood raised the hope for the next meeting with him. The scholarly results with a bibliography were published in the volume Boikova, E. V. – G. Stary, with the assistance of E. and Ch. Carlson (eds), *Florilegia Altaistica. Studies in Honour of Denis Sinor On the Occasion of His 90th Birthday* (Wiesbaden, 2006).

On July 10–15, 2011, the Mongolia Society and the Permanent International Altaistic Conference had a joint meeting in Bloomington. The original idea was that colleagues would celebrate his 95th birthday in his presence. He escaped and only his memory will remain with us. All who are working in the field will keep his memory.

Dear Dénes, we have to bid farewell.

András Róna-Tas