Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hung. Volume 57 (3), 363–365 (2004)

IN MEMORIAM ILDIKÓ (HILDA) ECSEDY

(1938–2004)

After the recent death of Professors Ferenc Tőkei and Pál Miklós, Hungarian sinology suffered another great loss: Ildikó Ecsedy, senior research fellow of the Research Institute for Linguistics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and Professor of the Faculty of Humanities of Eötvös Loránd University, passed away on the 4th of February 2004. She was one of the leading experts on Chinese history in Hungary, and her death meant the abrupt conclusion of a life of devoted, assiduous scholarship sustained till the end.

Ildikó Ecsedy was born in 1938 in the city of Ungvár (now called Uzhgorod in today's Ukraine), a city with an extremely turbulent history in the 20th century. Her father was a jurist, her mother a teacher at a grammar school. The family had a long tradition of scientific activities, professor Ecsedy's maternal grandfather, Antal Margittai (1880–1939) was a well-known botanist, while her younger brother, Csaba was to become a distinguished Africanist.

Professor Ecsedy's life was determined by the fact that she had been infected with a ruthless disease, infantile paralysis, when she was one year old. She was one of the few children who survived the epidemic poliomyelitis raging in the region of her birthplace; however, she could not overcome the infection entirely. The disease returned to her in the middle of her life, and she was forced to spend her last years in her little flat in Budapest, which has become a meeting place of orientalists, and a kind of spiritual, professional and scientific centre. The disease has not prevented her from continuing her scientific and educational activities. On the contrary, the difficulties stimulated her to conduct her work even more intensively. With her amazing energy, strength, will-power, enthusiasm and benevolence, which often surpassed those of the healthy, she set an example not only as a scholar, but also as a person.

Professor Ecsedy spent her childhood in a loving family, but among great hardships, together with her brother and two sisters. At the end of World War II, her father was taken captive by the Soviet troops for years, and the rest of the family was forced to flee their home on foot. After years of wandering, the family found a new home in Budapest. The roots of the passion for reading and of the extraordinary eru-

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dition can be traced back to these years spent among vicissitudes, when books often provided the only consolation for the children of the family. This was also the time when the future sinologist got acquainted with Oriental languages through the many books she read.

After high school graduation in 1956, she was admitted to the Faculty of Humanities of Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Budapest, the greatest and oldest university in Hungary. As at that time she already knew a number of Oriental languages, the entrance examination committee advised her to major in an Asian language beside the studies in Hungarian language and literature she had chosen. As a result, she studied Chinese and Hungarian at ELTE between 1956 and 1961. In 1961, she passed the doctoral exam in Chinese and Inner Asian Philology with her dissertation titled *Contributions to the history of the Karluk based on Chinese sources*. Her masters, as well as the board of her examiners, included two of the greatest Hungarian orientalists, Lajos (Louis) Ligeti and Gyula Németh.

From 1961, Ildikó Ecsedy worked in the Oriental Collection of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS) as a librarian. In 1970 she was appointed to a research fellowship, first at the Oriental Collection, later, from 1972, in the Oriental Workgroup. After 1973 she worked as a scientific consultant of the Department of Oriental Studies of the Research Institute for Linguistics of the HAS. In 1976, she became a member of the Committee of Oriental Studies, and the chair of its Far Eastern Work Committee. Later she started to work in the board of editors of *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* and *Keletkutatás* (Oriental Research), and she also became an editor of the Kőrösi Csoma Book Series. From 1979 she was a research fellow at the Oriental Work Committee of the HAS founded in that year by Ferenc Tőkei, and later she was appointed a scientific consultant.

Since 1974 she has given lectures on ancient history and philology at the Department of Antique Studies of ELTE. From 1987 until her sudden death she taught at the Department of East Asian Studies and the Department of Inner Asian Studies of ELTE. In 1990 she was appointed a Honorary Professor of ELTE. In 1990–1991, Professor Ecsedy was the scientific director of the Chinese Department of the Association of Humanities of Miskolc. After 1999 she also worked as a Professor of the Gate of Dharma Buddhist College, Budapest. When the Doctoral Program in Sinology at ELTE's Doctoral School in Linguistics was launched in 2000, she was appointed its head. Without her, institutional doctoral training in sinology could not have started in Hungary.

In 1980 she obtained a PhD degree with her book titled *Nomads and Traders on the Borders of China,* published in 1979 by the Publishing House of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest. In 1985 she received the Doctorate of the Academy; her dissertation was titled *The Beginnings of the Chinese State,* published by the same publisher in 1987.

Professor Ecsedy was a member of a number of Hungarian and international scientific organisations, such as the Kőrösi Csoma Society, the Society of Antique Studies, the Society of the History of Literature, the T'ang Studies Society, etc. Since 1994 she was a member of Academia Europaea. In 1995, Harvard University in-

cluded her on the list of the best one thousand experts on Inner Asia, and in the same year, she was awarded the Eötvös József Wreath by the HAS. She was elected honorary chairwoman of the Ferenc Tőkei Society in 2000.

Ildikó Ecsedy was a great expert of her fields of research, widely recognized not only in Hungary, but also in the world of international scholarship. Especially noteworthy are her works on the relationship between China and its nomadic neighbours. She was an exceptionally productive scholar; her full list of publications consists of more than two hundred books and articles, as well as three hundred book reviews. Her works are characterized by impressive accuracy, admirable thoughtfulness, and deep passion for the truth. Every sentence of her writings reveals that she was not only an expert of her field, but also had a deep understanding of the whole of Chinese and Inner Asian civilizations, as well as of human culture. Once she counted the Western and Eastern languages she had used in her life; the astonishing result was that she had consulted primary and secondary sources of forty different languages in the course of her researches. No matter what question she was studying, she took great care in acquiring a comprehensive knowledge of the original sources, as well as the Chinese, Japanese, Western and Hungarian secondary literature of the topic. She combined hair-splitting philological investigation with the formulation of overall theories of fundamental nature.

At the same time, beside strict scientific research, Ildikó Ecsedy always felt it to be her task to popularize her study subjects and propagate Chinese culture. She published scholarly articles and popularizing pieces simultaneously, she worked on original contributions as well as on translations. Very few China-related works have been published in Hungary in the past decades of which she was not a contributor as an author, translator, editor, consultant, etc.

Ildikó Ecsedy was an exceptional teacher as well. Generations of orientalists are proud to call her their master. She was giving courses at different institutions until the day of her death, and always provided great help to her students in their progress. If anybody asked for her assistance, she always gave as much aid as she could, in any subject. She supported her students and colleagues without ever asking for return. She taught us not only sinological knowledge, but also humanity, benevolence, and generosity.

Ildikó Ecsedy has left us unexpectedly, leaving behind many unfinished works, incomplete studies and unrealized plans. Her passing away means a great loss to Hungarian sinology, and also a personal loss to all those who had the privilege of knowing her. We will cherish her memory with respect, affection and grief.

Gergely Salát