

In Memoriam Mihály Szegedy-Maszák

Professor Emeritus Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, the spiritus rector of the Hungarian Studies program at Indiana University, a scholar who made Bloomington a global center for Hungarian scholarship, has died. It is difficult, almost impossible, for me to put these frightening words into writing. Somehow I had led myself to believe that his larger-than-life figure would always be with us. More than anyone else, however, he knew that such fanciful thoughts were mere folly. Human existence, he once confessed, is inseparable from confronting nothingness, and there is no meaningful work of art or philosophy without the recognition of this fact.

Any memory of the departed can only be subjective. I can only hope that these few lines will be worthy of Mihály, the most towering figure I have met and I am likely to meet in what remains of my life. I was not one of the lucky ones who were officially his students, yet meeting and knowing him had a profound and indelible effect on me, as it did on the lives of many others who came under the spell of his tremendous intellect. Perhaps more than anything else, he gave me an appreciation of in-depth knowledge, hard work, dedication, and the need to understand one's limits.

Some years ago, I was working on a paper and needed some help, so I decided to give him a call. It was relatively late at night and his beloved wife Ágnes answered the phone. I asked for Mihály. He had recently come home from the Hungarian Academy, where he had delivered a talk. I did not want to disturb his rest, I interjected. He had had his dinner, Ágnes said, and had sat down to prepare for a talk he was to give the next day. The question that flashed through my mind was, "Why was Mihály, who seemed to know everything, preparing for a talk?" His knowledge was unfathomable, and not only in his "official" field, comparative literature. His expertise was unmatched in other areas as well, ranging from the music of Wagner, Liszt, and Bartók (to name only a few), through German philosophy, aesthetics, semiotics, and visual arts (throughout the last millennium), to the great questions of ethnography and beyond. I have always had the uncanny feeling that he knew more than I did even in my own specialized field of study.

I thought I knew him—but not well enough. Not preparing for a lecture, a class, a scholarly debate, or a conversation was inconceivable to him. He never gave the same talk twice. Under his guidance, I organized several Hungarian conferences in Bloomington, and he always accepted my opinion on the speakers even when I had a hunch that he might not have fully agreed with my choices. It was hard for him to accept that we could not find the perfect speaker for every topic. Once he came up to me after a well-respected scholar had delivered a presentation. "I have heard this talk before," he told me. For him this was inexcusable.

What was Mihály's driving force? His immense curiosity? His insatiable thirst for knowledge? The humility with which he approached scholarship, the art of others? His profound respect for his audience, his peers and students, whom he wanted to dignify by giving them his very best? I recall the dropping jaws of an audience to which he delivered a keynote address on the

philosophical problems of contemporary ethnography, an audience that included the leading thinkers in that field.

Mihály did come to the phone that night, as he always did. He was always accessible; no honest query was beneath him. We talked and I asked my question. I sensed that he was keen to return to his nocturnal studies, but I had the Gadamer citation I asked for in the original German the next day. Were it not for Mihály, the German philosopher's work would not even have occurred to me. In his subtle way, he guided his students toward the texts they should read.

Mihály was an intellectual and moral compass with a lifelong mission to educate. He wrote in beautiful, accessible prose and guided his readers elegantly through the most complex arguments. The rich fabric of his texts and his mobilization of difficult theoretical concepts served one purpose only, comprehension. The standards he set for himself were stellar. What was his greatest secret? One may only speculate, but the great breadth and depth of his knowledge made him aware of his limits (of which only he was aware)—the limits of any single scholar. He did not believe in simple truths, in deceptively easy, all-encompassing answers to basic questions of human existence, in grand explanations of the complexities of culture and history. Neither did Mihály aspire to convert his students or peers to his own interpretations. He instead encouraged them to find their own way. He was too smart not to know that there will always be a shadow of doubt, and yet he was a guide to all those who sought his guidance. Mihály remained true to his principle that integrity and professionalism could not be breached. He grew up in and lived under a dictatorship that had little patience for diversity of thought. Many made compromises in order to publish their work and reap the accolades of a political power that rewarded intellectual servility. Mihály would rather have kept his work in the drawer.

Mihály firmly believed that a slide in professional standards would lead to the loss of civilization. He upheld that principle in Budapest, Berlin, Paris, London, Buffalo, Bloomington, and Cambridge, wherever he went. He had no patience for dishonesty or professional incompetence, and he adhered to his principles even when it would have served him better to comply. In the early 50s, he and his family awaited deportation with packed cases and books for Mihály to read. By sheer luck they were not taken, but this harrowing experience left a life-long imprint on him, and may have helped inspire his dogged determination not to compromise with absolute political power no matter what disguise oppression may take.

Mihály's contribution to the community in Bloomington went beyond his teaching and academic publications. He and Ágnes were wonderful hosts who provided their guests not only with great company, but lovingly prepared food and good wine. Those who had the privilege of hosting them also know how much they appreciated hospitality. And it would be a mistake to remember Mihály without noting his great sense of humor, and the fact that as a renaissance man, he loved life and most of all his family.

In my own scholarhip, I have never sought the approval of others—with one exception. I would never have confessed it to him, but while working, I thought of Mihály as my imaginary reader.

Would he like this interpretation? The way the thoughts were put into words? The integrity and breadth of research? "Your book is important and I have learned from it." This was the most generous praise I will ever get or deserve to get. Now I have no one to think of and I feel there is nobody left to write to. There is only a void. And gratitude. On behalf of all of us who had the privilege of knowing you and working with you, thank you and goodbye, Mihály.

László Borhi

Peter A. Kadas Chair Associate Professor

CEUS

Mert megnyugosznak az ő fáradságuktól, és az ő cselekedeteiknek jutalma követi őket.

(Jel 14, 13)

Mély fájdalommal, megrendülten tudatjuk mindazokkal,
akik ismerték, szerették és becsülték, hogy

Dr. Szegedy-Maszák Mihály

a Magyar Tudományos Akadémia rendes tagja, az Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem és az Indiana University professor emeritusa életének 74. évében, 2016. július 24-én elhunyt.

Augusztus 9-én 14 óra 30 perckor a Farkasréti Temető ravatalozójában búcsúztatjuk a református egyház szertartása szerint.

Felesége Ágnes, gyermekei Zoltán, Anna, Zsuzsanna, unokái Flóra, Blanka, Ilka, Borbála, Emma, Márton és András, menyje Trojkó Ildikó, vejei dr. Fekete Attila és dr. Thomas Cooper, valamint rokonai.

A szeretet soha el nem fogy. (1Kor 13,8)