

László Kálmán 1957-2021

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[Meghalt a második legjobb barátom. A legjobb most tavasszal halt meg, azóta nehezebben mozdulok. Édesapám elalvóban. Egyszerűen nincs senki a feleségemen kívül akivel az igazán fontos dolgokat meg tudnám osztani, és őt nem szívesen terhelem ezekkel, túlságosan jól ért, túlságosan mélyen átéli, és persze Kálmánt ő is nagyon szerette.]

I was asked to write about László Kálmán, since “I’m the most authentic” according to this old friend, who must have also known him for 30-40 years. In many ways, I am. I’m writing in English because he does need an English obituary. There will no doubt be many Hungarian obits, but László’s significance goes far beyond Hungary.

Like his father before him, László was a citizen. A proud citizen of the French/Dutch sort. Back in the day, as I learned from my father, László’s father was a staunch communist, a hard Stalinist. When I asked László about this (about 1980, when the Stalin/Rákosi era was long past, on a different tectonic plate, with the Mariana-trench of 1956, the year before we were both born, separating our twenty-something selves from what that was like) he told me communist or not, Bandi raised his kids in a strict bourgeois fashion, insisting on good grades, languages, music, the lot.

The result of this was that László won the country-wide high school French language competition in 1974. This was no mean feat – a lot of kids were studying French (a lot more than today, Francophone culture is slowly dying out in Hungary) and placing first meant automatic acceptance at the university. (Unless you wanted to become a doctor or an engineer, or you were prepared to live in a country town, there was only one university that mattered: ELTE.) There was another prize, a trip to Paris. Leaving the country on a tourist visa was the standard method of emigration those days, so his high-school French teacher told him “come back, or no other winner will ever get this prize”. So he came back, leaving the chances for a better education and a better life behind him. Doing the right thing came naturally to him. For this was the right thing, it was all true, the prize would have not been offered anymore had he not returned. It’s not just that he was a mensch. There was more to it: his moral integrity set a standard for all around him.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s linguistics was not practiced at the Department of Linguistics of the only university that mattered. László Antal has emigrated, and the dept was left in the hands of a clever careerist who sold his own (largely nonsensical) work as the ‘dialectical view of language’. Dialectical materialism was gold, Marxism was the way to go, and of course the guy regularly took a few demijohns of wine to the printing house of the Academy to make sure his work was published in a timely fashion. He understood the system, the entire system, both the desperate need to pretend that science was Marxist, and Marxism was science (this conjunction actually showed the ‘dialectical unity’ of the two) and the mild corruption that pervaded everything. László also understood (we all have, by that time the stench was unmistakable) but it would have never occurred to him to compromise, let alone to manipulate the system with the same gusto as the dept head has. In this, he was very much like the famous unbending Soviet dissidents like Esenin-Volpin who was once psychiatrically diagnosed with “pathological truth-telling”.

Linguistics was practiced at the English Department, where he met Ádám Nádasy and László Varga. There were a few more people there and at other schools the students could look up to, but the epicenter was the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Research Institute of Linguistics where, under the leadership of Ferenc Kiefer and György Szépe, students interested in the science of language congregated at Room 13. This was a place where knowledge was generously shared (I still remember Kati É. Kiss coming back from Canada explaining what Emonds and Jackendoff were up to and Anna Szabolcsi explaining Montague Grammar) and people could disagree about things. There was a lot of agreement too, about the ‘dialectical’ work, and about the deadly mixture of protecting the purity of language and neogrammarian orthodoxy that still ruled (and in many ways, remains dominant to this day).

But it wasn’t the agreement we all shared about the old stuff that held us together, it was the disagreements. Morris Halle was famous for telling his students “argue with me”, and Kiefer and Szépe, ever the liberals, were not about to push their own theories on the students. We argued all the time, and László in particular was always a joy to argue with, because he was smart as a whip, had an enviable command of the data in a multitude of languages (he was a true polyglot, effortlessly picking up one language after the other) and was, like in everything else, totally honest intellectually. I left Hungary in 1986, but we kept collaborating.

Over the long haul, the intellectual honesty didn’t serve him well: after his PhD he refused to write a habilitation thesis (the “big doctorate” as it was known), because he considered the entire system of academic advancement in Hungary corrupt. In this, he was mostly right, but not entirely: many good people obtained the big doctorate by honest toil, it’s just that many, especially in the humanities, have also obtained the title by other means. This of course is the very definition of corruption, he would point out, and he would be right. I would maintain that honest toil is honest, you are not lessened by jumping

through the hoops, even if the hoops themselves are low quality. It's a debate we often had, and never settled. But the complete lack of willingness to play by the rules put a stop to his advancement within the ranks. He remained pathologically honest.

One fine day I will write about his scientific work, which is genuinely interesting, and standing up remarkably well against the twists and turns of what counts as fashionable in science. Others will no doubt write about his pedagogical achievements (Professor with a capital P I wrote earlier) or about the fact that he was a hugely influential public intellectual, again leading by example. I should also write about what I owe him (a lot, for he was always generous with his time, his energy, and his intellectual powers), but all of this is too fresh, too painful. RIP