

OBITUARY

THE LEGACY OF LÁSZLÓ CSEH-SZOMBATHY

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László Cseh-Szombathy decided in 1945, after the end of World War II, that sociology would be the discipline he would be engaged in during his entire life. His interest in social sciences was further strengthened in the Calvinist grammar school of Lónyay Street, where one of his favorite teachers taught history on university level. His sensitivity towards social issues was enhanced by the fact that through his father who was a medical doctor as well as a politician of the Smallholders' Party, he personally knew Zsigmond Móricz, Mihály Babits, Lőrinc Szabó and Péter Veres. As a result he regularly read the books of the authors he had come to know, and works of the writers taking up the cause of the peasantry in Hungary. He was twenty years old when World War II ended, and he could continue his studies after the experiences he lived through, and some of it threatened even his life. At the Péter Pázmány University of Sciences he attended also the seminar held by István Hajnal, which was decisive in the shaping of his thinking. It was István Hajnal whose personal influence and works led him towards sociology. From then on his life was closely intertwined along several lines with the history of sociology in Hungary.

In 1946 he was already employed at the Institute of Social Science founded and led by Sándor Szalai. Szalai invited eminent experts to the Institute, among others János Harsányi, the later Nobel-laureate in economics, who at that time was the closest friend and intellectual companion of László Cseh-Szombathy. Due to his international relations Sándor Szalai succeeded in assembling a social science library unique in the whole of Europe, and his domestic contacts made the financing of researches possible. This promising workshop of Hungarian sociology was liquidated in 1950, and the books were burned. László Cseh-Szombathy survived these difficult years of the 'persecution' of Hungarian sociology as a primary, and later on secondary school teacher, but by a chance acquaintance he applied for a job to the Central Statistical Office already in 1955. Initially he was commissioned with some jobs as an outsider, but to his great surprise this situation changed in 1957.

"All of a sudden the Statistical Office contacted me in October or September ...they said that one could go in now. It was interesting because the entire political situation toughened in earnest at that time. It shows that things are sometimes unpredictable" (Kovács 2000: 27).

He worked at the International Department for five years, where he conducted comparative studies on living standards, meanwhile he learned ‘methodology’, and became one of the best Hungarian experts of it. Today the struggle for the repeated acceptance of sociology, he had also carried on, is part of the history of sociology. Reading now his writing of those days one is surprised to see the arguments he tried to use for supporting the justification of sociology as an autonomous discipline in his paper published in the *Statistical Review*.

“*Surveys of sociological nature have been already conducted in relation to the study of the problems of the socialist society, but these surveys were done within the framework of other disciplines. It seems to be necessary to bring together these researches for the systematic study of society and the development of the best methods of investigation within the framework of sociology as an autonomous discipline to some extent*” (Cseh-Szombathy 1962: 224).

This struggle, conducted together with others, was not in vain, for the Institute of Sociology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences was founded in 1963.

A significant change was brought about also in the life of László Cseh-Szombathy when he was transferred from the International Department to the Division of Population Statistics in 1962. Here, after a forced break of 12 years, he once again dealt with sociological issues, such as suicide, ageing; the situation of pensioners and with alcoholism. It was at that time that he got acquainted with people with whom he made friends for a lifetime, with Rudolf Andorka, Béla Buda, Péter Józán and György Vukovics. Besides his chosen fields of research he joined the international time budget research under the leadership of Sándor Szalai, which offered a good opportunity for the development of international relations once again. In the second part of the 60s, at the time when interest towards sociology was becoming increasingly active he considered important the professionalisation of sociology together with Iván Szelényi and Zsuzsa Ferge, both of them working at the Central Statistical Office. For this purpose he edited with Zsuzsa Ferge the volume entitled *A szociológiai felvétel módszerei* [The Methods of Sociological Survey], which was published for the first time in 1968. The book became compulsory material at several universities and subsequently had several editions.

It is also due to the high standard of László Cseh-Szombathy’s professional work, to his international relations and activities in the organization of science that sociology has become once again an acknowledged, accepted discipline evoking serious social interest in Hungary. He was one of the determining, acknowledged and highly respected personalities in the ‘heroic age’ of Hungarian sociology.

In the late sixties the family got into the focus of his broad interest, which offered a suitable theoretical framework to him to the better understanding of several sociological issues. From then on his writings on the sociology of the family kept on appearing, and two of his best known books, *A családszociológiai problémák és módszerek* [Problems and Methods of Family Sociology] and *A házastársi konfliktusok szociológiája* [The Sociology of Conflicts in Marriage] were also written on this topic. Issues of population policy were closely related to family studies he had been preoccupied with ever since preparations for the introduction of the flat rate childcare allowance (GYES) in 1967.

He defended his academic doctor's thesis in 1991 under the title *A házassági konfliktusok szociológiája* [The Sociology of Conflicts in Marriage]. In this work, which was published in book form in 1995, he elaborated a new theoretical framework for the sociology of the family. His aim was to apply achievements of conflict research in his own field of research. He regarded the elaboration of the theory of the conflict of married couples important because he regarded the interpretations by social psychiatry and social psychology, earlier dealing with conflicts in marriage valid within limitations. "*The sociology of the family should not be satisfied with the systematization of the results of the psychiatric and psychological analyses of conflicts when studying family conflicts and those of couples within it, but its task is to present those social factors that create conflicts within the family ...*" (Cseh-Szombathy 1985: 10). He studied the growing number of divorces as a social phenomenon which can be interpreted as the undesirable consequence of social change. In the theoretical approach he resolutely stressed the effects of changes that have taken place on 'macro' level, which subsequently led to family conflicts on the 'micro' level. "*The social changes have modified the weight and significance of the different functions of the family, and have brought functions to the foreground that are strongly changing, are of dynamic nature, and demand the permanent and joint development of family members. This is a demand a significant part of family members, and primarily couples are unable to meet; and it is proved by great instability and a high frequency of divorces*" (Cseh-Szombathy 1985: 8). It was an important aim of his work to direct attention to those macro-level changes that cause 'disturbances' on micro-level endangering the long-term functioning of the society.

Meticulousness characterizing his entire work can also be observed in this book. He devoted three of the seven chapters to the concept taken as the subject of his study, to the presentation of the possible interpretations of conflict, and to the analysis of its functions and types, and he composed the definition to be used in the rest of the book only afterwards.

The conclusion drawn from his research results is that matrimonial conflicts can also be interpreted as conflicts between the macro and the micro levels, and that the most important source of conflicts is the "struggle for the labor force of women", making the performance of motherly roles difficult. "*In modern marriages it is not the contradictions deriving from matrimonial and gain-some work that the gravest conflict between the parties evolves but from conflicts between mother's role and that of employment*" (Cseh-Szombathy 1985: 75). It is that micro level that has been the looser in this conflict, and its consequence is the high number of divorces and a low level of reproduction. At the end of his work he stated his conclusions he regarded of basic importance in the interest of protecting the families and of a healthy functioning of the society. It cannot be maintained in the long run to realize macro-level advantages to the detriment of the micro level. "... *therefore it is necessary to have changes of a macro-social nature, too. I have in mind a reduction of the conflicts between roles deriving from the social division of labour and family roles, a mitigation of material scarcity making the daily existence of families difficult in certain strata, a facilitation of the performance of parental roles, and influencing public thinking in*

order to attribute greater value and significance to family life and marital relations... ” (Cseh-Szombathy 1985: 188).

This book continues to offer a theoretical framework to experts studying these issues to this day and it is compulsory material at several universities.

In 1980 he presented a family model of fundamentally new outlook in the first issue of the periodical *Szociológia* [Sociology]. His many-sided interest and a profound knowledge of domestic and international literature helped him in applying the theories learned in the sociology of the family. It is well known that the theories of conflict and roles were built into the thinking of the sociology of the family primarily through his mediation. It is less known, however, that he also attempted to apply some results of natural science. He supported the rightfulness of this approach with the following arguments, knowing the related critical thoughts of some sociologists: “...decades had to pass until systems approach thinking proved that the use of biological organisms as models was not only a terminological game, but offered a possibility for successfully applying contexts identified by natural scientific researches in the elaboration of hypotheses for social scientific studies” (Cseh-Szombathy 1980: 65). In his writing he demonstrated that the use of biological organisms as models may produce new results in the sociology of the family, too. As far as I know he was the first among Hungarian sociologists who worded it as a new theoretical approach. “...for people family is not only a community where they belong, but it is of distinguished significance for their life, conscience and biological functioning: as members of the family they are so much linked to each other that it is not unjustified to describe their relationship as the functioning interrelationship of a living body, of an organism” (Cseh-Szombathy 1980: 65). This approach resembles in many respects to James Lovelock’s theory of Gaia, which considers the entire Earth as a living organism. Lovelock’s book was published in 1979, which László Cseh-Szombathy obviously could not know at a time when he worded his own thoughts. He mentions psychiatric researches in his paper as the starting point of his hypothesis. The publication of the two writings expressing similarly radical thoughts indicates that this thought was already ‘in the air’.

This new theoretical framework offered an opportunity to better understand the extraordinary strength of family relations that are not adequately explained by rational arguments. “...A large part of family interactions is inexplicable with the help of some model of bargain based on rationality; at least one of the parties, but usually both of them consider not only their individual interests but those of the other one too, simply because he or she does not feel the ‘other one’ totally independent of him- or herself, but regards the other as his or her part” (Cseh-Szombathy 1980: 66). In this approach the health-protecting effect of the family and the diseases occurring may obtain explanations different from the ones hitherto given. “...researches could set out from the already generally accepted realization that a large part of somatic illnesses have psychic causes. Here only the next step should be taken which would mean selecting those psychological causes that derive from the set of family relations. In the case of gastric ulcer cases, for instance, it should be demonstrated how far it is the consequence or the manifestation of matrimonial conflicts, or how heart complaints become a mutually accepted way out of sexual disturbances” (Cseh-Szombathy 1980: 67). The Gaia theory has provoked enormous discussion and it contributes to the

renewal of our thinking about our environment. By now it has become one of the best known ecological theories. Unfortunately it is not known what the domestic reception of László Cseh-Szombathy's writing was, neither why he did not deal with this approach any further, though he could have renewed our thinking about the family similarly to the Gaia theory.

In addition to research he also taught and actively participated in the sociological public life. He was a founder of the Hungarian Sociological Association, was elected its chairman in 1990, and remained a member of the Presidium to his death. He did a great deal for making *Szociológia* [Sociology] the periodical of the profession, and *Szociológiai Szemle* [Review of Sociology] from 1990 on a high standard and valuable one. He was chairman of the Editorial Board of *Szociológia* [Sociology] from 1981 to 1990, and became the founder editor-in-chief of *Szociológiai Szemle* [Review of Sociology]. He did the jobs of editor-in-chief and chairman between 1991 and 1998, and afterwards remained a member of the Editorial Board to his death.

He moved to the Institute of Sociology in 1974, where as deputy director, and from 1983 on as director he spent a lot of time to professionally support his associates. He always read with great care the manuscripts completed and contributed to them with interesting thoughts and rigorous methodological remarks in order to raise the standard of the final versions. It was one of the memorable examples of his support accorded to young people when in 1986 he declined participating in the World Congress held in New Delhi saying, that "two young people could travel there out of my personal budget". The Institute was regarded as one of the most exciting intellectual workshops of Budapest under his direction. Often meaningful professional and vivid discussions preparing for political change were held here. (For instance the discussions of the materials of "Change and Reform", and forums organized by young sociologists.) Part of the discussions preparing the setting up of the first independent trade union, the Democratic Trade Union of Scientific Workers was also held at the Institute with his consent. Finally, his retirement in 1988 took place also because of his 'trespassing' the political borderlines. The party leadership challenged him for this 'excessive' intellectual freedom. Subsequently he resigned from his director's post and retired. The continuation of lively debates was terminated by the political changes resulting in the split of the Institute for some years. The teeming intellectual life could never be restored in the Institute. After his retirement he continued his sociological work. His writings were continuously published, he taught at Hungarian and foreign universities, and participated in the public life of sociology and demography. A selected bibliography of his works compiled at the Central Statistical Office in honor of his 80th birthday makes up a whole volume. Acknowledging his high standard of professional work for several decades he was elected corresponding member of the Academy in 1993, and ordinary member in 2001.

During the final years of his life he was deeply engaged in the study of demographic processes, and analyzed particularly the social processes leading to the decrease of the number of births. He stated the following in an interview made with him: "*Right from the outset there has been a view in the Statistical Office according to which fertility and its decline is not the major problem, but it is high mortality, therefore improvement should be achieved in mortality. This is beyond doubt, but*

meanwhile the other problem is pushed into the background to such an extent that there are publications showing decline in fertility as almost insignificant. Nonsense, for life can be extended, and it is good if the mortality of the aged declines, but this is not a long-term solution ...this situation causes the increasing number of demographers in the 90s ... who say that the demographic issue should be raised in a sense that one should not only complain about mortality and see what can be done about it, but surely something is to be done about fertility as well” (Kovács 2000: 34). He always interpreted the fall in the number of births in a broader context and not as a specifically Hungarian phenomenon, but he also expressed his worries related to the future as an intellectual feeling responsibility for the destiny of the country. “Now I am not depressed by the size of one or another value but by the trend in the changes of birth, in which it is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve change later on: for the increasingly small cohorts in productive age will not be able to stop decrease even in the case of higher fertility in the 21st century” (Tóth 1994: 540). He was sharply criticized for his thoughts concerning the future of the country, and responded to it in one of the circular questions of *Demográfia* [Demography]: “Reacting upon one of my articles complaining about low fertility two eminent economists of our country called me fascist saying that an active population policy was the sign of Nazi thinking ... One should not search for fascist thinking behind the preoccupation of a nation with its survival” (Cseh-Szombathy 1999: 220).

Differently from several experts dealing with this issue he also always pointed out that the emerging trends could not be explained only with changes in the financial situation “...those explanations should be handled with reservation that attribute exclusive role to the disadvantageous financial situation of families in the low level of having children. It cannot be disregarded that a process of shrinking started around 1965 all over Europe, and as a result the index of total fertility dropped below the reproductive level, that is below 2 in poor as well as rich countries...” (Cseh-Szombathy 2001: 525). He expressed his contrary opinion in several writings. “Based on my own researches it is the general worldview and value judgment that is of key importance” (Cseh-Szombathy 2000: 12). This is why recommendations related to attitudes to children always figured among his proposed solutions. “In our view child rearing is making sacrifice and it is not only a financial issue, but it is joy, a gift and help; in other words it is value for the entire community. Therefore in addition to state contribution to the cost of child rearing great attention should be paid also to the ‘maintenance’ of values related to children” (Cseh-Szombathy 2001: 532). He was almost 75 years old when in 1999 the ad hoc committee on Population Policy was set up upon the initiative of the Committee of Demography of HAS. The Chairman of that Committee was the Prime Minister, and he was invited to elaborate a concept of population policy. It must have been a difficult task to undertake, for he knew well that demographers have called attention to this trend and its grave social consequences during the earlier 30 years yet no change could be achieved either in Hungary or in the developed industrial countries. The international expert body of the UN dealing with the issue could only state the gravity of the emerging situation and that so far the possible solution could not be found. He also knew precisely, because this had been his major field of research for decades that an uncertain situation emerged in these

countries struggling against population problems which weakened the stability of families, an important condition to child rearing. He accepted the invitation for he felt, as he stated in a professional gathering, that 'now we had favorable winds'. His decision may have been also influenced by the fact that though he had always made efforts to ensure the scientific foundations of his conclusions, he wisely saw the limitations of academic approaches. In an interview he said that though rather gloomy demographic forecasts are being continuously made, yet "*We have to be prepared for unexpected changes, too*" (Cseh-Szombathy 1994: 1479). This remark suggesting optimism was supported by the following example: "*In the 20th century a change in the functioning of families took place once that no one had expected. In the 30s scientific forecasts were published about the twilight of the family as a form of life, and the end of family life and its catastrophe were prophesized. Instead the institution of the family became increasingly popular and it was almost reborn just during the world war and after. Population increased by leaps, and an upward turn lasting for about more than fifteen years began. Many people have studied and analyzed this phenomenon of the 50s and 60s, but the explanations are not satisfactory. Therefore we are unable to say even today what may bring a way out of the current bedrock, but an upturn similar to the post-war one can be imagined*" (Cseh-Szombathy 1994: 1479.) Experts invited to elaborate a population concept availed themselves of the opportunity, and keeping a rather tight timeframe the concept was completed by early March 2000. The ad hoc Committee discussed the presentation and approved it. Next the Prime Minister commissioned one of the leading officials of the Prime Minister's Office to elaborate the actual operational programme on the basis of the concept, which, however, was not made. It was not the fault of László Cseh-Szombathy and the experts participating in the work that their efforts were not successful. A research trying to find an answer to why these modern societies are unable to give a meaningful answer to challenges endangering their survival would offer an opportunity to get a thorough knowledge of regularities asserting themselves and of power relations in those societies.

László Cseh-Szombathy was known by his friends, acquaintances and associates as a kind, polite and often smiling man, who was surrounded by particular respect due to his infinite honesty and correctness. He avoided conflicts in his private life as well as professional work. In the sixties he asserted this consideration even in selecting his research topics. "*In those days I very consciously chose topics that would hurt as few as possible, therefore there was the study of suicide no one cared for. The other topic was ageing, the situation of pensioners*" (Kovács 2000: 28). Such a no-risk choice was the time budget research as well as the sociology of family. Due to his family background and as a non-party member this was part of the 'survival strategy' under the given conditions. Only few people knew that despite this reservation and caution how incredibly strong inner toughness he had, that he was a man who had a 'fixed point' in his life. He demonstrated with his entire life how we could preserve our humanity in difficult times. He was a man preserving the values of the 'old world', who felt immense responsibility for the country and as he said he "did what was possible".

Calvinist faith inherited from his ancestors was an important value for him to be preserved. In his memoir on his family entitled *A hét nemzedék*. [Seven Generations]

he proudly mentioned his church-builder ancestors and what they had done for the preservation of their faith. He explained it with this family tradition why he came back to Hungary as the only one of the 12 scholarship-holders from Switzerland in 1947. He decided on returning despite the fact, or perhaps just because of it that he precisely knew what had happened to Ferenc Nagy, for in those days he was the interpreter and guide of the Prime Minister in Geneva. *“When he signed his prime ministerial resignation and was forced to emigrate I decided that no one was forcing me to leave Hungary for good, therefore I took the train on 1 July and came back to Hungary”* (Kovács 2000: 22). He remembered his home-coming, surprising many at that time, as follows: *“I felt the Cseh-Szombathy ancestors obliged me to do so. After 1947 difficult years came on us, but I have not felt sorry for that ‘mistake’ to this day. The most important positive result of my home-coming was my marriage: through my traditional aunt Margit Zupringer I got acquainted with my wife in 1948, with whom we lived in great affection for fifty years up to her death”* (Cseh-Szombathy 2004: 69). His family was highly important to him, and he regarded the birth of his sons and grandchildren as the most important events of his life.

He presented a memorable example of a man insisting on his own values in 1983 when his mother passed away. It happened when as a non-party member he applied for the director’s position of the Institute of Sociology. He brought the notice of death to the Institute and gave it to some of his close associates. The communication started with: *“Resigning to the will of God...”*. It meant the acknowledgement of his high standard professional work that he was appointed director despite it.

On the occasion of our personal talks he gladly narrated extraordinary stories he could not find any explanation for. He even wrote one of his favorite stories he repeatedly narrated about his medical doctor grandfather: *“He was an eminent diagnostic despite his poor sight. He said if he went to the patient’s home and entered the room where he was in bed, he would not see in which corner of the room the person was lying, but based on the smells he already knew what was his illness”* (Cseh-Szombathy 2004: 58).

He proudly wrote about his father who was also a physician that: *“his intuition was almost unsurpassed by which he assessed illnesses and their expected outcome...”* (Cseh-Szombathy 2004: 61). During the course of his academic work he refrained from wording intuitions, with the only exception of his writing on healthcare, though he did write in his introduction written for Durkheim’s book on suicide that this approach could bring new results in sociology. Partly criticising Durkheim’s method he wrote the following: *“For instance, he was not satisfied with theorizing about rich or poor countries, about Catholic or Protestant cantons, but he spoke about rich or poor people, about Protestants and Catholics. It does not mean that Durkheim’s statements about the individuals’ behavior would all be wrong, only that these findings are methodologically not justified. Intuitively Durkheim touched upon important interrelationships, however, his findings were proved scientifically only later”* (Cseh-Szombathy 1967: 12). Presumably it was professional discipline representing a basic value for him that kept him from wording intuitive thoughts he could not support with references to the literature or with his own research results.

During the past years I regularly visited him and we talked a lot in his flat under 5 Hegyalja Street. On one occasion he showed me the family Bible on the last page of which the more important events related to the family were recorded. According to family tradition this Bible was always kept by the senior male member of the family, and he said that he was preparing to hand it over to his son Márton. During our talks issues related to ending life often cropped up and he was much interested in my researches into belief in the other world and to near-death experiences. In the later 90s he spent a couple of days in the St János Hospital because of some minor illness, and asked me to visit him there. It was a great honor to me that he had taken me so much to his confidence and narrated his near-death experience to me. During these conversations he told me that he was absolutely not afraid of death, and at times he was even joking about this issue. It happened when I called him that his first words were: "I'm still alive...", and I knew that his characteristic gentle smile would appear on his face.

During the last year he was becoming increasingly weak, and we conversed only through the phone. He knew that the end of his life was approaching and was preparing for the farewell. He himself chose and invited a young minister to perform the burial rites.

His burial was nice. On that day there was bright sunshine, many people came that loved, respected and greatly appreciated him. His life was a complete whole. His ideas survive not only in his descendants and writings on sociology and demography but also in us, who knew a polite, fair man of great erudition, who had shown us how to preserve our humanity in difficult times.

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