

“...living on the cross of space and time...”

Remembering Dr. József Tóth

(1940–2013)



On 7th February 2013, Dr. József Tóth passed away at his 73rd year of age, after a short, severe illness. He was an emblematic personality of Hungarian human geography, a professor having created his own school of discipline. He had the opportunity to learn also from the greatest figures of his profession such as Gyula PRINZ, or Gyula KRAJKÓ starting him on his career, and László JAKUCS. He renewed classical pieces of knowledge in an innovative way, believing that geography is not only a subject, discipline or field of science, but a kind of perception as well. This is how he educated his students who are found today in many scientific workshops throughout the country, further building on his thoughts, bringing his innovations to perfection. Professor Tóth devoted his life to creation: he established research teams, departments, doctoral school, university programmes, organised an institute, directed a faculty and was the top leader of the largest university of the countryside.

The fact that he was born in the Hungarian Great Plain, determined his

identity, perception of the world, as well as his ambitions. He was a tendentious, straightforward and ambitious person, with a vision of definite aims, for the reaching of which he looked for partners and he organised teams. It was the Hungarian Great Plain that provided the spatial framework for his studies and the initial half of his career, the most important basis and directions for his research. He went to secondary school and university in the city of Szeged where he graduated as a teacher of biology and geography in 1964.

After graduation he started working for the Department of Economic Geography under Gyula KRAJKÓ, focusing his research on attraction zones and centres. Already being able to look at the Hungarian 'Puszta' and its peculiar world through the researcher's looking glass, he defended his university doctor title in 1966, and his CSc title in 1972 at the age of only 32. As a successful, young lecturer with a rich array of publications, he had the opportunity to test his science organising capacities too: in 1973 he was entrusted with establishing and leading the Great Plain Research Department of the Geographic Research Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He elaborated and co-ordinated settlement and spatial

structural research projects which were unconventional from many aspects, also exploring and convincing the necessary market, disseminating widely about the results of the group, in the meantime launching prospective academic careers for the young colleagues. As the professional conclusion of his scientific study period focusing on the Hungarian Great Plain, he defended his academic doctoral thesis in 1985, titled „Special features and problems of urbanisation in the Hungarian Great Plain“, which also marked the starting point of a new period that of the years spent in Pécs.

In 1984 he became the vice-director of the Regional Research Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Pécs, established by György ENYEDI, which became one of the flagship organisations of multidisciplinary spatial research outside Budapest. At that time he was already lecturing at the Department of Geography of the strengthening Janus Pannonius University, where he once again started a process of building. He consciously organised from what was then a college department with few staff members into a research and training base suitable for university level education, already as a full time DSc professor from 1987. He was assisting at the birth of new programmes, and at the development of a separate Faculty of Science from the former Teacher Training Faculty. He invited the qualified research staff of the Regional Research Centre and lecturers of sister universities to participate in the training programmes, and offered unparalleled career opportunities to his talented young colleagues. His impressively suggestive, informative, well-structured and always up-to-date lectures were listened by thousands of students who could also learn from him commitment towards the chosen profession.

Launching the doctoral programme proved to be a perfect means of building his school: it was only five years after the first year of university level training in geography that the PhD school was established in 1994. He was conscious in preparing his disciples for the academic career, also offering important and responsible positions and functions in lecturing, science education, scientific organising and further building.

In 1994, besides leading his department, guiding his disciples and directing the PhD school, Professor Tóth became the dean of the Faculty of Sciences, and rector of the university in 1997. In the year 2000 he was elected the first rector of the integrated University of Pécs, from which position he tried even harder to improve his field of science and the scientific workshop he had established. In the meantime he managed to organise the team of ever younger scientists around him into an institute, the majority of the junior staff being made up from his own former students.

He made the Institute of Geography established in 1998 one of the most populous workshops in the country, which became one of the most diverse research centres too. Through nation-wide co-operation he was first after the political transition to edit university textbooks titled and establish a department called 'Human Geography' instead of the formerly used term 'Economic Geography', thus helping the new international scientific trends to take root and spread in Hungarian geography education. He was actively participating in fitting new or neglected fields of science (medical geography, ethnic geography, political geography, cultural geography, geography of tourism, geography of education) into curricula, and in exploring and utilising their modern research challenges. He fought devotedly for enhancing the recognition of geography by society, and for new pieces of geographic knowledge to be made available for the wide public. For this purpose, too he was effectively making use of his broad Hungarian and international relation system; one of the last prominent pieces of his work was the 'Global Geography' volume published by the Hungarian Academic Press, which he was editor of. He believed firmly that geography is a unitary, yet Janus-faced field of science which should show out by the advantages of this duality of physical and social points of view, rather than by its disadvantages.

Professor Tóth's scientific interest during his years in Pécs was clearly of a synthetic nature. He rather let over his own new concepts to his colleagues for being brought to perfection, always assisting the innovative initiatives of young scientists. A series of books, collective volumes originate from this stage of his work, almost all of which were published together with a young co-author, co-editor. His 'tetrahedron model' became a classical concept in Hungarian human geography even as early as in his life, which he further expanded and interpreted as a notion of anthropogenic geographic spaces. Further developing the concept by Gyula PRINZ ("raumorganismus", "raumorganisation") he formulated his own understanding of regions which he communicated in a number of various forums including a peculiar, grand television lecture.

His greatest and most beloved work in the city of Pécs is by all means the doctoral school he established. When the new system of scientific qualifications was being created in Hungary, he was among the first ones to set up a doctoral programme which became the largest and most open of such schools throughout the country. The first individuals to have completed the school are now associate professors and chairs of departments; it has provided the possibility of gaining scientific degree for professionals working in Hungarian higher education both beyond the state borders and inside Hungary. The Doctoral School of Earth Sciences established by Professor Tóth accepted and enrolled not only geographers, but also other researchers from a wide array of other disciplines, receptive to various spatial problems. In the last period of his life he still participated in this scientific workshop, as professor emeritus in the very last two years. Besides, he was lecturing 'Studium generale geographiae', his only last gradual course, which was a very important one in talent stewardship.

Professor József Tóth became a citizen of Pécs and the Mecsek foothills in a sense that although he started off in the Hungarian Plain, he created everlasting values in Pécs, in terms of scientific, educational, science organisational, school establisher and human terms. His activities were signified and recognised by a series of rewards and prizes from scientific, university, municipal, state and public life, of which the one he confessed to be most proud of was the 'Honorable Citizen of Pécs' title awarded by his chosen home-town.

He was a charismatic man with high determination and consistency in his decisions, openly undertaking debates and conflicts for the sake of a good case. With these human features and aptitude, what he created has proved to be everlasting in Hungarian geography, in human geography, scientific and higher education, as well as in regional development. His oeuvre, exceptional personality and devotion to science will not ever be forgotten. We will always remember.

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