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## Under the Spell of Distant Landscapes: On the Lives and Work of a Few Famous Hungarian Travellers and Explorers after 1945 – an Introduction to the Topic for English-Speaking Readers

### Abstract

All travellers and explorers have always had the desire and the ambition to discover, for different reasons and motivations, remote and unknown lands. Hungarian travellers and explorers are no exception here. Eminent Hungarian Orientalists, archaeologists, geographers, as well as anthropologists, geologists, zoologists and botanists, and other brave and adventurous scientists, have become justly recognised in recent centuries, even worldwide, for their oeuvres and their scientific achievements.

After 1945, travel opportunities in socialist Hungary became more limited, and Hungarian scientists and researchers could embark on their expeditions only with great difficulty, overcoming many obstacles and with scarce financial resources.

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In this study, I introduce five such brave and determined Hungarian travellers: Dénes Balázs: geographer and karst researcher, János Balogh: biologist, ecologist and professor, Steve Bezuk: engineer and extreme sportsman, who lived in the United States, Ödön Jakabos: Transylvanian writer and “Székely pilgrim”, and finally, Tibor Székely: travel writer, museologist and Esperantist from Vojvodina.

They all – through their individual scientific achievements, discoveries, perseverance and human attitude – have become worthy heirs of the outstanding Hungarian explorers and travellers of the past centuries.

**Keywords:** *Hungary, traveller, explorer, Dénes Balázs, János Balogh, Steve Bezuk, Ödön Jakabos, Tibor Székely, expedition, scientist*

## **Pod urokiem odległych krajobrazów: O życiu i twórczości kilku słynnych węgierskich podróżników i odkrywców po 1945 roku – wprowadzenie do tematu dla anglojęzycznych czytelników**

### **Abstrakt**

Wszyscy podróżnicy i odkrywcy zawsze mieli pragnienie i ambicję odkrywania, z różnych powodów i motywacji, odległych i nieznanymi krajin. Węgierscy podróżnicy i odkrywcy nie są wyjątkiem. Wybitni węgierscy orientaliści, archeolodzy, geografowie, a także antropolodzy, geolodzy, zoologowie i botanicy oraz inni odważni i żądni przygód naukowcy stali się słusznie uznani w ostatnich stuleciach, nawet na całym świecie, za ich twórczość i osiągnięcia naukowe.

Po 1945 r. możliwości podróżowania na socjalistycznych Węgrzech stały się bardziej ograniczone, a węgierscy naukowcy i badacze mogli wyruszać na swoje wyprawy tylko z wielkim trudem, pokonując wiele przeszkód i dysponując ograniczonymi środkami finansowymi.

W niniejszym opracowaniu przedstawiam pięciu takich odważnych i zdeterminowanych węgierskich podróżników: geograf i badacz krasów Dénesa Balázsa, biologa, ekologę i profesora Jánosa Balogha, mieszkającego w Stanach Zjednoczonych inżyniera i sportowca ekstremalnego Steve’a Bezuka, transylwańskiego pisarza Ödöna Jakabosa oraz „pielgrzyma Székely’ego”, Tibora Székely’ego pisarza podróżniczego, muzealnika i esperantystę z Wojwodiny.

Wszyscy oni – dzięki indywidualnym osiągnięciom naukowym, odkryciom, wytrwałości i ludzkiej postawie – stali się godnymi spadkobiercami wybitnych węgierskich odkrywców i podróżników minionych stuleci.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *Węgry, podróżnik, odkrywca, Dénes Balázs, János Balogh, Steve Bezuk, Ödön Jakabos, Tibor Székely, wyprawa, naukowiec*

### **1. Introduction**

For more than twenty years I have been studying the lives and work of famous Hungarian travellers and explorers, or those ones who have been forgotten. I have taught courses entitled “World-famous Hungarian travellers and explorers” at several higher education institutions. I have also written about the unparalleled oeuvre of certain scholars, in particular on Gyula Germanus<sup>1</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> Germanus, Gyula (Julius Abdul-Karim Germanus) (1884–1979) was a Hungarian Arabist, writer, literary historian, professor, MP, and traveller.

the Arabist, writer, literary historian, university teacher and traveller who converted to Islam and who was the first Hungarian to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, but I have also published on Aurél Stein<sup>2</sup>, the archaeologist and orientalist, Armin Vámbéry<sup>3</sup>, the orientalist and professor and Steve Bezuk, the traveller and extreme sportsman. In this paper, I will attempt to present, without claiming to be exhaustive, five biographies of Hungarian travellers and explorers who have produced significant human and scientific achievements since 1945, because I believe that the work of Hungarian geographical explorers, travellers and researchers is not sufficiently known to the international scientific community, let alone to the public.

The answer to the question of why the oeuvre of Hungarian explorers is not as well-known as that of their English, French, German, or Spanish counterparts is manifold. This may have been due to the poverty, peripheral position, isolation, and the uniqueness of the Hungarian language of Hungarian researchers. Another reason for their relative obscurity after 1945 was the repressive nature of the communist regime, the difficulties of maintaining scientific and collegial contacts, especially with the Western world, the lack or scarcity of international contacts of the Hungarian “socialist” scientific background, and the neglect of the Hungarian and international press. Many times, Hungarian researchers, returning from successful and dangerous expeditions, were confronted with the disinterest, and sometimes even jealousy and envy, of the Hungarian community at home. Although they published the results of their research in scientific journals and books, and many of them also placed great emphasis on disseminating knowledge, and even made radio and TV appearances and gave public lectures, I believe that nowadays the great oeuvre they left to posterity is beginning to be forgotten. Although we are a Central European, landlocked nation, somewhat closed in the Carpathian Basin, there have always been brave, even daring explorers, researchers, and travellers among the Hungarians, who often risked their lives, lacked knowledge of the place and language, had empty pockets or very scarce financial resources to venture into the unknown. In addition, after 1945, during the decades of the repressive communist regime, until the change of regime in 1989, the official Hungarian state bodies, foreign missions and science policymakers were often suspicious of these determined, versatile, well-prepared Hungarian scientists and researchers travelling to the West and/or to “non-friendly” developing countries.

I believe that the five Hungarian careers of the post-1945 travellers outlined in my study can rightfully claim a place in the imaginary “Pantheon” of world-famous Hungarian travellers. I think that their work is not known in sufficient depth in Hungary, nor are they sufficiently known to the international scientific community and the public worldwide. Although they produced an amazing human and scientific achievement, they were worthy heirs of the famous Hungarian travellers of earlier times. My selection is subjective, and I have drawn on my own research and personal memories of the explorers too.

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<sup>2</sup> Stein, Aurél (Sir Marc Aurel Stein) (1862–1943) was a Hungarian-born British archaeologist, Orientalist and traveller.

<sup>3</sup> Vámbéry, Ármin (Arminius Vambery) (1830–1913) was a Hungarian Orientalist, Turkologist and traveller.

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## 2. In the footsteps of former Hungarian researchers and explorers

As János Kubassek, geographer, director of the Hungarian Geographical Museum in Érd and himself an eminent researcher and traveller, writes:

The first Hungarian geographic traveller, Friar Julian<sup>4</sup> (“Julianus barát”), took up the wandering stick with the aim of exploring the ancestral homeland. Many of his followers wanted to visit their Hungarian »brothers and sisters« who had remained in Asia. János Besse<sup>5</sup>, Sándor Kőrösi Csoma<sup>6</sup> and Antal Reguly<sup>7</sup> set out with similar aims. The 19th century made it possible for the sons of our nation to take part in the exploration of distant lands. Among the Hungarian geographic explorers and world travellers there were very poor and very rich people. They set out for varied reasons. Some were motivated by curiosity for the unknown, others by the constraints of history. Many were driven by the service of science, the thirst for knowledge. The Hungarian explorers who made a lasting contribution to the discovery of our planet were those who had scientific knowledge and serious prior studies. Their collecting and research work fertilised the fields of geography, geology, botany, zoology, ethnography, and linguistics. They penetrated the little-known interior of continents. They defied the forces of nature, took the risks of struggle, the dangers of disease and epidemics. Their work served universal progress in the noblest sense of the word. Many of them wiped the last »terra incognita« off the map. Many of them sacrificed their lives to fulfil the task they had undertaken. Sándor Csoma Kőrösi in India, László Magyar<sup>8</sup> in Southwest Africa, Samuel Fenichel<sup>9</sup> in New Guinea and Aurél Stein in Afghanistan are buried in lands far from home. Most of their journeys were not accompanied by glory or recognition, although some received the highest honours for their achievements, such as Aurél Stein. All of them contributed to a better understanding of the world and brought glory to their homeland (Kubassek 2008, pp. 8–9).

It is exceedingly difficult to narrow down the list of Hungarian traveller explorers to the top 10. There were professional scientists, whether orientalists, archaeologists, geographers or geologists, but also anthropologists, zoologists and botanists who made significant scientific achievements in far-flung landscapes (e.g. Ármin Vámbéry, Aurél Stein, Gyula Germanus, Lajos Lóczy<sup>10</sup>, Jenő Cholnoky<sup>11</sup>, Lajos Bíró<sup>12</sup>, Mór Déchy<sup>13</sup>, László Almásy<sup>14</sup>). There were those who were attracted

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<sup>4</sup> Friar Julian (? – after 1437) was a Hungarian Dominican friar who, in 1235, left Hungary to find those Magyars who remained in the eastern homeland.

<sup>5</sup> Besse, János Károly (1765–1841) was a Hungarian traveller and explorer.

<sup>6</sup> Kőrösi Csoma, Sándor (1784–1842) was a Hungarian Orientalist, philologist, and traveller.

<sup>7</sup> Reguly, Antal (1819–1858) was a Hungarian linguist, ethnographer, and traveller.

<sup>8</sup> Magyar, László (1818–1864) was a Hungarian geographical explorer, traveller, and map-editor of Southwest Africa.

<sup>9</sup> Fenichel, Sámuel (1868–1893) was a Hungarian explorer and traveller.

<sup>10</sup> Lóczy, Lajos (1849–1920) was a Hungarian geologist, geographer, professor, explorer, and traveller.

<sup>11</sup> Cholnoky, Jenő (1870–1950) was a Hungarian geographer, writer, professor, and traveller.

<sup>12</sup> Bíró, Lajos (1856–1931) was a Hungarian zoologist, explorer, and traveller.

<sup>13</sup> Déchy, Mór (1851–1917) was a Hungarian geographer, explorer, and traveller.

<sup>14</sup> Almásy, László (1895–1951) was a Hungarian aviator, desert explorer, traveller, military officer, and businessman. The film entitled “The English Patient” was modelled after him.

by the origins of the Hungarian people and therefore travelled to the East to find their supposed ancestral homeland, and there were also monks, mainly Jesuits, who were sent on missions by their order, even to Latin America, Africa, or Asia. Some of them were aristocrats who went hunting on the various continents (e.g. Count Zsigmond Széchenyi<sup>15</sup>) or organised serious exploratory expeditions (e.g. Count Sámuel Teleki<sup>16</sup>, Count Béla Széchenyi<sup>17</sup>). Among them were restless adventurers and military officers (e.g. Count Móric Benyovszky<sup>18</sup>, László Magyar, János Xantus<sup>19</sup>), but also doctors (e.g. Ferenc Gáspár<sup>20</sup>, László Sáska<sup>21</sup>), naval officers (e.g. Jób Kompolthy<sup>22</sup>), colonial officials in the service of other countries (e.g. Emil Torday<sup>23</sup>). One thing is certain, the oeuvre of Hungarian travellers and explorers is equal to that of any Western European nation, their work has proved to be valuable and enduring, and a good reference for generations of researchers after 1945.

### 3. Obstacles facing researchers: The regulation of travel in socialist Hungary

Hungary ended the Second World War on the losing side, the country was occupied by the Soviet Red Army by April 1945, and after a few years of democratic interlude, from 1948 the “Iron Curtain” descended on the centre of Europe and East-Central Europe fell to Soviet interests. The Communist Party took power and imposed a terrifying and brutal dictatorship on the country. The country’s borders were closed, and for ordinary people, and even for researchers, scientists, academics, travelling abroad became a dream category that was virtually unattainable. The Soviet Union and the “fraternal” socialist countries, as well as the “friendly” developing countries of the Third World, could be reached after long waits and struggles, but travel to the Western world was almost impossible until the 1960s.

The state kept a strict watchful eye on those who wished to go abroad, narrowing the circle of those who could do so, were mainly politicians, diplomats, artists and sportsmen, as well as professional bodies (e.g. foreign traders, transporters, airmen, sailors), dedicated »comrades« whose visits abroad contributed to the building of socialism (Tóth-Péter 2018).

After the suppression of the 1956 Revolution and War of Independence, the period of consolidation under the name of János Kádár<sup>24</sup> saw a slight easing of the restrictions on Hungarian citizens travelling abroad.

A citizen could travel abroad for private purposes, i.e. not on official or work-related missions, in three different capacities: as an individual visitor, as an individual tourist,

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<sup>15</sup> Count Széchenyi, Zsigmond (1898–1967) was a Hungarian aristocrat, hunter, writer, and traveller.

<sup>16</sup> Count Teleki, Sámuel (1845–1916) was a Hungarian aristocrat, hunter, explorer, traveller, and MP.

<sup>17</sup> Count Széchenyi, Béla (1837–1918) was a Hungarian aristocrat and geographical explorer.

<sup>18</sup> Count Benyovszky, Móric (1746–1786) was a Hungarian aristocrat, military officer, adventurer, explorer, traveller, and writer.

<sup>19</sup> Xantus, János (1825–1894) was a Hungarian military officer, zoologist, ethnographer, explorer, and traveller.

<sup>20</sup> Gáspár, Ferenc (1861–1923) was a Hungarian doctor, writer, and traveller.

<sup>21</sup> Sáska, László (1890–1978) was a Hungarian doctor, writer, and traveller.

<sup>22</sup> Kompolthy, Jób (1879–1938) was a Hungarian naval officer, writer, and traveller.

<sup>23</sup> Torday, Emil (1875–1931) was a Hungarian anthropologist, explorer, writer, and traveller.

<sup>24</sup> Kádár, János (1912–1989) communist politician, MP, Minister of the Interior (1948–1950), First Secretary (later: General Secretary) of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (1956–1985), Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the People’s Republic of Hungary (1956–1958, 1961–1965).

or as a participant in group travel organised by travel agencies or social organisations. Citizens could apply to the competent body for permission to travel abroad but could also be refused the right to travel without giving reasons. Travel to the West and visa issuing practices were strict. Destinations were divided in two: eastern, “friendly”, and western, “imperialist” travel. The main feature of the period was that there were two different passports depending on the destination. The “Eastern” (“red”) passport for socialist countries was easier to obtain and less restricted than the “blue” passport for the rest of the world. In the 1960s and 1970s, mass tourism to the socialist countries mainly replaced trips to the West, which were available only every three years for Hungarians. After a temporary relaxation, from the end of 1956, a passport application to the “people’s democratic republics” also required an employer’s proposal, 2 police-verified photographs and a stamped letter of invitation from a relative, no more than 3 months old. For individual tourist travel, the passport application was even more restrictive, requiring proof of a hotel room reservation and a maximum stay of 14 days. People who the authorities feared would emigrate or weaken the regime from within through their impressions of the West, were not even allowed to leave. Those who were given permission were expected to be monitored in the future. From the 1970s onwards, the conditions of departure were relaxed, so that the number of border crossings increased significantly, but even then, the application was carefully scrutinised in terms of the country of destination (Tóth-Péter 2018).

By the 1970s, travel regulations in Hungary had been further relaxed:

There were two ways to travel west in the 1960s and 1970s: an »invitation passport« was issued if a relative from the West wrote an invitation letter, had it authenticated, and the applicant enclosed it with the application. This allowed you to travel once a year. The “tourist passport” allowed travel once every three years. The invitation passport was valid for 50 dollars and the tourist passport for 70 dollars, and no more currency could be taken out of the country – to the extent that it was considered a criminal offence. The amount of currency purchased (and the amount left over from the quota) was recorded on a “currency sheet” attached to the passport. In 1978, the Presidential Council of the Hungarian People's Republic issued a decree declaring the right to travel as a legal right, and more and more people started travelling. In 1984, the universal “blue” passport was introduced. In 1987 it was decided to introduce a “world passport”, which could be applied for from 1 January 1988. After that, only the amount of currency, which could be exported to abroad, was limited. In 1988, after the so-called »world passport« was introduced, the exit permit was abolished. Full freedom of travel was introduced by the Passport Act 1989 (Dobos 2010).

In the light of all this, it is possible to imagine how much “Sisyphean work” it must have been for researchers in socialist Hungary to organise a mission outside Europe, whether it was a research trip or an expedition, to obtain the necessary permits and documents (passports, visas, permits, invitation letters, etc.), and to prepare for their trips, often for years. In the light of the above, it was also not easy to carry out a scientific trip as a “private trip”. An academic researcher or university lecturer who was invited on a research trip, to a conference or as a guest lecturer would also have to go through several rounds of complicated authorisation procedures and would usually attract the attention of the Hungarian state security. Furthermore, even if he had the

necessary documents to travel abroad, he had minimal or very limited currency, which was almost not enough for anything abroad. For most Hungarian researchers, and I believe other Eastern European researchers, lack of financial resources was often the only obstacle to achieve even greater scientific results.

Furthermore, it is not negligible that two of the travellers and researchers included in this study were citizens of other countries, as Hungarians abroad. Ödön Jakabos in Transylvania, Romania, while Tibor Székely lived in Belgrade and then in Subotica, Yugoslavia. Among them, there was also a Hungarian, Steve Bezuk who emigrated to the United States after the 1956 Revolution and War of Independence. I will outline the fate of five Hungarians, five outstanding human and scientific figures, all of whom have passed away, but whose memory I hope will live on for a long time.

#### **4. Dénes Balázs (1924–1994)<sup>25</sup> geographer and karst researcher**

Dénes Balázs (1924–1994), a world traveller, speleologist, and an excellent karst explorer, was one of the outstanding figures of Hungarian geography, whose books and fascinating travel drawings have been popular among generations. His books, written in an impressive style, influenced many people to choose geography as their life's vocation. Dénes Balázs was born in Debrecen on 17 September 1924. His father, Dénes Balázs, was born on 5 December 1890 in Kászonimpér (Imper) in “Szeklerland” (“Székelyföld”), Transylvania to a poor peasant family; his mother, Piroska Mérész, was born on 1 January 1895, the daughter of a baker in Rimaszombat (Rimavská Sobota). The parents of the illustrious world traveller were married in Újpest on 19 February 1922, and his father, hoping to make a better living, took up military service in Debrecen, and it was then when the scientist was born. Dénes Balázs was two years old when in 1926 the family moved from Debrecen to Mezőhegyes, where the head of the family served as a warehouse foreman at the state stud farm.

He completed his schooling in Tótkomlós, Makó, at the “Návay Lajos School of Higher Trade”, and then in Debrecen. In 1940, due to his father's illness, the family moved back to Debrecen. The head of the family died in 1941 at the age of 51. Dénes Balázs graduated from the Piarist trade school in Szent Anna Street of Debrecen in 1943. After graduation, in 1943, Dénes Balázs started working at the Debrecen Tobacco Factory, and in 1944 he was drafted as a soldier. He managed to avoid front-line service, but he was taken prisoner of war by the Soviets and did three years of forced labour in the Sumgait camp in Azerbaijan. After his release from captivity, they sold the family house in Debrecen and bought a modest home in Érdliget with his mother. The Soviet imprisonment and many other circumstances delayed his professional development for a long time, but in the late 1950s he slowly began to start his professional carrier. In the winter of 1958, he set off on his first one-man expedition to China, where he studied mainly the karst regions of southern China. On his return from there, he taught geography in the night school at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) from 1959 to 1962, and then, as a means of collecting material for his doctoral dissertation, he organised another study trip to the karst regions of the Middle East in 1962, during which he and Imre Maár<sup>26</sup> explored the karst regions of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt.

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<sup>25</sup> In preparing this biography, I have made extensive use of three works: Barna 2019; Kozák 2013; Veres 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Maár, Imre (?–?) horticultural engineer, karst explorer and traveller.

In 1964–1965 he organised another major study trip to the tropical karsts and volcanic islands of Indonesia. From the experience of this trip, he wrote his first book, *“Boat hitchhiking trip through the Indonesian archipelago”*<sup>27</sup>, which was later followed by 25 others. On his return from Indonesia, he gave up his job at the Ministry of Food and continued to work as a freelance geographer. In 1967–1968, he crossed the Sahara with a Polish-Hungarian truck expedition<sup>28</sup> and then travelled to Equatorial Africa<sup>29</sup>. In 1969–1970 he covered the Americas from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego<sup>30</sup>. After exploring North America from Caracas, he followed the Andes in South America, researched the unexplored Archidonia karst region of Ecuador, and reached the Galápagos Islands<sup>31</sup>. In 1972–73 he visited Japan, the Philippines<sup>32</sup>, and Papua New Guinea<sup>33</sup>, before continuing his expeditions to Australia and the Oceania archipelago<sup>34</sup>. In 1975, he visited the Indian subcontinent, but was unable to continue his journey to South Africa due to health reasons and had to return home, but soon set off again, this time touring South Africa and the surrounding countries<sup>35</sup>. In 1977–1978, on his first circumnavigation of the globe, he reached Scotland, Greenland and then, joining an expedition to Venezuela, researching the Waika people of the upper Orinoco, a group untouched by civilisation. Then he travelled to the countries of Central America (Panama, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico)<sup>36</sup>, followed by New Zealand and Australia<sup>37</sup>. In 1979, he travelled to the island of Madagascar, where, among other places, he located the former settlement and possible grave of Móric Benyovszky<sup>38</sup>. In 1981, he visited the Caribbean archipelago, then the three Guyanas, before setting off from Belém to sail across the Amazon and reach the source of the “Giant River” in the Peruvian Andes<sup>39</sup>. In 1984–1985, he circumnavigated the globe for a second time, visiting the Canary Islands, Canada and then again South America, with a special focus on Argentina<sup>40</sup>. From there, he visited New Zealand via Tahiti, followed by New Caledonia, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands, and again New Guinea. In 1988–1989, he travelled in Southeast Asia. Here, in addition to karst research, he collected material for a guidebook to the countries, but this (together with his major work on the geography of Asia) could no longer be published due to financial problems with publishers. In 1989, he managed to visit the karst regions of southern China again, and the following year he visited the Soviet Union. This was his last backpacking expedition. Dénes Balázs died on 19 October 1994 after a lengthy illness. In his last months he continued to work on his memoirs, which were published in 1995 under the title *“My Life – My Travels”*<sup>41</sup>, edited by his wife.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Balázs 1969.

<sup>28</sup> Balázs 1970.

<sup>29</sup> Balázs 1971.

<sup>30</sup> Balázs 1972.

<sup>31</sup> Balázs 1973.

<sup>32</sup> Balázs 1975.

<sup>33</sup> Balázs 1976.

<sup>34</sup> Balázs 1978.

<sup>35</sup> Balázs 1979.

<sup>36</sup> Balázs 1981.

<sup>37</sup> Balázs 1981.

<sup>38</sup> Balázs 1983.

<sup>39</sup> Balázs 1987.

<sup>40</sup> Balázs 1988.

<sup>41</sup> Balázs 1995.

<sup>42</sup> Barna 2019.



In connection with his scientific work, Dénes Balázs has carried out a significant moss collection in 45 countries of the world on behalf of the Hungarian Museum of Natural History and the Botanical Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Vácrátót. The moss species (*Bryoxiphium norvegicum* subsp. *japonicum*) collected on the Indonesian island of Lombok, which he discovered for the first time south of the equator, was a scientific sensation. He was one of the world's best-known karst researchers, and his collections of cave and soil fauna are particularly significant. He has published his experiences in an enjoyable style of high-quality travel writings. His work as a historian of science and museologist is particularly valuable. In 1983 he founded the Hungarian Geographical Museum in Érd, which he and his colleagues collected the artefacts of Hungarian travellers and geographers. He bequeathed the rich documentary and pictorial legacy of his research and travels, as well as his valuable ethnographic collection, to the museum he founded in his will.<sup>43</sup>

Dénes Balázs lived and travelled a lot in an era when the average Hungarian citizen could travel outside the socialist bloc with a tourist passport every three years. Of course, Balázs had to work hard for his trips, but he organised almost everything he wanted, even if it meant months of tedious application and follow-up. His extensive correspondence helped him a lot, as he corresponded with researchers and renowned experts from many countries around the world. By the 1980s, he had become not just an “official” but a veteran world traveller, having visited every continent, including Antarctica. His favourite destination was the Galápagos Islands, which he said was a “Mecca” for biologists. During his travels, Balázs not only researched the memorial sites of Hungarian travellers, but also Hungarian emigrants living abroad. The latter were often out of necessity, as he travelled mostly alone, backpacking, and had to save money, so hotels were out of the question. He had an effective method: he always looked up the letter “Sz” in the local phone book – in almost all cases, the individuals with this surname had to be Hungarian or Polish. They were happy to welcome their backpacker compatriot, who would tell them about conditions back home in exchange for accommodation. Of course, not everything went so smoothly: sometimes he was captured by kidnappers or partisan hunters or caught a local disease (these stories are detailed in his books). But in every trouble, he was always helpful with his directness, which enabled him to talk to anyone, anywhere. And his perseverance, which showed from a young age that if you are driven by pure interest and good intentions, you can achieve anything, anywhere, even on your own.<sup>44</sup>

Unfortunately, I did not know Dénes Balázs personally, but I had done a lot of research in the museum<sup>45</sup> he founded, which is still running and thriving. The museum's director, János Kubassek, PhD and his staff are faithfully preserving the founder's legacy, and a statue of Dénes Balázs welcomes visitors in the courtyard.

## 5. János Balogh (1913–2002)<sup>46</sup> zoologist and ecologist

János Balogh was born on 19 February 1913 in Nagybooskó (Великий Бичків), Transcarpathia. His parents, who were teachers, were transferred there from a village school in Arad County, shortly before his birth. His father was killed in action at Przemyśl (1914) in the First World War. Her mother received her dead husband's diary and after the war she travelled to look for his grave,

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<sup>43</sup> Kozák 2013.

<sup>44</sup> Veres 2017.

<sup>45</sup> See the Hungarian Geographical Museum's [website](#).

<sup>46</sup> In preparing this biography, I have made extensive use of the work: B.A. [2002–2023a](#).

but in the end, she did not find it. János Balogh was less than eight years old when the Spanish flu took his mother (1920). Until the age of ten, he was raised by his maternal grandparents, the Reformed cantor family of Túrkeve, as the youngest of eleven children. After completing the fourth grade, the brilliantly educated war orphan was admitted to the Protestant National Orphanage in Budapest, from where he was enrolled at the legendary “Budapest-Fasori Lutheran High School”. After graduation, he enrolled at the Faculty of Humanities of the Royal Hungarian University of Péter Pázmány (now: ELTE), majoring in natural history and geography. After high school, he went to Horthy College and then to university – with famous friends such as Gyula László the historian, Ágoston Kollányi the film director, László Móczár the zoologist, József Kerekes the geologist, Jenő Cholnoky the professor, Zoltán Kaszab the zoologist.

He was at university, but he was already researching spiders. At 17, he did research in Eagle Hill (“Sas-hegy”), Budapest and published by the age of 20. After graduating from university in 1935, he obtained a doctorate in humanities (PhD in zoology) and wrote his first book, “*The Spider Fauna of the Eagle Hill*”<sup>47</sup>, in which he described his four years of research starting in 1930 and which has since become one of the most important references among researchers. He saw nature as a system of great interrelationships, and so inevitably settled on ecology. Taking his cue from Humboldt and Darwin, he wrote in his diary at the age of 16: “My life’s ambition is to become a tropical zoologist”. This life goal was not fulfilled until he was 50, when he was the author of three successful books and more than 50 scientific publications.<sup>48</sup>

Between 1937 and 1946, he started his activities at the Department of Zoology and Zoological Geography headed by Professor Endre Dudich<sup>49</sup>, first as an unpaid trainee, then as an assistant professor, later as an adjunct professor. He habilitated in 1944. He then worked at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and returned to the university as a researcher in 1951, where he was one of the founders of the Department of Soil Zoology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. In 1952, János Balogh was awarded the title of Candidate of Biological Sciences, and two years later the title of Doctor of Biological Sciences. In 1965 he became a corresponding member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA) and from 1966 he was a professor. After Dudich’s retirement (1967), he took over the chair of the Department of Animal Systematics, founded by Professor Dudich at the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), which continued to function as the Department of Animal Systematics and Ecology in 1973. János Balogh headed the Department until 1987 and was also the head of the research group of the Department of Soil Zoology from 1970. He was primarily involved in teaching ecology to biologist and biology teacher students, but he also enjoyed teaching first-year earth science students, whose attention was drawn to the major ecological problems of the Earth. In 1973 he became a full member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He was Vice-Chairman of the Biology Department of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences from 1970 to 1973, and then Chairman from 1973 to 1980. In 1985 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by ELTE. He was professor emeritus from 1984 to 2002. He became an honorary member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences in 1986.

His scientific research can be divided into three broad areas: the first is arachnology, which he started when he was still at school and which he continued to enrich with many significant research results. The second is his research into soil ecology, culminating in the publication

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<sup>47</sup> Balogh 1935.

<sup>48</sup> For the full publication list of Professor János Balogh see: Anonymous (ed.) [2002–2023b](#).

<sup>49</sup> Dudich, Endre (1895–1971) was a Hungarian zoologist, professor.

in 1953 of his major research work “*Fundamentals of Zoocenology*”<sup>50</sup>, published in 1953. This became one of the definitive works of domestic zoology, published abroad entitled “*Lebensgemeinschaften der Landtiere*” („*Biotic Communities of Terrestrial Animals*”)<sup>51</sup>, internationally recognized as a basic work. His most important and internationally renowned research, however, was in the field of acarology. He made major contributions to the knowledge of oribatid mites<sup>52</sup>. He discovered and described a species new to science, followed by numerous publications from all over the world. He first studied a number of groups of mites, from which he described several new species, genera and families, but later on, armoured mites were the main focus of his research<sup>53</sup>. His acarological work was so well recognised, that in 1963 he was invited to participate in the first international acarological congress in Fort Collins (USA), where he was a jury member in the section on “Systematics and Nomenclature”.<sup>54</sup>

From 1959, he was an author and consultant for several radio and television series. In 1963 (after a third nomination) he was awarded the “Kossuth Prize” and finally received his passport. As if this was what UNESCO had been waiting for. In 1963 he was commissioned to research tropical soils. His lifelong dream of going to the tropics was fulfilled. The initial task was a zoological comparison of the soils of the still untouched Congolese rainforest, the plantations and the degraded areas that had been taken out of cultivation. This basic task was later expanded into a worldwide soil zoological study of tropical rainforests. Over the following thirty years he led 34 tropical expeditions, the last at the age of 87. “After a while, every Hungarian in the whole world knew that there was a mad, ageing scientist who was poking through the forest with his nose and he has nothing but his backpack and his enthusiasm”, he writes in his book “*From Túrkeve to Oceania*”<sup>55</sup>.

His main area of research was the largely unknown soil fauna of savannas and tropical rainforests in Africa, and later in South America, mainly in the Andes and Amazonia. The combined time spent in the tropics amounts to more than six years. Between 1963 and 1995, he organised expeditions outside Africa and South America to Asia, New Guinea, Australia, Oceania, and New Caledonia. The material collected there has been processed into hundreds of publications around the world<sup>56</sup>. It is a sad fact that some of János Balogh’s work is now irreplaceable and unrepeatable, given that it is about primeval forests that have since been completely wiped out. In recognition of his work, he was awarded the “Kossuth Prize” in 1963, the “Széchenyi” and “Pro Natura Prizes” in 1993, the “Academic Gold Medal” in 1995, the “Hungarian Heritage Prize” and the main prize of the Pro Renovanda Cultura Hungariae Foundation in 1999, the “Central Cross of the Hungarian Republic with Stars” in 2000 and the “Corvin Chain” in 2001. Professor János Balogh died on 16 August 2002, in the 90th year of his life.

Professor János Balogh was the first in Hungary to point out the connections and problems related to the past and present functioning of our planet. He was an excellent lecturer, and he always included his personal experiences in his talks, captivating his audience. He also enjoyed talking to the department’s thesis or PhD students, who were able to hear about his tropical

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<sup>50</sup> Balogh 1953.

<sup>51</sup> Balogh 1958.

<sup>52</sup> Balogh-Balogh 1992.

<sup>53</sup> Balogh-Balogh 2002.

<sup>54</sup> Horváth-Kontschán 2013, p. 8.

<sup>55</sup> Balogh 2003.

<sup>56</sup> Balogh 1984.

research expeditions and plans in a very enjoyable way. He was extremely enthusiastic with his young students. In addition to his scientific work, he has taken every opportunity to use television and radio to raise awareness of the problems threatening our living planet, and to protect forests, water, and air. As early as 1971, he was among the first to point out the dangers of global warming. He did not despise, and indeed recognised, the extreme importance of promoting science, and accepted invitations to give various lectures in schools and other institutions. In one of his speeches at the Academy, he stressed that, at the turn of the millennium, the scientist who promotes science is as important as the scientist who researches it. He argued that today's science has accelerated, and that the traditional school-based transmission of new knowledge cannot keep pace with progress. It must be "short-circuited", and this requires the media, especially radio and television.<sup>57</sup>

In the autumn of 1989, as a third-year high school student, I visited Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) as part of a small group for a university open day, where we were guided through the corridors by university students and we were welcomed by Professor Balogh, who had already become a legend in his own lifetime. He was infinitely kind in informing us about the faculty's courses, and we could ask him questions. I remember I took advantage of the opportunity, and he answered me exhaustively, directly and with a smile. Unfortunately, I was no longer able to attend his classes at the university, as I had changed my course. Even so, the memory of that brief meeting with the professor is still vivid in my mind.

## **6. Steve Bezuk (1938–1990)<sup>58</sup> engineer and extreme sportman**

"The real heroes were among us, and the age of discovery was not yet over." These were my first thoughts when I first heard about the adventurous life of Steve Bezuk (István Bezuk) (1938–1990), engineer, extreme sportsman, traveller, and his journey which was published at the Guinness Book of World Records too<sup>59</sup>, and which was a unique sporting achievement for his time. Between 21 June and 4 November 1970, Steve Bezuk paddled alone in a small kayak some 3,360 miles across the Amazon and its headwaters to reach the Atlantic Ocean at Ponta do Céu in Brazil, starting from Atalaya in Peru. He made it on his own, without any outside help, without sponsors, with little financial resources, with a minimum knowledge of Portuguese, but with even more courage, spirit, determination, and perseverance. He braved and survived thousands of dangers (e.g. starvation, skin rashes, torrential rains, sunstroke, windstorms, mosquitoes, bandits, harassing police, even poisonous stingray bites) on a folding, one-man little kayak of wooden frame and rubberised canvas cover. Bezuk, after the fortunate and successful completion of the adventure and his return home, wrote a manuscript chronicle of this fantastic journey in English, which, after the tragic and untimely death of the author, was inherited by his brother Zsolt Bezuk<sup>60</sup>. Thanks to his persevering and dedicated work, his high-quality and accurate Hungarian translation and – last but not least – his financial sacrifice, as well as the professional support and book's introduction of János Kubassek, Director of the Hungarian Geographical Museum in Érd, the book was published in Hungarian in 2017.<sup>61</sup>

After one of my lectures – several years ago – Mr Zsolt Bezuk contacted me and asked for my advice on the publication of the book. Mr Bezuk told a wonderful and touching story about his

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<sup>57</sup> Anonymous (ed.) [2002–2023a](#).

<sup>58</sup> In preparing this biography, I have made extensive use of two work: Bezuk 2017; Udvarvölgyi 2020.

<sup>59</sup> Norton 1990.

<sup>60</sup> Bezuk, Zsolt (b. 1941) is a Hungarian mechanical engineer, and traveller.

<sup>61</sup> Bezuk 2017.

brother István (Steve), who left Hungary after the 1956 revolution and freedom struggle. In the United States, he graduated from the University of Pennsylvania, Faculty of Engineering. He then spent years at the sea with the US Navy's Coast and Geodetic Survey, and soon began a promising career as the youngest officer of his rank. After a while he left the service, married, and was stranded ashore. He was not very fond of the civilian lifestyle on land, so he spent his free time on exciting and not exactly harmless pursuits: rock climbing, flying, white-water kayaking. He rafted all the wild rivers in the area and rafted Colorado's infamous Grand Canyon. He has kayaked on nearly ninety of the most famous rivers in North, Central and South America (e.g. the Pacuari, Revenazo, Cucico, Sarapiquí in Costa Rica; the Clearwater, Quesnal, Cariboo, Fraser in Canada; and the rivers of Washington, Utah, Idaho and Colorado in the United States). His ambition to reach 100 river was no longer fulfilled: On November 28, 1990, in the 53<sup>rd</sup> year of his life, he died tragically in white-water kayaking in the upper Green River Gorge, not far from his home in Seattle.

Bezuk flew to Peru in June 1970, and after a tiring journey with several stopovers, he began his greatest adventure in Atalaya. On 21 June 1970, he started kayaking on the river. He encountered Campa Indians, was plagued by tiny black flies, and at night his tent was always transformed into a hot, almost unbearable steam bath. He was disturbed several times by peccary pigs in the nearby bush, often wading waist-deep in mud during the landing. When he docked in the mestizo village of Bolognesi, the whole population wanted to see the "gringo" (light-skinned foreigner). Bezuk made a miscalculation from Atalaya to Pucallpa, not providing enough food. Every day he was hungrier, more tired, and dirtier. During his journey he met several Conibo Indians and mestizos. He later kayaked the Ucayali and landed in Pucallpa on 28 June 1970. Bezuk also describes in his book many of his precise observations of the people, especially the Indians, the landscape, the towns, the river, the forests, the fauna, and flora, among other things. For Bezuk, his self-imposed daily allowance for his journey was forty miles. The slow current, frequent headwinds and killer heat made it very difficult to achieve. Sunstroke was a daily occurrence. He often spent the full day in the boat, rowing, and drifting.

Bezuk has also lost his way on his journey, getting lost on the main branch of the Ucayali instead of a tributary, where a longer and more difficult section awaited him. Close to the shore, he was exposed to the curiosity of the people along the water's edge, often accompanied by a chorus of jeers, laughter, and disparaging shouts. Sometimes, perhaps because of his beard and khaki-coloured clothing, he was identified as a "bandolero", "guerillo" or "fidelista" (bandit, guerrilla, Castroist). During his journey he also met Cocama Indians and dolphins. Once he was almost swept away by a pile of logs caught in a floating tree, which rushed 15 feet away from the kayaks. The wanderer was often stopped by police, soldiers, river guards and he was harassed several times. The authorities were almost always suspicious of the lone kayak and its American "gringo" passenger on the mighty river. On dozens of occasions, he was suspected of being a smuggler, a robber, a subversive, a suspicious element, kept waiting for hours, searched in a humiliating manner. He engaged his aggressive interrogators in heated, useless debates, often desperately claiming that he was just a kayaker who wanted to go down the Amazon. He has suffered much humiliation in pursuit of his goal, and often he has been pushed to the brink of a nervous breakdown by police brutality. However, in all cases, he has "escaped" these adventures unscathed, even though his prolonged incarceration and deportation were often a close shave.

Bezuk also soon docked in Iquitos, Peru. On a further stretch, he was caught in a storm on the river and thus in danger. Later, a very exciting stretch followed, and on the sixth of August he was approaching the “land of three countries”, where Peru, Colombia and Brazil meet in a tiny, awkward bend. He was a little worried, knowing that smugglers were operating in this region. Where he docked, on a small sandbank, a marauding gang of 8–10 men soon disembarked from their barge and soon began to question and threaten Bezuk, who was lying flat in his tent. Only a mosquito net separated the villains and the frightened traveller. But Bezuk was lucky again, and the smugglers gave up after a while, and, fearing a possible gunshot, they did not dare to enter the tent, even though Bezuk had no weapon, and so he escaped this threatening incident. He soon continued his journey along the Brazilian stretch of the river. Unfortunately, the nights were often not spent in rest, but in fearful vigils and anxiety: on several occasions, tramps, malicious or curious people surrounded his tent, rummaged through his belongings, and picked at his kayak. Eventually, the peace and quiet of the night soon disappeared. Bezuk later recounted a shocking adventure, when, who knows why, four men chased him down the river, shouting at the top of their lungs, shaking their fists, and chased him for forty-five minutes. However, a rising headwind came to the aid of the fleeing man, and the “hooligan gang” gave up the chase. Bezuk suffered muscle spasms in his kayak. In the next town, Santo Antonio, the inquisitive harassment of the locals was repeated, with the mob gathered at the port escorting him to the police captain. Bezuk was saved from further trouble only by the appearance of an American missionary, Dale Paine. He was to enjoy his hospitality from then on. On the next port of call, at Fonte Boa, he was also harassed by a policeman and escorted to the station, and finally released.

Day after day Bezuk rowed or drifted with the slow tide, drowned in the midday heat, or braved stubborn headwinds. Sometimes he relied on the hospitality of the natives, but he was always on guard against their hostile feelings and never knew where he would spend the night. The “romanticism” of his journey had long since worn off. All that remained was the cruel reality of the difficulties and dangers that were an essential but unpleasant element of his venture. On 10 September 1970, he arrived in Manaus, the jungle capital, known as the “Queen of the Amazon”. The author also painted a very interesting and plastic picture of the city. The traveller slowly approached the mouth of the river. During the nine-day journey from Manaus to Santarém, he camped only twice. A new problem arose, the constant headwinds, which made it difficult to continue. In Macapa, the adventure seemed to be over: the police arrested him, frisked him, and deported him for allegedly having expired his visa. His kayak and equipment were also confiscated. He was later acquitted, released and his belongings were returned.

With renewed vigour, he continued his journey towards the destination. A bumpy ride followed, a wave capsized his kayak, and some of his equipment got lost. Bezuk persevered and on November 4, 1970, the end of the adventure arrived, he saw the small white building of the lighthouse of Ponta do Céu. Ponta do Céu marks the southeasternmost tip of Curuá Island, and thus the entrance to the Canal do Norte. When it stopped, it was already completely on the edge of the ocean. After reaching his destination, the weary wanderer headed back to Macapa, flew from there to Belém, and then back to the United States. The adventure ended happily, with only the dismantled Klepper kayak, which had weathered many storms, being lost in the airline on the way home. Steve Bezuk’s kayak trip in the Amazon, under adverse conditions, is a record for its time and, in my opinion, deserves a place in the imaginary “podium” of Hungarian travellers and explorers.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Udvarvölgyi 2020, pp. 78–84.

## 7. Ödön Jakabos (1940–1979)<sup>63</sup> “pilgrim” and writer

Born on 25 January 1940 in Nyújtód (Lunga), Transylvania, Ödön Jakabos (1940–1979) was literally a “pilgrim”. Without determination, perseverance, courage and obsession, great things cannot be achieved, and if these qualities are present, neither administrative obstacles nor lack of money can prevent the realisation of noble plans. Jakabos, who graduated from high school, worked as a salesman and then as an administrator, and travelled a lot in his free time, set himself a lofty goal as a young man: to make a journey to the grave of Sándor Kőrösi Csoma, revered as the saint of the Szekler (“Székely”) people, in Darjeeling, and to break up the nuggets he had brought with him from his homeland, from under the old walnut trees of Csomakőrös (Chiuruş), and to bring back the same number of nuggets from the grave to the walnut trees of his homeland. This objective gave the thin-skinned, frail young man incredible strength. The citizens of Romania, a country isolated from the world and led by the communist dictator Nicolae Ceauşescu, faced incredible difficulties in travelling abroad. It took months, often years, of office packing to obtain a passport, and they were allowed to withdraw up to five US dollars in spending money. These conditions discouraged many people from travelling and gaining experience, and Ödön Jakabos proved that nothing was impossible for him under such conditions. Over the years he built up a network of dozens of pen pals from Transylvania to India, and when he set out with little money and high hopes, relying on the help of people he had never met, he did an extraordinary thing. He disproved a legend that still lives on today: “you can only travel if you are rich and have lots of money”. Jakabos was not rich, he had almost no money, yet he was able to accomplish a journey that no one else would have been able to do with thousands of dollars.

He crossed Turkey and then Iraq to reach India by boat. In Bombay (now: Mumbai), he entered the land of his dreams. In the autumn of 1972, he began his wanderings in the Indian subcontinent. Everywhere he found helpful people who welcomed him into their homes, gave him shelter, food and supported his travels. The “Székely pilgrim” also avoided the worst scourge of the poor traveller with empty pockets, the smallpox. During Ödön Jakabos’ journey, millions fell ill in Bengal in this terrible epidemic, and hundreds of thousands died in the most appalling sanitary conditions. Other dreadful diseases of the tropics were compounded by the stinking sewage in the open sewers of the cities and the piles of rotting rubbish that towered to the size of houses. Ödön Jakabos got to know India through the lenses of the poorest people. One of his Muslim hosts, a young man in his 30s, was not allowed to take him into his home because the head of the family had banned the Transylvanian Christian guest from his child’s apartment because of his religion. His pen friend took him to a cheap hotel to avoid angering his traditionalist father. Nor could he take him to the cinema without his parents’ permission.

The young man from Transylvania got to know the inexorable power of a millennia-old tradition, which neither technological progress nor the independence that ended the British colonial yoke could break. He ate simple Indian food, travelled in crowded buses, and overcrowded trains. He had to adapt constantly to changing landscapes, special weather conditions, different languages, and customs. Everywhere he lived among ordinary people, he developed a realistic view of the continent that few Europeans have. Those on luxury tours organised by tourist agencies could only see the surface. From the architectural beauty of the Taj Mahal, it is difficult to understand the life, problems, and mindset of Indians. Jakabos has lived in the depths of Indian life, seen the misery of the monsoon villages, suffered the agony of water shortages.

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<sup>63</sup> In preparing this biography, I have made extensive use of the work: Kubassek 2008, pp. 94–97.

In India, the love and warm hospitality of his penfriends enabled him to travel and live in the country for months. In Darjeeling, on the 128th day of his journey, 21 February 1973, he experienced the most memorable day of his journey. He put on the sheltered “székely” (“szekler”) clothes he had carefully carried in his rucksack, asked his host for garden tools, and set off on foot for the old English cemetery. He saw the tomb of Kőrösi Csoma, bowed his head to the memory of his idol, became emotional and tied a wreath of flowers to the grave. Ödön Jakabos felt that on this day he had fulfilled his voluntary mission.

But the hardship of the pilgrimage lied ahead. He had to return home, ill, emaciated, empty of money, but full of hopes that his achievements would be appreciated in Transylvania. In Pakistan and Afghanistan, he passed through tribal areas ravaged by fighting. With the help of occasional travelling companions, he scrambled through the perilous passes of towering mountains. In Afghanistan, on his way to Herat, he wanted to sell his watch in the village of Gormak, but the villagers did not know what the strange, shiny contraption was for and would not give him a penny. In Iran, things were much easier for him, as he was hosted by several friends from Romania. He returned to his homeland via Turkey. The great pilgrimage ended in Csomakőrös. A huge crowd awaited his return, thousands of people paying their respects on the way to the small village. Many people were crying, holding his hand, because he had made their unfulfilled desires come true. Sándor Kőrösi Csoma was a symbol of freedom, and this inspired and gave hope to many Hungarians. Jakabos held hundreds of lectures, where thousands of listeners could draw strength from the journey of his role model, the great Szekler scholar and the young man from Kézdivásárhely (Târgu Secuiesc) who followed in his footsteps. He wrote his travel diary in two copies, with indigo. One he always sent home by post, the other he kept with him, prepared for any bad eventuality. He survived the journey, but many hardships weakened his body and asthmatic lungs. He typed up his travel diary with the help of his wife, Mária Molnár, secure in the knowledge that the deadly disease would not allow him to see it published. It is György Gálfalvi<sup>64</sup>'s merit that it was published in print under the title “*Indian Travel Diary*”<sup>65</sup>. The work reflects a dramatic fate and character, it is a gripping read, a unique work of Hungarian travel writing in that its author put the drafts to paper on his deathbed.<sup>66</sup> I believe that this book also has scientific value, as the author has also recorded his thorough ethnographic and geographical observations. Ödön Jakabos died young in Brasov on 22 October 1979, after a long period of suffering. The brave “Székely (Szekler) pilgrim”, wanderer of India, was buried in Kézdivásárhely.

### **8. Tibor Székely (1912–1988)<sup>67</sup> museologist and Esperantist**

Tibor Székely (1912–1988), the great Hungarian world traveller, Esperantist, and travel writer, was born in Spišská Sobota (Szepesszombat), in “Felvidék” (now: Slovakia) on 14 February 1912 and died in Subotica (Szabadka), Yugoslavia (now: Serbia) on 20 September 1988, where he was buried. He made his first journey on a sledge, but even as a child he longed for bigger, more meaningful journeys. He would often pull the first volume of the “*Pallas Encyclopaedia*” from his father’s library shelf, sit down on the carpet and leaf through it. He read a lot about Africa,

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<sup>64</sup> Gálfalvi, György (b. 1942) is a Hungarian editor and writer in Transylvania, Romania.

<sup>65</sup> Jakabos 1983.

<sup>66</sup> Kubassek 2008, pp. 94–97.

<sup>67</sup> In preparing this biography, I have made extensive use of two works: [Pálfi, Ibolya] 2012a; Iby P [Pálfi, Ibolya] 2012b.



America, Asia, and Australia. He looked at the maps that accompanied the articles, and at bedtime he always tossed and turned restlessly, wondering why a river meandered that way when it would have been shorter to the sea in another direction. For example, he asked himself these questions: “Why does the island of Celebes look like a spider?” “What kind of people live in the jungle?” The child Tibor Székely promised himself that one day he would become a world traveller.

From Spišská Sobota, on the Tatras, the family’s journey led to Cenei (Csene) in Romania. One evening, the little boy Tibor grabbed a shovel and ran out into the garden. He wanted to get to the other side of the land. But his father warned him that the heat on the other side of the globe was hellish, so they should stay where they were born. Tibor Székely raised in Transylvania, learned German, Serbo-Croatian and spoke French. In Kikinda (Nagykikinda), Vojvodina, he even gave French lessons. He went to high school in Nagyikinda and graduated from high school in Nikšić, Montenegro. At his father’s request, he studied law in Zagreb and graduated. He also studied painting, sculpture, and dramaturgy. Immediately before the Second World War, in 1937 (according to other sources in 1939), he sailed to Buenos Aires, Argentina, on assignment for a newspaper, to report on the Yugoslav emigrants living there, but later became a contributor to several magazines. One day a Swiss mountaineer, Hans Georg Link, asked him to join his expedition. And so, it began.

He studied ethnography, anthropology, and archaeology in Buenos Aires. He visited the Brazilian rainforests<sup>68</sup>, went to villages in the Amazon – he even met man-eaters –, went to Bolivia, crossed the River of Death (Rio das Mortes), wandered the Mato Grosso, sailed the Itenez, went everywhere, even found unexplored rainforests. He dedicated his book “*Storm on the Aconagua*”<sup>69</sup> to the heroes who lost their lives storming the peaks (many of these ventures claimed victims.) He travelled miles by train, boat, ski, ventured into jungles on elephant backs, met statesmen, chiefs, artists, travellers, vagrants, oil magnates and Arab sheikhs. In Iran he ate giant-size flatbreads, in the remote villages of the Himalayas he sipped tea flavoured with acidified butter, in China he ate shark fin with chopsticks, in the jungles he tasted snake meat and monkey meat. He picked the delicacies sometimes from silver plates, sometimes from banana leaves, sometimes with his fingers, sometimes with gilded spoons. In 1954 he returned to Yugoslavia, settling in Belgrade, but he continued to travel extensively. In 1962 he set off on his first trip to Africa.

Between 1962 and 1963, he travelled in some countries of Africa with an international Esperanto expedition he organised called the “Caravan of Friendship in Africa”.<sup>70</sup> During 1970, he spent six months in Australia, New Guinea, and New Zealand, getting to know the indigenous peoples and cultures of these countries. In the meantime, he studied museology in Zagreb and obtained a master’s degree, enjoying a high reputation in museology circles. His travels were then more professional: he took part in the Chicago Congress of Ethnographers and the Copenhagen Congress of Museologists.

Tibor Székely lived in Subotica from 1972, where he was the director of the City Museum until his retirement and donated the largest collection of the region to the city. His novel “*Kumevava, Son of the Jungle*”<sup>71</sup> was translated into sixteen languages, and even in Japan, where it sold hundreds of thousands of copies, was proclaimed “Youth Novel of the Year” in 1984. In

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<sup>68</sup> Székely 1970.

<sup>69</sup> Székely 1960.

<sup>70</sup> Székely 1965.

<sup>71</sup> Székely 1988.

1983 Székely founded the World Association of Esperanto Writers. In 1986 he was elected an honorary member of the World Esperanto Association in China, and in 1987, at the age of 75, he received the well-deserved lifetime achievement award, the “October Prize of the City of Subotica”, which was then the equivalent of an honorary citizenship. He has visited 90 countries, travelled the jungles, steppes, and deserts. He understood twenty-five languages. For many years he was also president of the International Esperanto Federation. He has published numerous books in many languages. During his travels, he spared no time or money to collect as many objects as possible that caught his interest and which he considered worth taking into his possession on a permanent basis. He believed it was worth learning other languages because it was easier to make new friends. This attitude has helped him in his travels and has contributed to the fact that he has received more than one item to his collection as a gift. He carefully inventoried the objects, filed them to cardboard and took photographs of them. Where possible, he also included important details such as where and when the object came into his possession, under what circumstances, to which people or tribe it belonged, whether it was in use, etc. The collection also includes many sound, film and photo materials made during his expeditions, which perhaps record a world of customs that has now disappeared.<sup>72</sup> The city of Subotica and its museum continue to honour the memory of its former director.

## 9. Conclusion

I believe that by outlining the lives and work of two Hungarians from the Hungarian motherland (Dénes Balázs and János Balogh), two Hungarians living abroad (Ödön Jakabos and Tibor Székely) and one Hungarian living in emigration (Steve Bezuk), I have also highlighted the situation of 20th century Hungarian scientific history. In fact, the fate of the five Hungarians symbolises the history of the past 70–80 years of the Hungarian nation, the trials and tribulations of a nation trapped behind the “Iron Curtain”, oppressed by communism, and torn apart, during which time there were also brave scientists and travelling patriots who, in addition to their own undertakings and research, did everything they could to enhance the international reputation of the Hungarian nation. Through their sacrifices and personal careers, they proved that they were worthy heirs to the world-famous Hungarian travellers and explorers of past centuries.

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