

MODERNITY VERSUS DEMOCRACY: THE POLITICS OF ALBERT SZENT-GYÖRGYI, 1945-47

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The subject of this paper falls safely outside the domain of biochemistry. Vitamin C, myosin, actin, and the like will all be in short supply on the pages below. I am afraid, my presentation will be disappointing even to those who expect a contribution to the hagiology that has developed around the person of Albert Szent-Györgyi, "the militant humanist".¹

For the intents and purposes of the present discussion, biography is but a method of studying questions concerning the profound changes that took place in the organization of science and in its integration with other major institutions of society in the first three years of postwar Hungary. I will try to identify and assess some biographical facts relevant for a better understanding of Albert Szent-Györgyi's postwar politics as this was manifest in the debate over the modernization of Hungary's academic regime.

The so-called university reform and the sovietization of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1948/49 were the corollaries of the political system established in the country soon after the first Cominform meeting in Szklarska Poreba. But Hungarian Science had serious internal problems too, making it even more exposed to the totalitarian menace. From the very first days of Budapest's liberation from under fascist rule, the academic elite (the membership of the Academy of Sciences) was divided into two major camps. The conservative and the radical reformers adhered to conflicting views as to the place and role of science in society and, consequently, as to the desirable status and tasks of the Academy itself. The opinion they held in common was that reforms were necessary in order to adjust the whole institution of Science to the needs of modern research activity and to secure improved access to public funds in an age of increased fiscal dependency. What divided them was, in essence, the issue of the future relationship between Science and Politics, and the role of the latter in introducing the necessary modernizing reforms.

The *conservative reformers* wished to preserve the academic autonomy intact and, accordingly, they could only conceive of changes initiated, designed, and introduced by the academic community itself, within the domain of autonomy.

Impressed by contemporary movements in Western (especially British) Science, by the propaganda of Soviet Science, and also by the encouragement from the parties of the political left, *radical reformers* were ready to allow an increased role for Politics in academic matters. They went so far as to ally themselves with outside politics in trying to impose their modernizing reforms upon the rest of the academic community. Their major concern was with the needs of modern, resource-intensive natural science research. And they were aware, Science had to accept some degree and form of public accountability if a generous public funding of research activity was to be secured. For similar considerations, they would have consented to the introduction of planning in Science, though they preferred to see it confined to logistic functions and exercised only in cooperation with the scientists themselves.

To the detriment of the academic community as a whole, the division between the two groups was further enhanced by the fact that it went along the borderline between the two major sections constituting the empire of knowledge: advocates of conservative reform belonged home, without exception, in the humanities and social sciences, while the radical reformers were, again without exception, natural and technological scientists.² Conservative reformers had an understandable bias for autonomy, while an improved bargaining position for Science as against other institutions and activities dependent on public funding was not ranking among their highest priorities. Radical reformers, on the other hand, were alarmed by the backwardness of Hungarian as compared to Western Science in terms of technical equipment and economic capacity to promote development. Unlike the representatives of the humanities and social sciences, radical reformers could see no other way of catching up with international front-line research than by a trade off with the political power: they were ready to redefine the criteria of autonomy and to assume a new position strongly in favor of "applied science" in exchange for an increased and regular fiscal support towards scientific endeavour.

Albert Szent-Györgyi initiated, organized and led the offensive of the radical reformers. His calculation seems to have been, that he, with a new academic leadership behind him, would be able to tackle any political encroachment upon the scientists' sovereignty over academic matters. This calculation would have probably failed even if he had put it to any serious test, which he did not, for when such defence was most needed he had already left the country. But the most counterproductive or tragic feature of his politics as an academic leader was his alliance with the communist party and his reliance on the latter in pursuing his objectives in science policy, instead of trying to come to terms with the conservative reformers, such as Gyula Moór, István Hajnal, or István Bibó, and to find a solution uniting rather than dividing the academic elite.

I have elsewhere related the details of Szent-Györgyi's activities as the leader of radical reformers within the Academy.³ What follows is just a brief review of the main initiatives and manifestations indicative of his alliance with the communist party. Szent-Györgyi put forward his proposals for a radical renewal of the membership and organization of the Academy already on the first postwar meetings of the Academy's assembly in March and April, 1945. His suggestion was that everybody should resign and 30 members of the "greatest professional merit and the most progressive outlook" should elect new members thus creating an activist elite organization of science that enjoyed the confidence and support of the emerging new political regime. The plan was rejected almost unanimously (only Zoltán Bay supported Szent-Györgyi's idea). But in May, 1945, the Academy's assembly decided to set up a Reform Committee to consider and develop proposals as to a more active role for the Academy in the management of science and as to changes in the statutes enabling the Academy to rid themselves of members who had nothing to recommend them for continued membership and who failed to prove their "moral and civil integrity" during the war and prewar years. Szent-Györgyi himself was elected into this Committee, but he did not participate in its work and gave it no chance to reach any workable conclusion. Instead, he left for the Soviet Union and when he returned he let the leaders of the Academy know that he no longer believed the Academy was able to renew itself without outside (political) intervention. While in the USSR, he initiated the establishment of the Hungarian-Soviet Cultural Society. Having returned to Budapest, he held several public lectures in which he depicted Soviet institutions in general, and the organization of Soviet science in particular as the most up-to-date ones in the world and as the models to be followed by Hungary. In the end of July, 1945, he launched his break-away Academy, the Academy of Natural Sciences. He showed little interest in finding a negotiated solution preserving the unity of the "old" Academy and he resigned from his membership in November. He saw to it that his resignation took the form of a spectacular public scandal: he published, among other things, an article entitled *The Crisis of the Academy*, in the communist party's daily, the *Szabad Nép*. In this he contended the Academy borne a great deal of the responsibility for the catastrophe the nation suffered in the war. It took almost two months of negotiations and all the diplomatic skills of the arbitrating Minister of Culture, Dezső Keresztury, to re-unite, by mid-1946, the two academies with Zoltán Kodály as president and Szent-Györgyi as second or vice-president. Even after formal unity had been restored, by and large upon such bases as were demanded by the radical reformers, Szent-Györgyi could still be found aiding a communist action exposing the Academy to a humiliating blackmail:

it was he who brought to the Board of the Academy and lent his support to György Lukács' list of 15 scholars from the humanities and social sciences whose election in lump sum into Academy memberships the communist party demanded. To make the Academy comply, the payment of the modest monthly support the Academy was entitled to from the cultural budget was withheld. Around this point of time (in February 1947), however, Szent-Györgyi was forced to make one of his life's truly bitter discoveries: he understood that the generous support promised to enable modern state-of-the-art research would never be forthcoming from Rákosi and his party. In February, 1947, the National Assembly discussed the new Budget. It allowed for less than 50% of what was spent by the much abused Horthy-regime on higher education and science in 1937-38. Szent-Györgyi's sharp critique delivered in the National Assembly bore no resemblance to his appearance on the IIIrd congress of the communist party only four months earlier, when he rejoiced over the mutual understanding and cooperation between the working class, democracy, and science. After yet another period of four months, in June 1947, he left Hungary and her paralyzed Academy behind.

Having placed Szent-Györgyi's politics among the factors contributing to the deterioration of the Academy's power of resistance against totalitarian designs, the question arises how we are to explain his behavior in these three decisive years? The evidence from the coalition period leaves with us a portrait disturbingly different from everything we are used to believe to be the correct image of Szent-Györgyi, one of the most charming and loveable persons in modern Hungarian history. Part of the blame for this can certainly be put on the mist of hagiography surrounding this truly East-Central-European character. It is my conviction, that a fresh look at some of the most important phases of Szent-Györgyi's biography may enable us both to do justice to the complexities of his personality and to provide a plausible explanation for the origins of his ideas concerning the modernization of Hungarian Science and of his "Faustian Deal" with the communists.

Born in Budapest, in 1893, Albert Szent-Györgyi came from a "titled" family on his father's side. His determination, however, to try and become a research scientist had been motivated rather by the maternal background. He had more regular contact under his upbringing with his mother's brother, Mihály Lenhossék, than with his own father. Lenhossék, a man of international horizon, professor of anatomy at the Budapest University, represented the third generation of one of Hungary's most distinguished scientific dynasty traceable back to the late 18th century.⁴ In a way it was his uncle's making that Szent-Györgyi, as if to defy Lenhossék's rather low opinion of his nephew's talents, embarked upon the career of a research scientist. Though, as

Szent-Györgyi himself wrote, he “started science on the wrong end”, as a proctologist, his first scientific paper dealing with “the epithelium of the anus”,⁵ it did not take him a long time to prove to be one of the truly innovative minds engaged in the relatively new field of biochemistry.

When the period of our immediate interest starts, early 1945, Szent-Györgyi had been Hungary’s most famous scientist. In 1931 he identified Vitamin C. In October 1937, he received the highest international distinction a scientist can be bestowed upon, the Nobel Prize. To this very day, he has been the only Nobel Laureate of Hungarian origin who, at the time the Prize was given, was also living and working in Hungary. In 1928, upon the initiative of the Minister of Culture, Count Kuno Klebelsberg, he was appointed to the Chair of the newly established Institute of Biochemistry at Szegec University, in Southern Hungary. He took up the position in the autumn of 1930.⁶ The institute and the research activities pursued by it were to a considerable extent funded by the Rockefeller Foundation.

Szent-Györgyi was probably the country’s youngest professor in the 1930s. His liberal-democratic views in general and on matters of education in particular, his informal ways with the students, his openly shown contempt for the authoritarian style prevailing at the Hungarian universities⁷ and, last but not least, his outlandish manners (his tweed jacket, his smoking pipe, and the five-o’-clock teas at his institute) made him suspicious rather than popular within the country’s conservative-nationalist academic establishment. Quite a few members were said to have been against him when he was elected into the Academy of Sciences in 1935. In 1940 he became the Rector of the University of Szegec. From the viewpoint of his career within the hierarchy of interwar Hungary’s academia Szent-Györgyi’s international fame must have been of decisive significance. The reputation of being one of the world’s leading research scientist, however, does not fully explain Szent-Györgyi’s central role in the science policy debate right after the war, and it leaves us completely in the dark if we are to understand the particular policies advocated by him in 1945–46.

At the 1926 Stockholm Congress of the International Physiological Society, Professor Frederick Gowland Hopkins invited Szent-Györgyi to Cambridge. In October of the same year, he received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to study with Professor Hopkins and Henry Dale.⁸ The four years Szent-Györgyi spent in Cambridge, at the Sir William Dunn Laboratory, had been a formative experience. He himself told his biographer he had always regarded Cambridge as his “scientific homeland”. For Szent-Györgyi the professional possibilities, the progress he could make in his research work were of primary importance. He said, in retrospect, that it was there for the first

time he could devote himself to chemistry in earnest.⁹ But we should not lose sight of other possible components of the intellectual experience offered by interwar Cambridge. As Ralph Moss informs his readers, Hopkins and his laboratory, one of the leading international centers of biochemistry research, attracted not only the most brilliant minds of the field, but also some of “the most outspoken radicals in science”.¹⁰ Indeed, Cambridge’s contribution to the intellectual radicalism emerging in interwar Britain was quite significant. In the academic community of the university town, as Neal Wood reveals

Physicists and biochemists were the scientists most influenced by communism. Both sciences were being revolutionized at Cambridge. Blackett, Schoenberg, Nunn May, and Burhop were continuing the work of Rutherford on the atom. Bernal and others were pioneering with Sir William Bragg in the field of crystallography. The frontiers of biochemistry were being pushed back by Haldane, the Needhams, Waddington and Pirie under the guidance of Sir Frederick Gowland Hopkins. Scientific innovators of this sort are individuals of great intellectual brilliance, often egocentrics who adopt unconventional attitudes in their interpersonal relations, and who are attracted by non-conformist social philosophies. Haldane, Bernal, and Joseph Needham were typical.¹¹

Moss describes Szent-Györgyi’s mentor, Sir Frederick, as a politically-ideologically neutral scientist standing “above the battle”.¹² Another and, in this respect, perhaps more initiated source, however, maintains of Hopkins, once a friend and neighbor of James Ramsay MacDonald, that “after biochemistry his greatest interest lay in socialism; his views were quite to the left”.¹³ Leslie J. Harris’ commentary to this quote adds that “In truth, Hopkins had a deeply progressive social conscience though he played little part in active political life.”¹⁴

In Neal Wood’s description

The Laboratory was a remarkable melting pot of eager and adventuresome scientists and students from all over the world. The *esprit de corps* was exceptionally high, for they were young pioneers working and living together on a hitherto unsettled and unexplored frontier. The environment was relaxed, convivial, and tolerant – intellectually stimulating. (...) What better place could there be for the free exchange of ideas, for serious conversations about the state of the world, the social implications of science, and the politics of the left?¹⁵

What is of importance to us in this milieu is the views obtaining in it on the place and role of science in society. For it was this corner of British academia from where a distinct group of scientists of radical socialist persuasion emerged with firm beliefs and norms as to the societal determination of scientific knowledge, as to the social responsibility of science, as to the rightful status of

scientists in society, and as to the need for integrating intellectual endeavour into the totality of social machinery by central planning. This group received with great enthusiasm the marxist understanding of scientific and technological development as presented by N. Bukharin, B. Hessen and other Soviet delegates at the Second International Congress for the History of Science in 1931¹⁶ just as they

accepted an account of the Soviet Union which depicted it as a society in which scientists had such high status that their outlook would be incorporated into national policies, and where fundamental science was directed in a way which enabled it to contribute to the solution of basic social and economic problems.¹⁷

The most systematic exposition of their views is J. D. Bernal's *The Social Function of Science*.¹⁸ Bernal criticized the old scientific societies, such as the Royal Society or the Chemical Society in Britain, for becoming "purely honorific in character, their only collective activity being publication". According to his normative model, the Academy should be the active leader rather than merely the guardian and archivist of science, by undertaking the responsibility for carrying on fundamental research and performing the role of "the general directing body for scientific advance as a whole". In this latter capacity, however, the academy's function would be of a "legislative, advisory" rather than "administrative or authoritative" character. As a reflection partly of the dominance of the honorary function of the academy and partly of the "politically and socially inferior position of the scientist [in capitalist society]", Bernal explained, the academies had been lacking initiative. An additional source of the inertia, Bernal contended, was the gerontocratic rule. This, he suggested, demanded reforms in the overall organization as well as in the mode of electing members in order to separate the purely honorary from the functional aspects and to secure that the academy represents "the active and responsible scientists of the day".¹⁹

Our intention is far from suggesting that Szent-Györgyi got involved in leftist politics while in Cambridge. We may, in fact, take it for granted that the experience with Béla Kun's short-lived Hungarian Republic of Councils in 1919, seen with the eyes of a Magyar gentle middle-class intellectual,²⁰ made Szent-Györgyi highly suspicious of and rather resistant to all sorts of leftist radicalism. His political aversions notwithstanding, Szent-Györgyi may very well have found some of Needham's, Haldane's, Blackett's and Bernal's proposals for a better integration of science with the rest of society and for an activist academy quite attractive. Ideas of national planning *for* research and, especially, the demand "for the establishment of a really generous national

attitude towards the needs of research”²¹ must have struck him as most appealing. And he must have been especially pleased when he discovered that these ideas so sympathetic to him were advocated not only by leftist radicals but by another movement of a moderate, reformist character, too. This latter movement found a coordinator and an untiring advocate in the editor of the internationally acclaimed science weekly, *Nature*.²² Sir Richard Gregory was for “the application of scientific expertise to the whole range of national economic, technological and administrative problems”. Central planning as proposed by the radicals did not win the support of the reformists. They stood for a decentralized functional control of scientific research and they conceived the promotion of general welfare through establishing a closer cooperation within some corporatist frameworks between scientists, politicians, and capitalists for achieving a better allocation of resources and for the guidance of the development of science and technology.²³ Their movement was supported, in the 1940s, also by the president of the Royal Society and Chairman of the Scientific Advisory Committee of the Cabinet, Sir Henry Dale (Szent-Györgyi’s other mentor in Britain). In Sir Henry’s view, the freedom of science and the integrity of scientists would hardly be endangered “by the organized application of scientific method to problems of public welfare, or by more effective access of scientists to government”.²⁴

Even appreciating the fact that both the radical and the reformist proposals for a closer integration of science and politics were put forward, in a more consistently articulated form, in the 1930s, i.e. in the period when Szent-Györgyi was already back in Hungary, there can be not doubt whatsoever that a great deal of the inspiration to Szent-Györgyi’s own proposals concerning the organization and role of the Academy of Sciences after 1945, had their origins in the above outlined trends within the British scientific community.²⁵ I imagine he found it especially easy to identify himself with the reformists’ ideas, not only on account of their stressing quite resolutely the need of improvement of the social position and prestige of sciences and of their practitioners, but also because of their readiness “to accept the social order as it was, provided that they and their kind were given a greater voice in public affairs”.²⁶

The second important piece in the mosaic of the biographical background making intelligible Szent-Györgyi’s position in postwar Hungary is the political role he undertook during the war. The German orientation landing the country in the fatal military alliance with Hitler, the shift on the domestic scene towards rightist politics culminating, after the German occupation of the country, in open fascist (Arrow-Cross) rule, and the anti-Semitism that had come by the late 1930s to poison all corners of the country’s public life could

never be approved of or accepted by him. In February 1943, he went to Istanbul to contact British intelligence people in order to initiate talks concerning the possibilities for Hungary to free herself from the alliance with Hitler and to secure peace with and the cooperation of the Anglo-Saxon powers. One of the motives prompting his mission was the wish to avoid an eventual and much feared Soviet occupation. Though he was not acting on their behalf, the Hungarian Government were aware of Szent-Györgyi's mission. Before leaving, on 7th February, Szent-Györgyi had talked with the leaders of the Social-Democratic, the National Peasant, the Smallholders' and the National Democratic parties, as well as with representatives of the "legitimists" (royalists). He was therefore in a position to tell his British contacts in Turkey that "except for the fascists, all the political parties and organizations would accept him as the prime minister of a new government". The plan was that, in anticipation of the launching of an Anglo-American invasion on the Balkans, Szent-Györgyi as prime minister would do everything in his power to sabotage the war efforts of the Axis. He would purge the HQ of the Hungarian Army and thus he even hoped to be able, at a later stage, to join the allied forces against Hitler.²⁷ Szent-Györgyi's mission, similarly to the contacts initiated by the Hungarian Government, was a failure in that the response to it had been negative. Nevertheless, it did cause the Foreign Office to elaborate their views on the Allies' relationship to Hitler's satellites in Southeastern Europe. In a memorandum from late February 1943, London suggested that the Allies should follow a common policy that would take account of the differences between the satellites. They maintained, Hungary had managed to preserve the greatest degree of relative independence. Much space was given to Szent-Györgyi's mission in the memorandum, for it differed from other similar missions in its having been non-governmental and because professor Szent-Györgyi, as the leading officials of the Foreign Office emphasized, "enjoys a certain amount of independence and seems to be a personality with whom it would be useful to sustain discreet contacts through proper clandestine channels".²⁸ The memorandum was sent both to Washington and to Moscow.

Due to lack of data, we are compelled to rely on conjecture in assessing the consequences of Szent-Györgyi's mission and their impact on his behavior from late 1944 onwards. I think it cannot be wrong to assume that the information given in the memorandum had been carefully considered by Moscow when they decided upon the policies to be followed in Hungary after she was taken over from the Germans. Quite certainly, the British memorandum left the Soviet leaders with the impression that Szent-Györgyi, having been a candidate for the position of Prime Minister agreeable to all non-fascist

political groupings in 1943, was a person of great potential significance in postwar Hungarian politics. A secret report produced by the Office of Strategic Services, predecessor of the CIA, on February 13, 1945, stated "Professor Szent-Györgyi enjoys great popularity in Moscow as well as in London and Washington. It is the general opinion... that Szent-Györgyi will be the first President of democratic Hungary."²⁹

Szent-Györgyi himself had been toying with the idea of going into politics ever since the early 1930s. As his biographer puts it, "like many people who become highly successful in one specialized field, he had the unshakable belief that he could excel in other fields equally well. Especially politics."³⁰ His participation in the activities of (non-communist) anti-Nazi organizations like the Hungarian Front of National Independence (1942) and in the establishment of the Citizens Democratic Party (1943) also increased the probability and feasibility of a more ambitious political engagement on his part after the war. Moscow, on the other hand, must have greatly disliked any idea implying a massive British (Anglo-Saxon) presence on the Balkans and in Hungary at the conclusion of the war on Hitler. Furthermore, we have reasons to suppose that political planners in Moscow did not at all enthuse over the perspective of seeing Szent-Györgyi in a central political position in postwar Hungary. Firstly, Szent-Györgyi had openly and rather spectacularly demonstrated his opposition to Russian great-power expansionism by publicly denouncing Moscow's war on Finland and giving his golden Nobel Medal to the Finnish Red Cross in support of their war effort against the Soviet Union.³¹ Secondly, throughout the coalition years it was the deliberate policy of Soviet-Backed communists in Hungary to prevent strong, independent personalities with a charismatic potential from coming into leading positions in the non-communist parties. Thirdly, the communists were especially eager to keep off the political scene such non-communist personalities as had good contacts and commanded some reputation in the Western world. The view that Szent-Györgyi "enjoyed great popularity in Moscow" can hardly be regarded to be more than an indication of the failure of American intelligence people to tell "popularity" from a conspicuously great interest exhibited by Molotov's foreign policy management.

It is in my view the political potentiality represented by Szent-Györgyi's person rather than some humanistic considerations or the will to save great universal (scientific) values that explain the special care extended by the Soviet HQ to him from December or early January to some time in March, 1945. In one of our sources Szent-Györgyi is said to have been brought out of hiding on January 10, 1945.³² The Gestapo had been after him for quite a long time. But he was also expecting that he would be arrested by the Soviet military

authorities. When he gave himself up to the Soviet patrol searching for him, however, he found an English-speaking (!) major who had come not to arrest but to bring him “to safety on Molotov’s personal order”.³³ He and his family were then taken to Marshall Malinowski’s headquarters where, as Szent-Györgyi recalled, “we lived for three months with a special nice house, a servant and good food. Then after that, *they let me go back to Szeged*.”³⁴ It is impossible to establish quite exactly how long Szent-Györgyi and his family were entertained as the guests of Marshall Malinowski, but the three months recalled by Szent-Györgyi himself seems to be a good approximation. There are indications that he was held at the HQ as early as around the Christmas of 1944.³⁵ His first appearances in public were made in March and April, and he assumed his duties as Head of the Institute of Medical Chemistry at the University of Budapest on 27th April, 1945.³⁶

The circumstances and, especially, the duration of Szent-Györgyi’s stay in the custody of the HQ of Soviet occupying forces make a rather strong case, in my view, for the assumption that *the intention had been to insulate him from the country’s reemerging political life*. He was still underground, hiding with the help of the Swedish Legation,³⁷ when the main institutions and organizations of postwar Hungary’s coalition democracy resumed and/or launched their activities in the Southeastern parts of the country. In December, 1944, the Provisional National Assembly held their first sessions in Debrecen and appointed a political committee and a caretaker government. Significantly, when the Budapest executive committee of the Citizens Democratic Party decided, in early March 1945, to contact Szent-Györgyi in order “to ask him, with reference to the old Vázsonyi–Szent-Györgyi–Supka agreement, to participate in the party’s work”, it proved to be still *impossible* “to establish contact” with him.³⁸ It is asserted, erroneously, in Ralph Moss’ book that Szent-Györgyi “was also the head of [...] the Citizens Democratic Party”.³⁹ There may have been talk of appointing Szent-Györgyi to the presidency of that party. But even if that was the intention it could never materialize as he was for the party’s executive committee out of reach. Count Géza Teleki, Minister of Culture and Religion of the Provisional Government, was the first president of the CDP, soon to be replaced by Sándor Szent-Iványi. In fact, there is no evidence at all of Szent-Györgyi’s active engagement in the affairs of (or, for that matter, his membership in) the CDP during or after 1945. Nor do we know of any occasion when he acted on behalf of that party during the postwar years. Before leaving the country for good, he made his last remarkable public appearance (when he delivered a devastating critique of the government’s budget proposals) as an independent MP, with no party affiliation at all.⁴⁰

Adding his conspicuously long (two months’) visit in the USSR in mid-1945 to the three months he had previously spent as the “guest” of the Soviet HQ,

it does not seem too bold to imagine that Soviet officials had in fact used the opportunities casually occurring and talked to Szent-Györgyi about his personal plans for the near future in Hungary and dissuaded him from any political aspirations. We may, furthermore, assume that an agreement had been reached to the effect that Szent-Györgyi would abstain from the political role he could have, it appears, so easily acquired. In exchange, the communists were to accept and sanction his leadership in the Republic of Science and to give their blessing and support to Szent-Györgyi's ambitious programme aiming to reorganize and boost the scientific enterprise of Hungary. Such a tacit deal must have implied the undertaking on Szent-Györgyi's part of a certain amount of propaganda activity to the benefit of the image of Soviet-type society in general and of the policies of Hungarian communists in particular.

The third biographical development, then, which is of great relevance in our understanding of Szent-Györgyi's postwar politics and of the particular policies he advocated within the Academy is his trip to the Soviet Union.

In Soviet academic circles rumors were afloat already in April 1945 concerning a jubilee celebration soon to be held to mark the 220th anniversary of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR.⁴¹ The invitation from Moscow to five Hungarian scientists (Albert Szent-Györgyi, neurologist Kálmán Sántha, jurist Géza Marton, and historians Gyula Szekfű and Sándor Domanovszky) was announced by one of the four top leaders of the Hungarian Communist Party, József Révai, in an article published on June 6, 1945.⁴² By then Szent-Györgyi had already been in the Soviet Union for about two or three weeks. The earliest known letter from him sent from Moscow was dated May 24, while his first public appearance after the trip was made on July 22. Ralph Moss had brought to publicity a couple of documents of crucial import for judging how Szent-Györgyi himself understood his position within the emerging political setting and how he related to Soviet and communist politics. During his long visit, Szent-Györgyi had or, rather, saw to it to have opportunity to contact Eric Ashby, Australia's Acting Minister in Moscow, representative of the Australian Research Council, and a scientist himself. Upon their private meetings, Ashby wrote this to Dr. O'Brien of the Rockefeller Foundation:

Szent-Györgyi is here. Brought here (this is very confidential) by the Soviet Government to 'cement cultural relations' between USSR and Hungary. You may read what you like into that expression. He very badly wants to visit Britain or the USA, but he will probably not be allowed to: Russia controls all visas from Hungary. Szent-Györgyi is even uncertain whether letters he might write to you or to the Royal Society would get through. He is not

allowed to visit British people here in Moscow, and we have more or less clandestine talks now and again. [...] I have undertaken to send Brimble an account of Szent-Györgyi's new work for Nature, and to get over tactfully that *he is still very pro-English-speaking-scientific-world and badly wants to regain contact with us.*

Moss adds to this, that

Ashby also conveyed Szent-Györgyi's request for more Rockefeller funds. He wanted the RF to initiate contact with him because, said Ashby, 'if he takes the initiative and writes to you, the Russians will probably say they can supply all this equipment, and Szent-Györgyi needn't bother to ask Western countries. *It is this isolation from the West which he is rather fearful of, and wants to prevent, if possible.*

Ashby is also quoted to have written "Russia is treating him [i.e., Szent-Györgyi] very nicely, but there may be a price for this nice treatment, in loss of his intellectual liberty."⁴³

The document suggests that Szent-Györgyi understood his position in Moscow as well as in Soviet-controlled Budapest as one of captivity. This is underlined by his main fear having been the isolation from the West, from the "English-speaking-scientific-world" due to the controls imposed by the Soviet occupation power. It is remarkable that Szent-Györgyi seems to have sensed, already at this early stage, a tendency on the part of the Soviet political management to deliberately reduce or, even, terminate his country's (and personally his own) relations with the West.

If this reading of Szent-Györgyi's desperate message from Moscow is justified, which I think it is, then it makes rather hard to subscribe to R. Moss' interpretation of Szent-Györgyi's postwar politics, of his pronounced pro-communist stance he exhibited upon his return from Moscow. Moss' explanation is that Szent-Györgyi's relationship with the communists was based on the same principle as his relationship with "capitalists" such as the Rockefeller Foundation or István Ráth (a not-too-significant Budapest businessman on whose help he relied in his efforts to provide for the financial and material needs of his Institute of Biochemistry and his Academy of Natural Sciences):

He was 'used' by all of them. He used them, too: to establish his laboratory, to finance his projects, even to work his will on the Academy. [...] Albert's relationship with the Soviet-backed government, as with the others, was a kind of Faustian arrangement.⁴⁴

If we accept that Szent-Györgyi's overriding consideration was to secure "his own freedom to do state-of-the-art scientific work" and that he cared little about "abstract political freedom",⁴⁵ how should we explain his willingness to enter a Faustian deal with a power which, he himself feared as is shown by his

message from Moscow, would restrict his personal freedom as a research scientist? However great role research work may have played in Szent-Györgyi's life, it could hardly provide a full explanation for his postwar politics. If there had been a deal with the communists at all, Szent-Györgyi must have been induced to enter it at least partly by other considerations than his own freedom as a research scientist. There are only two further motives that may be regarded consistent both with the existence of a deal and with Szent-Györgyi's message from Moscow: a) he may have been forced into an arrangement against his own will, or b) he was lured into an arrangement by promises to be aided into a top-position, if not within politics, then, at least, in the domain of science. However disappointing it may be from a hagiographic point of view, the second alternative seems to be supported best by the circumstantial evidence at our disposal.

There are, in fact, quite a few indications of his love for Power. Though not quite explicitly, this is suggested by his biographer too. Moss mentions that Szent-Györgyi found the idea of playing a prominent role in postwar Hungarian politics rather attractive. Then, he continues to reveal the following: "Albert's feelings about this were mixed. He wanted to get his laboratory going again [...] But politics beckoned, and it was heady stuff. Although he continually expressed reluctance about getting drawn into political activity, he also relished the excitement. He especially loved to be praised by those in high positions."⁴⁶ Szent-Györgyi's aggressive saint-simonianism fits well into the chemistry of a successful scientist cherishing political ambitions.

In fact, the task of the politician in the modern state – he contended in December 1945 – is nothing else than the transplantation of the results of science into life. Therefore, science and politics have to go hand in hand, and the due place of the workshop of science is there, right beside the workshop of politics.⁴⁷

The impression that he had fancied the idea of assuming a position of Power is further strengthened by a public lecture of his delivered right after his return from Moscow. Giving an account of what he experienced in the Soviet Union, Szent-Györgyi described Stalin's leadership as follows:

In a circle of extraordinarily intelligent people, all leading scientists, I raised the question: Is it true that Stalin is a dictator? Their answer has convinced me. They were laughing for about five minutes, as if intending to say 'how, on earth, a grownup person can tell such a stupid thing?' I realized, Stalin was indeed no dictator. He is the father of his people, a man of grand style. What gives an impression of authoritarianism in Russia is partly [the fact] that democracy for them does not mean that everybody interferes with everything, but it means that *they raise into supreme authority the one who is most fit and*

*he governs as long as he is trusted by the people. This is the healthiest form of government because there are questions that cannot be solved by discussion. This is an old thing, that there can be no two captains on the same ship. In Russia, every institution is like a ship, entrusted to one person: as long as you do a good job, you may do it.*⁴⁸

The most important thing about this argument is, of course, not that it shows Szent-Györgyi's involvement in pro-Soviet propaganda. The way in which Szent-Györgyi presented Stalin's personal power position is of greater significance as it reveals his own authoritarian stance which sanctioned *meritocratic* pretensions to hegemonic positions undermining the most elementary norms of democratic control. This sort of "democracy" he considered as a model for solving the problems of the Academy too. And there can be hardly any doubt who in his view could serve best as the "Captain on the Ship of Hungarian Science"... He was apparently disappointed in 1946, during the negotiations restoring academic unity, when he had to admit that in the eyes of the public it would be rather dubious if he was to take the presidency after having so fiercely attacked the Academy for more than a year. Even as he resigned to the idea of only becoming second in rank, he tried in the last seconds to prevent Kodály's appointment by presenting an alternative, physicist Zoltán Bay, one of his friends.⁴⁹

The unhappy combination of his personal power aspirations, his unwillingness to listen to and consider other interests than those of the natural sciences, and his heavy reliance on the cooperation with outside (communist) politics proved to be equally disastrous for Hungarian Science and for Szent-Györgyi's own modernization project to create a new, activist Academy. To my mind, therefore, his letter to Zoltán Kodály, from March 1948, was the acknowledgement of a failure dependent on the inherent weakness of his own enterprise rather than on a world proving too vile or immature for it:

Looking back, from a distance, upon my activities in the Academy, I can in no way regard it as successful. Thus, even if I would return home, I don't believe I would wish to go on with that sort of work. I would rather wish to be a simple member of the Academy.⁵⁰

Indeed, if there was only one lesson to be learnt from the experience of Eastern Europe during the past three quarter of a century it would certainly be that there are no short-cuts saving all the bothers with democracy and providing a highway to modernity and/or social justice.

Notes

1. The expression quoted is the title of the latest piece in the hagiographic tradition arising around Szent-Györgyi's person: Nagy Ferenc, "A harcos humanista. Szent-Györgyi Albert a dokumentumok tükrében" (The militant humanist. Szent-Györgyi in the mirror of the documents), in: Bay Zoltán, Gábor Dénes, et al., *Szent-Györgyi Albert. Dokumentumok, riportok* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó (in the series "Egyéniség és alkotás" edited by Furkó Zoltán), 1989), pp. 38–213.
2. With more details on the composition of the Academy during the 1940s see my "Academic Elite into Scientific Cadres: A Statistical Contribution to the History of Hungary's Academy of Science, 1945–1949", *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 2, 1991, pp. 281–299.
3. Cf. György Péteri, "Születésnap ajándék Sztálinnak. Vázlat a Magyar Tudományos Akadémia államosításának történetéhez 1945–49", *Századvég* (Budapest), 1989/1–2, pp. 18–35.
4. Much of the biographical details here and hereafter come from Ralph W. Moss, *Free Radical: Albert Szent-Györgyi and the Battle over Vitamin C* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1988). Useful complementary information were drawn from László Csernay, ed., *In Commemoration of Albert Szent-Györgyi. In Memoriam Albert Szent-Györgyi* (Szeged, Hungary: Studia Medica Szegedinensia, Tomus 11, 1987).
5. Albert Szent-Györgyi, "Lost in the Twentieth Century", *Annual Review of Biochemistry*, Vol. 32 (1963), p. 4.
6. L. Csernay, ed., *In Commemoration of Albert Szent-Györgyi*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
7. This is the common image of Szent-Györgyi prevailing in most of the descriptions of his personality by his former students and colleagues. It should not be left without mention, however, that there are indications contradicting that image too. Professor M. F. Perutz recalls such an episode as follows: "An old friend of mine ran into Szent-Györgyi in a mountain hut high up in the Alps. After dinner, he found Szent-Györgyi dictating a scientific paper to a student with a typewriter carried all the way up the mountain by a porter for that purpose. In Cambridge, taking one's student to the mountains as a secretary would have been inconceivable; and the urge to prove one's ceaseless creativity would have been tempered by the sobering thought that after a hard day's climb fatigue might cloud the clarity of one's mind. The student was Straub [F. Bruno], who has been proposed as the next [and, by now, is] president of Hungary." (M. F. Perutz, "Two Roads to Stockholm" (review article on R. W. Moss' biography), *The New York Review of Books*, October 13, 1988, p. 22.)
8. Cf. R. W. Moss, *op. cit.*, pp. 52–53.
9. R. W. Moss, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
10. R. W. Moss, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
11. Neal Wood, *Communism and British Intellectuals* (London: Victor Gollanz Ltd., 1959), pp. 86–87.
12. Moss, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
13. From an article of Sir Charles Sherrington (*Lancet* 1947, /1/, p. 728.) as quoted in Joseph Needham and Ernest Baldwin, eds, *Hopkins and Biochemistry 1861–1947: Papers Concerning Sir Frederick Gowland Hopkins, O. M., F.R.S., with a Selection of his Addresses and a Bibliography of his Publications* (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons Limited, 1949), p. 99. Also quoted by Neal Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
14. J. Needham and E. Baldwin, eds, *op. cit.*, pp. 99–100.
15. Neal Wood, *op. cit.*, pp. 87–88.

16. The papers presented by the Soviet delegates were published at the time. With valuable additions from Joseph Needham ("Foreword") and P. G. Werskey ("Introduction"), the volume reached a second edition: *Science at the Cross Roads: Papers presented to the International Congress of the History of Science and Technology, held in London from June 29th to July 3rd, 1931, by the delegates of the U.S.S.R.* ("The Social History of Science", No. 23.) (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1971).
17. Philip J. Gummatt and Geoffrey L. Price, "An Approach to the Central Planning of British Science: The Formation of the Advisory Council on Scientific Policy", *Minerva* Vol. XV, No. 2. (Summer 1977), pp. 121–122. The principal representatives of the radical movement were J. D. Bernal, P. M. S. Blackett, J. B. S. Haldane, Lancelot Hogben, Hyman Levy, Joseph Needham, C. H. Waddington and W. A. Wooster. Cf. Paul Gary Werskey, "British Scientists and 'Outsider' Politics, 1931–1945", *Science Studies*, 1 (1971), p. 71.
18. J. D. Bernal, *The Social Function of Science* (London: George Routledge & Sons Ltd., 1939).
19. J. D. Bernal, *op. cit.*, pp. 281–283.
20. Szent-Györgyi describes the communist takeover of 1919 in Hungary as a development "which meant a complete loss of all my belongings" (A. Szent-Györgyi, "Lost in the Twentieth Century", *op. cit.*, p. 5). The fact that his gentle origins constituted an important component of his identity was well reflected in Szent-Györgyi's use of the Germanic "titled" form of his name, a custom to which he apparently insisted throughout the 1930s. Cf. R. W. Moss, *op. cit.*, p. 56, and, for a later occurrence of the signature "Albert von Szent-Györgyi": Joseph Needham and David E. Green, eds, *Perspectives in Biochemistry. Thirty-one Essays presented to Sir Frederick Gowland Hopkins by past and present members of his Laboratory* (Cambridge at the University Press, 1937).
21. Sir Frederick Gowland Hopkins' presidential address to the Association of Scientific Workers in 1938 as quoted in J. Needham and E. Baldwin, eds, *Hopkins and Biochemistry 1861–1947*, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
22. On the views to which the *Nature* gave a forum see Paul Gary Werskey's "Nature and Politics between the Wars", *Nature*, Vol. 224 (November 1, 1969), pp. 462–471. During the 1930s, Szent-Györgyi was among the contributors to the magazine.
23. Cf. P. J. Gummatt and G. L. Price, *op. cit.*, pp. 122–123. P. G. Werskey enlists among the important reformists Sir Daniel Hall, Sir Frederick Gowland Hopkins, Julian Huxley, Sir John Boyd Orr and Lord Stamp (Werskey, *British Scientists...*, *op. cit.*, p. 71).
24. Gummatt and Price, *op. cit.*, pp. 124–126.
25. Szent-Györgyi had, in fact, kept in touch with his colleagues in England throughout the 1930s. His biographer mentions his "dramatic appearance at the 1934 meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science held in Aberdeen, Scotland" (he did, indeed, contribute to the discussion in Section B (chemistry) of the BAAS meeting on September 7, 1934; his talk was on the "Isolation of ascorbic acid and its identity with vitamin C: physiological properties and clinical uses": British Association for the Advancement of Science, Report of the Annual Meeting, 1934 (Aberdeen, September 5–12), London, 1934, p. 293). The British Association for the Advancement of Science was the organization on which, before 1938, "the Reformists concentrated most of their attention" (G. P. Werskey, *British Scientists*, *op. cit.*, p. 72). He is also said to have paid a visit in Cambridge around the "mid-thirties", when "he was offered a permanent position" (Moss, *op. cit.*, p. 73 and 95).
26. Werskey, *British Scientists*, *op. cit.*, p. 71.
27. Cf. Juhász Gyula, *Magyarország külpolitikája 1919–1945* (The Foreign Policy of Hungary), (Budapest: Kossuth, 3rd rev. ed., 1988), p. 303. ff., and the contributions of János Szilárd and Gyula Papp to L. Csernay, ed., *In Commemoration of Albert Szent-Györgyi*, *op. cit.*, p. 12 and 17.

28. Juhász Gyula, *op. cit.*, p. 316.
29. Quoted by R. W. Moss, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
30. R. W. Moss, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
31. A. Szent-Györgyi, *Lost in the Twentieth Century*, *op. cit.*, p. 11 and R. W. Moss, *op. cit.*, p. 142.
32. János Szilárd, "Remembering Albert Szent-Györgyi", in L. Cserney, ed., *In Commemoration of Albert Szent-Györgyi*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
33. A. Szent-Györgyi, "Lost in the Twentieth Century", *op. cit.*, p. 11.
34. Interview made and quoted by R. W. Moss, *op. cit.*, p. 142. Emphasis added.
35. Cf. Kovács Imre, *Magyarország megszállása* (Budapest: Katalizátor Iroda, 1990), p. 159.
36. János Szilárd, "Remembering Albert Szent-Györgyi", *op. cit.*, p. 12.
37. Cf. Per Anger, *Med Raoul Wallenberg i Budapest* (Stockholm: Norstedts Faktapocket, 1985), pp. 90–95.
38. Izsák Lajos, *Polgári ellenzéki pártok Magyarországon 1944–1949* (Bourgeois Opposition Parties in Hungary), (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1983), p. 20.
39. R. W. Moss, *op. cit.*, p. 145.
40. *Nemzetgyűlési Napló* (Protocol of the National Assembly), Session 91, February 6, 1947, pp. 145–150.
41. The most detailed description of the celebration with an extensive day-to-day account of what happened, is to be found even today in Eric Ashby's *Scientist in Russia* (New York: Pelican PBooks, 1947), Chapter 6, "Science on Show", pp. 126–145. Some complementary information may be brought from Julian Huxley, *Memoirs*, Vol. I (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1970), pp. 281–287, and Hans Selye, *On Being a Scientist* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), pp. 389–391.
42. Révai József, "Értelmiség és demokrácia" (Intellectuals and Democracy), *Szabad Nép*, June 6, 1945, p. 1.
43. R. W. Moss, *op. cit.*, pp. 146–147. Emphasis added. The source of the letter quoted is given by Moss as follows: Eric Ashby to Dr. O'Brien, RF 1.1/750/2/10, 26 May 1945.
44. R. W. Moss, *op. cit.*, p. 161.
45. *Ibid.*
46. R. W. Moss, *op. cit.*, pp. 144–145.
47. A. Szent-Györgyi, "Az Akadémia válsága" (The Crisis of the Academy), *Szabad Nép* ("Free People", the communist daily paper), December 12, 1945.
48. Szent-Györgyi Albert, "Kulturális törekvések a Szovjetunióban" (Cultural Endeavors in the Soviet Union. Talk delivered in the Free Trade Union of Hungarian Teachers, July 23, 1945), *Embernevelés*, Vol. 1, Nos. 1–2. (September–October 1945), pp. 59–60. Emphasis added.
49. Protocols of the negotiations between the representatives of the Hungarian Academy of Science and the Academy of Natural Science held in the Ministry of Religion and Education, June 18, 1946, pp. 5–6, *Régi Akadémiai Levéltár*, 48/1946 (Old Academy Archive), in the *Manuscripts Department of the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Letters and Science*.
50. Albert Szent-Györgyi to Zoltán Kodály, March 13 [1948], Manuscripts Department of the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Letters and Sciences, *Régi Akadémiai Levéltár*, 138/1948.