

## CHRONICLE

### In memoriam Ferenc Schweitzer (1939–2023)

A prominent figure of Hungarian geomorphology and Quaternary research passed away on March 6, 2023. As he liked to mention, his ancestors came from Alsace to design water management works in the northern part of the Little Hungarian Plain and settled there for good. When this area was finally annexed by Czechoslovakia as a consequence of the Slovak-Hungarian ‘population exchange’ agreement after World War II, the family had to move to the present Hungary. He studied geography and biology at the Teacher Training College of Szeged and then at the Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest. During his university years an event with deep impact on his future career was his finding of the first pebble tools at Vértesszőlős in 1962 and his participation in the excavations led by Professor László VÉRTES, which peaked in the discovery of the hominid finds. This event had a decisive impact on his early scientific interests. Consequently, he ventured on research into freshwater limestones (travertines) related to river terraces in cooperation with the geologist Gyula SCHEUER.

On joining the staff of the Geographical Research Institute, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, in the 1960s, his experience gathered during the study of landforms both in the library and their recognition in the field as well as his keen observations of human character made him rise in career. By the 1970s he was set as an example of the talented and hard-working field geomorphologist with a profound knowledge of professional literature to young researchers in the Institute. Major steps in his career were the Doctor of Sciences title in 1993 and his nomination to deputy director of the Institute. Then he undertook the (far from being uncomplicated) job of director of the Institute between 1997 and 2010. In this capacity he fought ardently and, finally, successfully for the survival of the almost wrecked ‘flagship’ of Hungarian geography.

In this period his sphere of research broadened to embrace an exceptionally wide range of fields from Quaternary geochronology, neo-tectonics and Late Cenozoic climate change to the origin of floods and excess water inundations and their control. He liked to ‘think big’ and set up theories not only on the history of the Danube catchment but also on the Tertiary drainage evolution of the entire Eurasian continent. He found ample evidence for and enthusiastically spread his concept on an arid, desert-like period in the Carpathian Basin. In 1998 he even edited a collection of papers (with Tibor TINER) on the geographical requirements of site allocations of large industrial investments and



hazardous waste disposal, which – along with his investigations concerning engineering geomorphological problems and the seismic hazard of the Paks Nuclear Power Plant – reflected his ever present interest in the solution of practical applications of research findings. In addition to popular lectures, the book “Land, Water and Air” edited with academician Ernő MÉSZÁROS, published as the first volume of the Academy series Magyar Tudománytár (Hungarian Scientific Archive) in 2002, was his main contribution to the dissemination of science. He was a great fan of new results and challenges in science, such as the possible presence of water and life on Mars, which he investigated through the landforms and processes of the planet.

He was invited to lecture at the University of Pécs in 1992, where he received habilitation (1995), became professor (1996) and professor emeritus (2004). At Pécs he always felt very comfortable and esteemed in the circle of fellow teachers and students. At the University his foremost ambition was to establish the institutional background to university-level teaching,

including the revival of geomorphology in the curriculum, to discover talented students and to encourage them to engage in research. At that time geography students were more keen to respond to his call and followed him to the field – where he really felt at home and where he could inventively and almost instinctively reconstruct past geomorphic processes. He never refrained from sharing his ideas with the best students selflessly and always treated those who were worth of such a treatment as partners. He never ceased to emphasize that a good teacher simply cannot hide novel ideas and scientific thoughts in his lectures. His enthusiastic lectures presenting new approaches to geomorphological issues of Hungary and the Carpathian Basin aroused interest among the audience and he managed to recruit dozens of young geographers for the staff of the University of Pécs, the Geographical Institute in Budapest and other academic institutions. With his enduring work in the Earth Sciences Doctoral School he established a geomorphological school which involved a generation of researchers and teachers.

In acknowledgement of his scientific achievements, he was awarded by the Silver Medal of the Work Order of Merit in 1987, but true appreciation came with the change of the political system. Then he became ordinary member of the St. Stephen Academy of Sciences (2004), honorary member of the Hungarian Geographical Society (2001) and of the Hungarian Society for Karst and Cave Exploration (2001). The Geographical Society awarded him with the Louis de Lóczy Medal (1995) and the University of Pécs with the Gyula Prinz Medal (2004).

His infinite curiosity was not only reflected in his scientific research, but also in his ardent wish to travel in the world, to discover remote and exotic lands known to him from his readings – in the true spirit of the geographical explorers of the past whom he greatly admired. This quest took him to the Loess Plateau of China, where he spent a month practicing one of his main interests in Quaternary science and geomorphology, the origin of loess. In addition, he took all possible opportunities to get acquainted with the cultural monuments of the region. Also he used a chance to visit Alaska, where he was confronted with several riddles of periglacial geomorphology in the company of world-leading experts, who immediately became his friends in the course of the field trip. One of the highlights of his travels was a round-the-world journey with the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji Islands, as destination. With his colleagues he marvelled at the new landscapes and strange customs we met on the Pacific Islands which he called paradise on Earth. India was another country of his dreams, where again it was difficult to decide whether the unpaired edifices, like the Taj Mahal, or the spectacular landforms, like the traces of huge landslides, exerted a deeper impact on the visitor.

Although always friendly with everybody at personal encounter, his character was not easy to read. Life experience taught him for cautiousness, not to reveal his real opinions publicly. Indeed, he was eager to share his knowledge with students and researchers of the younger generations. Through this behaviour he certainly set an example of the attitude of a professor for all of us. He will be remembered as the embodiment of the field geomorphologist and a peculiar, respectable and amiable personality in the history of the discipline.

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