

CHRONICLE

In memoriam Peter Meusbürger (1942–2017)

A few days before the Christmas of 2017 a sad news shocked the international community of geographers. Peter MEUSBÜRGER, a distinguished senior professor at Heidelberg University in Germany, passed away on the 18th of December at the age of 75 to a tragic illness he had dealt with dignity. With his death the Hungarian community of geographers lost its eminent supporter, the Hungarian Geographical Society its honorary member, Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest its honorary doctor, and our journal its advisory board member.

Peter MEUSBÜRGER was born on 14th March 1942 in Lustenau, Austria, a small town in the federal state of Vorarlberg, on the border of Switzerland. He started his school-years in his hometown before attending the secondary grammar school in Bregenz. After one year of mandatory military service he went to the University of Innsbruck, where he studied Geography and English. In the first years, the focus of his academic interest was the human geography of his homeland. He investigated the Vorarlberg cross border commuters in his PhD thesis, which he defended in 1968 with distinction. While keeping his commitment to science and working at the university as lecturer, his interest soon turned to the geography of education, which he began to scrutinise on the basis of a comprehensive survey of the Ministry of Education and Culture in Austria. This field of research became the central topic of his habilitation thesis in 1980, and also of his whole scientific work in the coming decades.

In 1982 Peter MEUSBÜRGER was invited to Heidelberg University, where he received a professorship and was now responsible for managing the Institute of Geography. The new context and tasks soon revealed his outstanding capacity of organising science and creating innovative frameworks for scholarly work. He established the education geography specialty group of the German Society of Geography (“Deutsche Gesellschaft für Geographie, Arbeitskreis Bildungsgeographie”) in 1983, and launched the Heidelberg Geographical Society as founding president two years later. Over the next decades he took considerable part of steering the institute, the faculty and also the whole university, the “Ruperto Carola”, as vice dean, dean, vice rector (1991–1993) and elected member of the Senate of the university (1999–2006).

Peter MEUSBÜRGER made truly pioneering work in the renewal of German language geography and the improvement of its international network. His efforts were



motivated not only by the experience he gained as guest lecturer and researcher in Oxford (1977), Paris (1979), Tokyo (1981), Beijing (1987) and Budapest (1988), but especially by his stay at Clark University (Worcester, USA) in 1993–1994, which regularly hosted leading scholars of the field for lectures and roundtable talks. In 1997, Peter MEUSBÜRGER launched the Hettner Lectures, a series of ten events until 2006, for which they invited leading personalities of Anglophone human geography to Heidelberg. In addition to regular lectures, roundtable talks and informal discussions were inherent parts of these events, enabling young scholars and students to exchange ideas with great names of the field. In 2006 he initiated a new project, the “Knowledge and Space Symposia”, where outstanding experts making research on knowledge have been brought together from various countries and diverse academic fields in order to promote interdisciplinary academic communication. So far 15 symposia have been held in Heidelberg.

Beyond organising innovative scientific events, Peter MEUSBURGER made a great contribution to scientific work by opening up new domains of academic publishing and elaborating new publication forms. His seminal work on geography of education (“Bildungsgeographie”, Spektrum Verlag, 1998) set the framework for a whole discipline, and the volumes of “Hettner Lectures” and “Knowledge and Space” became nodal points in the international landscape of scientific publications on geographies of knowledge. He was the main initiator and coordinator of the “Wissenschaftsatlas of Heidelberg University” (Verlag Bibliotheca Palatina, 2012, with German and Spanish editions in 2011 and 2014), which established a novel and truly geographical genre in the global research of education and knowledge.

The importance of these achievements is clearly reflected by the numerous prizes and awards Peter MEUSBURGER received, including the Presidential Achievement Award of the American Association of Geographers in 2010 and several prizes in Germany and Austria. Several international journals and scientific funds, including the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the German Research Foundation (DFG), and the council of the town of Heidelberg regularly relied on his advice and evaluations.

It is of utmost importance from the point of view of Hungarian geography that Peter MEUSBURGER played a distinctive role from the 1980s onwards in fostering academic cooperation between German and Hungarian speaking geographers, which significantly contributed to the internationalisation of Hungarian geography in general. He regularly held lectures at academic events in Hungary, and brought hundreds of students to Hungary on his field trips. He gave the opportunity to a lot of Hungarian scholars to attend scientific visits, research projects and graduate studies in Heidelberg, and to publish internationally. At Heidelberg University he served for more than ten years (1998–2009) as the rector’s representative for the partnership with Eötvös Loránd University.

Over these decades he played an eminent role in disseminating geographical knowledge about Hungary in the international scientific domain. He published, both on his own and with German as well as Hungarian colleagues together, a number of works on the human geography of Hungary, including the volume “Transformations in Hungary” (Physica Verlag, 2001), which he co-edited with Heike JÖNS. He and his colleagues were the first to describe and explain several trends of Hungary’s geography of labour and knowledge based on Hungarian census data from 1980 and 1990. He also was advisory board member of our journal. As an admiration for his outstanding efforts he was elected honorary member of the Hungarian Geographical Society and honorary doctor of Eötvös Loránd University in 2010, and received the Lóczy Lajos Prize, the highest rank award of the society, in 2015.

In addition to his diverse and invaluable academic achievements, it was his humane attitude, open-minded character and legendary helpfulness that became the true hallmark of Peter MEUSBURGER in the eyes of his colleagues and disciples, including the 164 master students and 27 PhD students he supervised, many of whom are prominent geographers now in various countries. Professor MEUSBURGER, as we commonly called him in Hungary, belonged to those few scholars who, instead of “producing” “academic labour force”, created human communities and helped individuals in finding their own way as well as viable forms of cooperation with other people. He often mentioned that it is people who are doing science. Many of us will never forget how he asked us to inform him about the exact time of our arrival in Heidelberg, so that he can take us by car from the railway station. The many times he not simply replied amazingly quickly to our e-mails in which we sent a new manuscript or asked him for a supporting letter, but sent back a long list of wonderfully nuanced comments or a remarkably detailed recommendation along with some warm encouragement, as if all this generous support had been just natural. We will also remember the feeling we had so many times, that he paid special attention to all of us.

The scholarly work of Peter MEUSBURGER was always permeated by honest curiosity, cheerfulness, and a fine sense of humour in the best Austrian traditions. He loved to point out by employing simple everyday examples the weaknesses and unrealistic features of self-important scientific concepts, or to reveal, with a content smile on his face, some erroneous assumptions behind widely accepted and taken for granted theories by presenting well elaborated results of in-depth studies. The impressive combination of purposefulness and peaceful harmony, a precise sense of reality and cheerful optimism, which were so unique to his personality, radiated from him to those in his environment. It was simply fun to be and work with him. The following sentence of him vividly lives in my mind: “Thanks God, nothing happens the way one plans.” This special wisdom, so characteristic to him, always made him see, instead of problems, enemies and hopelessness, wonderful new opportunities to learn, think, and work together with others.

The memorial service of Peter MEUSBURGER took place in Heidelberg on 12th January 2018. We lost an excellent, internationally renowned scholar, a devoted supporter of Hungarian geography, and, what is even more important, an extraordinarily great person with him. We will keep him in our memories and strive to forward to others all what he gave us.

FERENC GYURIS