

JÁNOS BALOGH THE TEACHER OF THE PUBLIC

ÉVA MONTSKÓ

Editor-in-Chief, Hungarian Television, Budapest

Maybe it is needless to say how honoured I feel by being given the opportunity of receiving the floor after so many great names, excellent academicians here at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, despite the fact that I am not a scientific researcher, I do not make new discoveries, my only business is – by virtue of my chosen calling – to pass on your thoughts, i.e. the fruit of your efforts, to the broadest possible public.

Consequently, a journalist or an editor can act as an intermediary only, and assuming a good scenario, i.e. he/she is competent and responsible enough to do a good job; he/she can pass on nothing more than whatever his/her knowledgeable partners have found out, discovered, and shared with him/her. That is why the representative of the media can also get the floor – space and time – at this honourable forum, and get the chance of bowing to the memory of Professor JÁNOS BALOGH because the media have had, and still have, few scholars as partners who are as committed and successful as Professor BALOGH was. (Let me just put in a short personal statement here: since I was a student of Professor BALOGH's at the university, and we nurtured fairly good personal relations with one another even later on, he honoured more than one programmes of mine with his interest, well-meaning and professional advice, and was ready to stand in front of our camera even when he refused to do so for any other programme.)

Certainly, it was not the timid and silent protest that characterised him whenever he encountered with an unpleasing phenomenon. Instead, he started reasoning, entering into disputes, and grasped every opportunity for articulating his position. A whole array of media of various levels, with country papers, local publications, national dailies, journals for the general public, radio and TV programmes radiated his statements with the aim of disseminating his thoughts that were always worthy of consideration.

As an illustration of my point, let me quote a section from an interview he gave to Magyar Nemzet, in which he gave the following answer to a question inquiring after scientists' responsibility:

“A scientist will never assume responsibility for the way politicians or economists use the findings of his research. The only responsibility a scientist can have is to explain whatever is relevant for the mankind as a whole. Clearly, and in an easily comprehensible way. This, ladies and gentlemen, is a royal virtue; very few people are competent in that respect. I can just repeat the words I said way back in the 1970s, the scientist–educator will become as important as the scientist–researcher around the turn of our century. And this is how I would like to change this statement of mine today: the scientist-educator is more important than the one re-

vealing new scientific phenomena. For there is nothing more urging than making people understand what is going on in the world. For should they fail to understand it, as was the case so often before, everyone – men-in-the-street and leaders alike – will make the same insane mistakes they tend to make, anyway.” This interview was published in 1994. And it is needless to emphasize how timely it still is today.

Let me now go back for a while to the beginnings and refer to the fact that JÁNOS BALOGH brought the said “royal virtue” from home to some extent. His father, a form teacher, would regularly publish articles in *Temesvári Hírlap*, and had a collection of poems also published. His mother’s father, ELEK SZABADFI, kept writing articles for *Túrkevei Hírlap* and his historical novel, *The Blood of Bánk*, also came out.

What is more, the media of his time, namely an issue of the *Natural Sciences’ Bulletin*, also played a decisive role in JÁNOS BALOGH’s career selection and the development of his interest in biology. That is how he wrote about it in his memoirs:

“I was always hungry as a dweller of the orphanage, actually. So I would often spend my trifle pocket money my granny gave me on the then cheapest available food, some broken wafer biscuits that were sold in a paper bag. Once this bag, however, was made of the 1901 shelf copy of the Natural Sciences’ Bulletin the shopkeeper must have bought from some kind of estate, and there I could read a letter of Lajos Bíró, the globetrotting Hungarian zoologist, that he posted home from New Guinea. That is how I first learnt about Lajos Bíró’s enterprise, which threw the general public of the time into fever, actually, of taking research expeditions following the footsteps of Sámuel Feichel, the ethnographer. I got so enchanted by the expeditions that took Bíró and Feichel to exotic regions that I got under their spell for the rest of my life. Later I had the chance of visiting New Guinea six times, thanks to which I could put together the Globe’s biggest spider collection here, in Hungary. Bíró’s and Feichel’s fate interested me so much that I started conducting some research work in connection with them. As much as it was possible I myself directed the attention of the Hungarian public to them, and maybe this also played a part in “Australian Hungarians” establishing the Bíró-Feichel Memorial Committee. Later, I could also use my special natural scientist’s tools for preserving my role models’ memory: I named two mite species with their natural habitat in New Guinea after them...”

Certainly, as an adult he had some other kinds of relationships with the press. As an unemployed teacher, for example, he worked for the office of Tolnai Világlapja. He took advantage of his journalist’s experience later, as well. In 1968 he could submit a very successful application for UNESCO funds and he laid the

foundations for his tropical expeditions by wording his application very consciously “*not with the scientist’s head but the journalist’s pen*”. Later, actually, he pointed out that it was exactly his “journalist’s” head he owed so much gratitude for the first aid of 3,000 USD. And what the world of science can thank these expeditions, well, I think you have much more authority to name that than me.

It is the fortune of the society, the general public, and the “world” that the public within very broad bounds knew the recognitions and findings of these research expeditions. Obviously, the Hungarian Television, the medium of the biggest impact and unlimited powers in the 70s, also had a decisive role in that. Back then the TV had enough resources to shoot and present long film series on Professor BALOGH’s missions.

For example the film series “Following the Sunlight” serve as a good example of Professor BALOGH’s excellent lecturer’s style by which he could raise his viewers’ and listeners’ attention anywhere, any time, and under all circumstances.

His comprehensive knowledge not restricted to biology and ecology but also to ethnography, anthropology, and geography.

When I was asked to give a presentation on JÁNOS BALOGH, the media star – this was the term you used, Sir, was it not – I could not actually assess the difficulty of the task. On the contrary, it seemed to be very easy and spectacular because a media star, as you may guess, will appear in glitzy roles, keep roaming about exotic places, perform fantastic tricks, and use impressive similes – and all this holds for JÁNOS BALOGH, too. He was a real media star when his great series were on, and even when he did not appear on the screen in person, people knew very well that he was there somewhere in the background. A good example of such a production was the series “The Wounded Planet” that was on in many other countries, as well.

So JÁNOS BALOGH was a very popular man, people would stop him in the street, wave to him from trams, kilos of readers’ mail were delivered to the TV studio, he wrote a great many newspaper articles and interviews were taken from him for various programmes. In spite of all that JÁNOS BALOGH always bore in mind that media meant nothing else than just a special tool, and his concern about the fate of the world made him express his position in unambiguous terms.

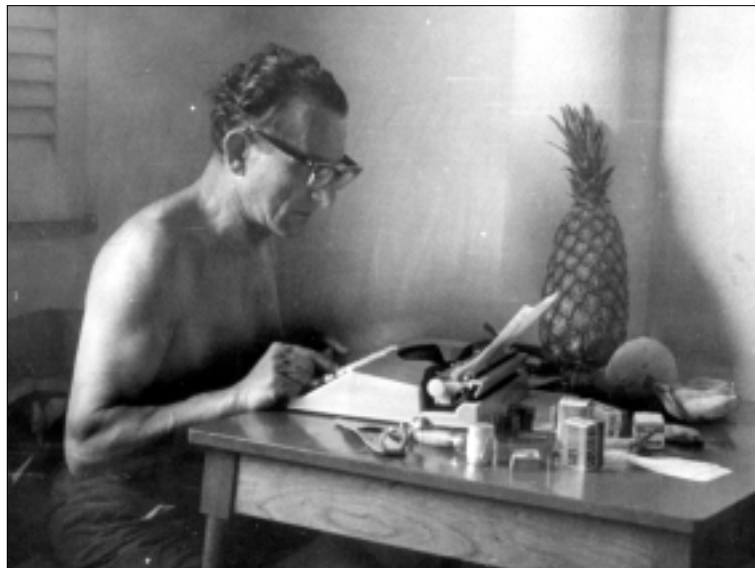
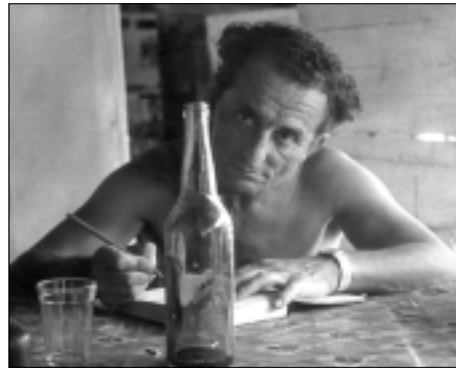
His personality, in the narrowest sense of the word, “came through” the screens and through the speakers, for the number of his radio programmes (e.g., the very popular series “Nature Playing Music”) by far exceeded that of his TV appearances.

Actually, I started but could never finish counting hundreds of radio programmes JÁNOS BALOGH edited and in which he was actually on the air. Accounts of his tropical expeditions, youth programmes, report programmes – count-

less programmes presented in his beautiful, melodic Hungarian, and in a style that could be match to any spectacularly filmed image praise his name.

TV programmes like the series “Geography with Love” by Duna TV were very important for him because they bring the Hungarian scenery, the Hungarian nature, and – last but not least – the values of the Hungarian people to the forefront.

We just cannot help making mention of the permanent will to synthesise, which was so typical of JÁNOS BALOGH. The edge of Hortobágy is just a short step



J. BALOGH is preparing his sound and written report for the radio and the Hungarian Television (Manaus, Brazil). (Photos by S. MAHUNKA)

away from the realm of jungles for him; Hungarian villages and ecological societies get in a very close vicinity of one another within a matter of a moment.

When in preparation for today's session I leafed through the archives I heard so many splendid dialogues, thoughts that would deserve to be thought further, and amazing admonishments that now I am not sure that I have always chosen the most effective and best inserts and recordings. I firmly believe, however, that I have managed to pick typical details. Even more so because, inevitably, there is some redundancy in Professor BALOGH's media performances, he was often asked, and he often made statements correlative one and the same issues. We must also be aware of the fact, however, that whatever he did, he did it consciously. This consciousness is very well reflected by the documentary report programme made with/about him on the occasion of his receiving the Hungarian Heritage Award.

Reports given by him prove his sophisticated interrelations of values, the stability of values, orientation on Nature, and lastingness. It was amazing how receptive the eighty-odd year-old scholar was even to the application of the latest technology like CD ROMs.

Though JÁNOS BALOGH, as a highly appreciated media star and experienced TV performer, was absolutely aware of the real value of a good picture, an interesting illustration, he consciously chose another approach in his last media programmes. This is what he said about this in an interview:

"I, e.g., entered the premises of Duna TV management by saying that I wanted to make an anti-clip. As a matter of fact, I highly doubt that we, viewers are so fallible that we can comprehend nothing but a spectacle, its snippets, and chaotic series of images. As far as I know, any thought is taking shape by my reflecting on the spectacle, which is time-consuming. The St. Vitus dance the audience is forced to dance at the sight of modern shots just will not leave any room for such reflections. I want to prove that the screen is capable of transferring not just a spectacle but thoughts, as well ..."

I think he succeeded with that. In "pictured" genres and in front of a sombre set of a bleak studio alike. Such were the conversational programmes Professor BALOGH made first on Duna TV, and then continued on the Hungarian Television, repeating the important thoughts again and again, fighting his Don Quixote fight for our Globe, the wounded planet, never getting tired of reiterating its values and the hazards it is exposed to, always through the filter of a wise, synthesising mind.