

### **In memoriam András Rónai**

On November 21, 2006 Geographical Research Institute of Hungarian Academy of Sciences (GRI HAS) held a birth centenary conference in honour of András Rónai (1906–1991), the geographer and geologist of wide renown. After the opening speech of academician Sándor Marosi (GRI HAS), professor Zoltán Dövényi, deputy director of GRI HAS made a broad outline on Rónai's life-work and on the historical circumstances of his activities. He drew attention on the dramatic events in Hungary during the 20th century which had had an adverse effect on the scientific public life. Following World War II hitherto flourishing academic disciplines disappeared or sank into negligence having not fitted into the new official political orientation. These changes also affected the career of scholars who conducted such studies and there had been only few among them to carry on through giving up original field of interest and taking up a politically neutral stance. Such a representative of geosciences was András Rónai, who cultivated human geography (primarily political and ethnic geography) until the end of the 1940s, then switched to geology and had become an expert of world renown in hydrogeology and Quaternary studies.

Professor Zoltán Hajdú (Research Centre for Regional Studies HAS, Pécs) spoke about Rónai's contribution to political geography which could be characterised by an overall fair and unbiased approach to the issues that had to be solved, through the analyses of high accuracy, orderly and scholarly level. He had always accepted this principle as valid, even in the course of handling statistical data produced in successor states of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Rónai wanted to get a clear insight in autorepresentation of these states and formed his analysing and correcting criticism on the basis of fairly elaborated data sets. Rónai had come from below socially, i.e. he did not belong to the ominous middle classes, which did not stand unprecedented in Hungarian geography of the period between the world wars. He became university professor thanks to his gift, diligence, stubborn and persevering work; his advancement along the social ladder was purely due to his merits. He engaged himself to service in sharp historical and political situations and represented scholarly approach in an age when it was not advantageous in many cases, because propaganda seemed to yield more spectacular results than making use of well-founded arguments.

Professor Károly Kocsis (GRI HAS) emphasized, that in the first third of Rónai's academic career he acted as political geographer. Though he never considered himself an ethnic geographer, from the viewpoint of the discipline in the present-day sense, i.e. research of spatial aspects of ethnic issues and their mapping, his scientific activity prior to 1949 is to be considered a milestone in the development of Hungarian ethnic geography of the 20th century. His studies on political and economic geography of Central Europe and the Carpathian Basin and their regions were subordinated to the efforts in territorial revision of Trianon Peace Treaty by Hungary. These demands were also supported by ethnic geographical investigations. Apart from the multi-ethnic composition of population of the whole area in general and of Transylvania as his homeland in particular, this approach stemmed from impressions of childhood and youth spent there, his ethnic tolerance, command of languages and last but not least from the moral and scholarly influence of his

patron and mentor, Count Pál Teleki. Rónai's research activities of nearly two decades in ethnic geography can be subdivided into four phases on the basis of national and personal cataclysms (1938, 1941, 1945) presented by his main publications.

Academician István Klinghammer (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest) gave a detailed information about the Atlas of Central Europe, Rónai's masterpiece in cartography. From December 1940 until May 1945 Rónai acted as director of the Institute of Political Sciences at Budapest. According to the verbal testament of Count Pál Teleki immediately prior to his suicide (he probably anticipated an eventual defeat of the Axis Powers) Rónai launched a project to publish an Atlas of Central Europe containing a series of predominantly thematic maps which was compiled from more than 3.5 million statistical data published by ten states of the region in the 1930s and 40s (environment, population, economy, transport etc.). The atlas represents an area from Saxony to Lemberg (west to east), to the Abruzzi and Foggia in Italy, Albania, Skopje and Edirne (down south). This volume of 171 maps with an extensive explanatory notes (altogether 367 pages) had been edited and drawn at the Institute, which was relocated at Balatonfüred at the end of the war. A limited number of rotaprint copies (quasi-proofs) were produced by March 15, 1945. The Soviet troops took the settlement ten days after. From the material a digital facsimile was produced at the Department of Cartography of Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest and the Atlas was printed out anew in 1993. It provides an image of Central Europe on the eve of World War II.

The last paper was presented by Dr László KUTI (Geological Institute of Hungary, Budapest) who spoke about RÓNAI's activity in the field of geology. RÓNAI joined the Geological Institute of Hungary in February 1950 as the head of the Department of Cartography. He became involved in the newly initiated mapping of the Great Hungarian Plain led by J. SÜMEGHY, organised and managed groundwater mapping of lowland areas to the very end. In 1956 he was appointed head of Lowland Department. He initiated the mapping of lowland areas at 1:200 000 scale being as a matter of fact the revision of the previous survey. During this campaign he elaborated the methodological bases of lowland mapping. Upon these principles he started the complex, comprehensive geological mapping of the Great Hungarian Plain in 1964. The survey based on a shallow borehole grid spaced in a predefined network opened a new perspective in lowland mapping on international level as well. The work had not only been initiated but it was completed brilliantly, though the last map sheets were compiled by his colleagues half a year after his retirement. Just another result of international interest was the establishment of deep subsurface water monitoring network in the Great Hungarian Plain. Drillings set up along two profiles and penetrating the whole Quaternary sequence not only contributed to the unrivalled monitoring network but they put the Quaternary stratigraphy of Central Europe on a completely new basis. The results of his survey of the Great Hungarian Plain during several decades were summarised in his last substantial work "The Quaternary Geology of the Great Hungarian Plain" (1985).

In the closing part of the three-hour-long memorial conference professor Ferenc SCHWEITZER, director of the GRI HAS summarized the results of the meeting. He emphasized that RÓNAI's scientific heritage must be referred to among the greatest achievements of Hungarian geology. RÓNAI presumed that geological survey would in perspective shift from classical geology, lithology and paleontology towards hydrogeology, engineering geology and environmental geology. It was the promotion of the latter disciplines that he recommended strongly. At last professor SCHWEITZER added: András RÓNAI was a real Hungarian patriot, who did his best for our homeland and Hungarians in all of his life.

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