Niessen, James P; Dropick, Anne and Böszörményi, Zoltán. "Remembering Paul Sohar: A Forum" *Hungarian Cultural Studies*. Journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 17 (2024) DOI: 10.5195/ahea.2024.579

# Remembering Paul Sohar: A Forum

James P. Niessen[1], Anne Dropick[2], and Zoltán Böszörményi[3]

Paul Sohar (1936-2023) was a longtime member of the American Hungarian Educators Association (AHEA). After he retired from corporate employment, he became active in literature and in AHEA. In the last few decades, we usually saw him at our annual conferences — he was a charming presence, poet and translator, and generous distributor of his own books. This activity followed a distinguished career as a chemist who delivered 26 papers and secured thirteen patents during his years at Merck Sharp & Dohme, the pharmaceutical company.
A refugee of the 1956 revolution, he was active in the Hungarian American cultural activities of New Jersey as was his late brother István and István's wife Gyöngyvér Harkó. Sadly, Paul did not live to attend this year's AHEA annual conference in New Brunswick. He lived for many years in Warren, New Jersey. His life was celebrated at a memorial mass at St. Ladislaus Catholic Church on September 9, 2023. Afterward, his widow Éva Botai and other family and friends spoke fondly and movingly of the deceased.

Literary associates and AHEA members read selections of Paul's poetic translations in an online event on November 19, 2023, and an in-person event at Woodbridge, New Jersey, on February 14, 2024. On March 20, a second online meeting featured readings from Paul's last book, a volume of Hungarian poems selected and translated by Paul entitled Pillars of Magyar Poetry (Somerville, Massachusetts: Červená Barva Press, 2024).

We are pleased to bring two original contributions to this tribute to our late colleague. Anne Dropick conducted an oral history interview with Paul at our Quinnipiac conference in 2023, which details his recollections about his flight from Hungary and settlement in the United States. Paul Sohar worked with Zoltán Böszörményi on the translation of many of his works, including a novel that appeared in Paul's 2019 translation as The Refugee. The novel recounts the flight and camp life of a refugee who could be a Hungarian in 1956 Austria.

[1] Niessen@rutgers.edu
[2] Anne.dropick@yale.edu
[3] zoltanb@monaco.mc



ISSN 2471-965X (online)

Niessen, James P; Dropick, Anne and Böszörményi, Zoltán. “Remembering Paul Sohar: A Forum” *Hungarian Cultural Studies*. Journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 17 (2024) DOI: 10.5195/ahea.2024.579

# In His Own Words: A Tribute to Paul Sohar

by Anne Dropick

Paul Sohar was a pragmatist. He saw what needed to be done and he did it. “You have to hurry,” he immediately told me when I asked him to participate in my project documenting stories of refugees from the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. He was very eager to contribute to the project.

I had met Paul through the *Öregdiák Szövetség*, the Alumni Association in New Brunswick, New Jersey, while I was teaching at Rutgers University and a graduate student down the road at Princeton University. This group was a gathering mainly of ‘56ers, including Freedom Fighters, plus former political prisoners from Recsk and others who had fled Hungary due to Soviet aggression. I must have been one of its only American-born members.

It has always seemed to me that great writers are born of great tragedy. If being torn from his homeland were not enough, Paul mourned the loss of his adult daughter by his first marriage. Beginning to write poetry as a teenager, Paul persisted throughout his life. A prolific writer, he produced many verse and prose books, translations, and his own poetry, all while holding down what he considered a creative day job as a scientist. His dear wife, Eva, helped assemble his last book. Paul did not sell his books; he generously gave them away. He was delighted when someone wanted a copy of his work.

Paul and I spoke on and off over a period of three days during an academic conference in Hamden, Connecticut, in the spring of 2023. We continued until Paul was satisfied that he had given me enough details and that my questions were answered. He was very determined to finish the interview. It is my great privilege to share with you the following excerpts from my discussions with Paul on the making of the poet and wordsmith. These have been lightly edited for clarity and length.

Here, Paul recounts his involvement in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, which broke out in October of that year while he was in his third year of university in Budapest:

> I did not directly participate in the fights, but my contribution was a little lesson in the use of hand grenades that I gave the second day of the Revolution, when I ran into a small group of people with a big bunch of ammunition, and these kids who were trying to figure out how to use it. By that time, I had had some military training because an officer’s training course was part of every university course, whatever profession they prepared you for, and it also included a summer camp—boot camp—so I had to learn how to use machine guns and rifles, etcetera, and hand grenades. That was the critical point because I saw these kids messing with hand grenades and I had to tell them to differentiate between a defensive hand grenade and an attack hand grenade. The defensive hand grenades could only be used from behind a safe barrier because when they exploded, they created a whole rain of shrapnel that was like machine gun fire--it could kill you. The attack hand grenade was just an explosive, it didn’t have shrapnel, so it created a big explosion that would knock you out, knock you to the ground perhaps, but

> not kill you. So, you could use that when you run toward a trench or run toward the enemy and throw it at them, hoping that it could affect them more than you. But these defensive hand grenades had to be handled very carefully and their explosive part was separate and came in a separate box. I had to show it to these kids and tell them not to use it in the streets, just from behind a barrier and throw it at a tank. Of course, it would not affect a tank very much. If they saw troops coming at them, they could use it from behind a wall. But luckily, a military person came by, and I handed over the training of these 15-16-year-old kids for the job ahead.
>
> I think the true start of the Revolution was at the radio station because the students went to the station with a declaration that they wanted to be broadcast and, of course, they were not even allowed into the building. Then they demanded to be let in and this led to some scuffles with the police. Of course, the radio station was a very important source of information, and therefore it was guarded by the secret police, not just the regular city police. I think this is where the first shooting started.
> I found that out the next day—how it all happened. When the shooting started—the radio station, against these innocent students. The news spread like wildfire, you know, all over town. Then, when workers came out of their factories on the outskirts of town where the factories were located, they decided to join the uprising, but not just march, but march in there with weapons. They went to the Hungarian military barracks and the military surrendered their weapons to the workers. So, you had two kinds of fighters: you had the teenagers and you had the worker types—maybe people in their 30s, 40s, or perhaps even people who had already had training during World War II. So, by the next day, the fight was on when I rejoined the Revolution on the 24th of September.

Near Christmas of 1956, Paul escaped from Hungary, first by taking a train close to the Austrian border, getting off a stop early to avoid detection, then continuing closer, concealed in a farmer's produce wagon. Finally, Paul crossed the border on foot in broad daylight, betting that gunners in the guard towers would be dozing after a long night on duty waiting to shoot others crossing during supposed cover of night. It was a good decision. In the following excerpt, Paul describes his stay in the refugee camp in Austria:

> You have to realize that Austria, just like Germany, was divided after World War II into several parts, so that the Soviets got some parts, along with the Americans, the French, and the British. The Americans got Salzburg, so they built a military base just outside of Salzburg, maybe a couple of miles outside, in a small town. When Austria became neutral in '55, the military base was vacated and was standing there unused, an ideal place for a refugee camp. It wasn't too far from town, so I always walked into Salzburg every day to spend a day there instead of being in the noisy refugee camp.

Despite all he had endured during both World War II and the 1956 Revolution, Paul poignantly still appreciated artistry:

> Salzburg was a very cute little town. It was the birthplace of Mozart and I visited the Geburtshaus of Mozart and other notable places and even went to the local opera house, a cute little wedding cake kind of architecture where I saw a comic opera by Lortzing. In the main cathedral of the town, they had musical Masses by great composers. On Sunday mornings, I attended these Masses just for the music. But what I remember best are the wonderful acoustics the cathedral had. I never heard "*Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!*" [*Silent Night*] sung so beautifully as it was there, especially after all these hectic adventures. "*Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!*" sounded so beautiful."

Paul on his language study and other formative education:

> My education started, as usual then, with a primary school run by nuns. These happened to be German nuns, "*Liebe Schwestern*" they called them, so a little bit of German education was part of my first four grades. Then, the next eight years, grades five to twelve, was one curriculum, so to speak, and in my case, I went to a school run by Cistercian monks where I studied Latin. Latin was always started at the age of ten, in the fifth grade. I studied Latin with the Cistercians until 1948, the year of the big change in the Communist Party when it finally, officially, took over the country. They immediately nationalized all the religious schools and fired all the monks who were teaching there. They combined this school with the public school, which meant that there were eighty of us in one class, squeezed together into one classroom. It was ridiculous. We continued Latin for another year, but then we had to change to Russian and drop the Latin. We studied Russian, and then the whole school system was changed to an eight-year, plus four-year high school, which is now more generally accepted in the U. S., too. I started in a generally-oriented high school. But 1950 was the worst time of this Communism because Rákosi was in full power then, and Stalin was still alive, and his shadow just covered the whole Soviet sphere of influence.
>
> They organized some Communist-oriented youth groups, and they wanted me in there, too. My job would be to go from house to house and agitate and explain to the people why it was beneficial to them to restore the rationing of bread. I thought it was ridiculous if I went to somebody's house—a kid, I would have been 14 or 15 by then—and tried to talk to them about rationing. They would throw me out. So, I said, "No, I'm not going to do it, and I'm not going to join this organization, either." Then they kind of threw me out of that school, and I had to go to another high school that was oriented toward mechanics and engineering. I studied more math there and physics and that sort of thing and continued Russian as a language.
>
> But, at the same time, I took private lessons with my old Cistercian teacher. I took some more Latin lessons with him and also English. He spoke English. In fact, he was a 'big' Boy Scout, and when the World Scout Jamboree was held in Hungary in the 1930s, he was the translator to Sir Baden-Powell, the originator of the Boy Scout Movement. So, he had impeccable credentials as an English interpreter. This monk's name was Edgar Putz, a German name. He didn't only teach me Latin and English but he lent me his books by Aristotle. But he never talked about religion because he somehow felt that I was reluctant about any kind of ideology. Even though he said Mass every day in his apartment, he never invited me, never talked about religion. But we talked about philosophy. So, I told my mother that I wanted to try to switch back to humanities and

> study either history or philosophy. But, of course, at that time, philosophy was Marxism and Leninism. So, you couldn't just study philosophy. By then I had read Nietzsche and Aristotle and Plato. I mention this because later on, when I went to the University of Illinois, I continued my studies in philosophy.

Paul recounts traveling to the United States as a refugee, his university development, and getting a job:

> The various refugee organizations made arrangements and sponsored the refugees. There were philanthropic organizations from each religion, such as HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society] for Jewish refugees, the Protestant philanthropic organization, and the Catholic one, which was the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC). I was sponsored by them. But we were all put together on a train in Salzburg, and we had an overnight train trip all the way across Germany up to the North Sea and Bremerhaven, where the American naval base was located. Then we immediately boarded a ship called General LeRoy Eltinge, which was used and built as a military troop transport ship for the war, World War II. We were crowded into that ship, not as much as the soldiers probably, because instead of 4,000, there were only 2,000 of us on this small boat, a relatively small boat. In eleven days, it took us to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, which is closed now, and from there, we went directly by bus to New Jersey to Camp Kilmer, also a military base that was set up for refugees. At this refugee camp, people were accommodated until they found jobs and housing for them. There was a special program at Camp Kilmer to deal with university students whose education had been interrupted. They interviewed these students as to their field and what they wanted to do. First, they arranged an intensive language course at the university, a three-month course. I got into a group of twelve or fifteen of us university students who were sent to the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. That's where we were accommodated with free room and board—a three-month course, all day just studying English. Not just reading and writing, but speaking it, which is a different skill from reading and writing.
>
> While we were there, we were encouraged to apply to that university to see if they would accept us and give us a scholarship, which was really not a big deal at that time because the in-state tuition was $100 a semester, and the out-of-state tuition was $300. Well, $300 is what we got as a scholarship, and we had to arrange for our living accommodations.
>
> Again, it was a Catholic priest who helped, who talked to different fraternities to take in refugees. [Then] I went to the University of Chicago and talked to admissions there and they said, "Well of course we don't have scholarships for you, you would have to pay tuition, or maybe we could do something about that." But they said that if you want to study philosophy, you're best off if you first get a degree in science because science gives you the discipline of thinking which philosophy requires. If you start with philosophy, you'll never learn discipline.
>
> So, "Okay" I said, "well, if that's the case, then I'll just go back to Illinois." For the summer, I was able to go back to New York City and I got a job working in a paint factory as a chemist. Well, I wasn't much of a chemist, but it wasn't much of a factory either, so we got along fine. Then I got the official notification that I was accepted at Illinois. I think it was before I went back that I was already questioned as to how far I had

progressed in my university education to see how much credit I could get from my Hungarian education. For that, I had to pass some tests, including history especially. It was the main subject because they suspected that people educated under Communism would be very one-sided in their education. So, they questioned me about modern history. They were very much satisfied with my larger point of view and ability to distinguish between propaganda and truth and to talk about recent history, going back to Napoleonic times and all that. They gave me credit for two years and so, when I went back to finish my education, to get a bachelor’s degree, I only had to stay there for another year and a half. I got a Bachelor of Arts degree because I took chemistry and philosophy, but it turned out at the end that I didn’t have enough chemistry to get a Bachelor of Science degree. So, I got a B. A. But, on the other hand, I had a lot of experience in chemistry, because I earned my living working in the Chemistry Department doing organic preparation.

So, in fact, that work experience earned me a job at a large pharmaceutical company, Merck, which had sent a recruiter to the university. He interviewed me there at the University of Illinois and invited me to come to New York for an official interview at Merck. I just packed up everything and I went to New York. I didn’t go to the fancy hotel where they were going to put me up because I didn’t want to stay for one night, I wanted to stay until I found an apartment. I went to a cheap YMCA hotel and they were surprised. But I told them, “Hey, I’m here to stay.” And they said, “Well, okay, then you can have the job.”

That’s how I got started earning my living doing a creative type of work, because my job involved the kind of work you would do as a student. Because when you’re a researcher, you’re a student for life. You keep learning all the time and you can never stop. In research, you always have to keep learning. Eventually, I worked my way up to the position of a Ph.D. chemist before I retired.”

Paul never stopped.

Niessen, James P; Dropick, Anne and Böszörményi, Zoltán. “Remembering Paul Sohar: A Forum” *Hungarian Cultural Studies*. Journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 17 (2024) DOI: 10.5195/ahea.2024.579

# The Poet and Translator: A Tribute to Paul Sohar

by Zoltán Böszörményi, Hungarian poet and writer, Temesvár, Romania

Gabriel García Márquez, who was a great cultivator of the English language, claimed in an interview that the English version of his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, translated by Gregory Rabassa, is better than his original text. He did not explain why, he only hinted that his Spanish source language took on a more favorable form through the stylistic, textual, and rhetorical features of the English target language and that this realization was only due to the talent and passionate work of the translator. Sándor Márai wrote in his short story entitled “Magic,” “not only does the writer shape the fate of his characters, but they also influence his own destiny”. As do his translators.

Paul Sohar is such a translator. He not only interprets but also uses the semantic, cognitive and linguistic properties and possibilities of English language; he weighs, compares and selects in order to achieve the greatest artistic effect. During one of our conversations, he reported that he translated Sándor Kányádi's poem “All Souls’ Day” in Vienna in five versions, because he was intrigued by how he interpreted the same Hungarian source text in the target language, English, at a time far apart, in a different mental and physical state. How one criterion affects another, while only the source language is constant. With this, he suggested that translation also has its theory of relativity. The first translation of “All Souls’ Day” in Vienna was published in the anthology entitled *I Remain*, featuring ten Hungarian poets, while the last English version, considered the definitive translation, of the poem, was published in Kányádi's collection entitled *Contemporary Tense*.

Paul Sohar became famous in the field of poetry. Before translation became his daily occupation, he published his own poems. They appeared in eighty-seven American, eleven Canadian, nine English, French, Austrian, Hungarian, Dutch, Czech literary magazines, in print and online, as well as his translations in almost the same journals. It is an amazing performance in both volume and quantity. “One who does not have his writings published in as many literary magazines as possible has no credit,” he once said to Sándor Kányádi, whose seven volumes of poems in English, one in Spanish he translated and published.

Later, he translated and published poems by classical and contemporary Hungarian poets. The list is extremely rich, containing the names of thirty-two Hungarian poets. Here is a short list in alphabetical order: Endre Ady, Mihály Babits, Sándor Csoóri, Jenő Dsida, György Faludy, Árpád Farkas, Gizella Hervay, Gyula Illyés, Attila József, Sándor Kányádi, Lajos Kassák, Aladár Lászlóffy, János Oláh, Sándor Petőfi, Miklós Radnóti, Lőrinc Szabó, Domokos Szilágyi, Géza Szőcs.

Twenty-seven volumes of translations by Paul Sohar have been published since 1997. Anyone who translates a literary text into another language knows very well that many consultations and exchanges of letters are necessary for the target text to contain the nuances of

meaning, pulsation, taste, atmosphere, power, and clarity of what is being said. It is a Sisyphean job, which only the most dedicated, well-meaning, obsessed person can perform.

In 1956, during the Hungarian Revolution, Paul Sohar emigrated to the United States where he obtained a degree in philosophy. In the end, he did not take up teaching; instead, he worked at a research institute until his retirement. His first volume of translations was published in 1997, by Pro Print Kiadó in Csíkszereda/Miercurea Ciuc, under the title *I Remain*. This small anthology contains the poems of ten Transylvanian Hungarian poets: Árpád Farkas, István Ferenczes, Gizella Hervay, Sándor Kányádi, László Király, Aladár Lászlóffy, Lajos Magyari, Béla Markó, Domokos Szilágyi, Géza Szőcs. This anthology was followed by twenty-six volumes. Which one was he most proud of? I suspect the books he translated by György Faludy, Sándor Kányádi, Árpád Farkas, Géza Szőcs and Katalin Mezey.

I remember that he corresponded with Sándor Kányádi for decades, asking for explanations so he could precisely translate each line of his poem. I witnessed several times their conversations, their small arguments and the brainstorming of the two poets. Kányádi, who translated a lot himself, once told Sohár:

> You should never rush to translate a poem into another language. It took me two years to finish the translation of one of the short, aphorism-like poems of the Romanian poet and mathematician Ion Barbu. It may seem a lot to you, Paul, but I needed this much time to be able to put a full stop to the end of the text, dreaming about the text day and night with a calm mind and jubilant with joy.

Since he edited and published six of my books in English: *Far from Nothing, The Club at Eddy’s Bar, Refugee, Pining Away, Ripped Apart, The Conscience of the Trees*, I can also say with full certainty that Paul Sohar was a master of two languages who did an outstanding job. The Canadian publisher of Exile Editions, Barry Callaghan, professor emeritus of English literature at York University in Toronto, said after reading my novel, *Far from Nothing*: “This is an excellent piece of work. Did you write it in English?” “I did not”, I answered. “It was translated by the American poet Paul Sohar.”