

Biography of Lajos Ligeti

Lajos Ligeti (October 28, 1902 - May 24, 1987)



Ligeti was born at the North Hungarian city, Balassagyarmat. After his secondary school years at Gyarmat, he gained admission to the Budapest József Eötvös College of great fame and French orientation. As a student of the Faculty of Arts in the University of Budapest he studied classical philology, and learned even more absorbedly Turkish philology and severe judgement from Gyula Németh, with whom the undergraduate dissected the works of great Vámbéry to false and true segment. He learned etymology, a passion to search for the Turkish elements of Hungarian language from Zoltán Gombocz. But he realized that at home he could not arrive at the final source of our relationship

with, and beyond, the Turkish peoples, so after he took a Ph. D. degree with honours - then rewarded with an iron ring instead of the golden one of the pre-war time - he gladly went to Paris to be instructed by the great masters of Sorbonne. On a Hungarian scholarship, he studied Chinese subjects with Henri Maspéro, Tibetan philology - in the wake of Csoma de Kőrös - with Jacques Bacot, and first and foremost, the Mongolian and related fields with highly versatile Paul Pelliot, his most influential professor in Paris.

The metropolis urged him to stay, but he returned to Hungary, into unemployment. Eventually he managed to raise support for an expedition to China. In 1928-30 he visited the Mongols in the north between the Great Wall and the Gobi Desert. He lived in lamaistic monasteries and studied the little known languages of southern and eastern Mongolians: Chahar, Harchin Tumet and Dagur, so important for its ancient peculiarities. Most of his collection was destroyed during the Second World War, but his invaluable old Mongolian, Manchu, Tibetan and Chinese manuscripts and books survived, which he gave to the Library of the Hungarian Academy as a gift. In his scholarly report (*Rapport preliminaire...*, 1933) he made mention of his inquiry into the 108-volume Mongolian Buddhist canon, which he was the first to describe as an immense source for linguistic, cultural and historical research (*Catalogue du Kanjur mongol imprimé*, 1942-1944). In the autumn of 1936 he travelled to Afghanistan, where he sought out the Moghols, a people believed to have already vanished, and reported new data on their disappearing language. He also studied the folklore of the Uzbeks in Afghanistan. In the meantime he discovered the correlation between the long vowels of old and contemporary Turkish languages.

From 1936 he was elected corresponding member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and an ordinary member from 1947. He was 37 when he became a professor of the Faculty of Arts in the University of Budapest and a year later he was appointed to the holder of the Chair of Inner Asia. He was the first to teach there Mongolian and Tibetan language and culture, Inner Asian history and Manchu, from the alphabet to many settled and unsettled questions and to various complex methods of investigations. In addition to his own department, for twenty years, he also held the Chair of the Far East, where he taught the first generations of Hungarian sinologists. For several years he was in the Chair of Turkish philology as well. Among others, he was also managing director of the Institute for Hungarian Studies.

He was the vice-president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences for two decades. He was the founder of *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, so far the longest-lived of our journals devoted to Oriental studies; he edited the monograph series *Bibliotheca Orientalis Hungarica* in European languages and that of the *Csoma de Kőrös Pocket Library* in Hungarian; he reorganized the Csoma de Kőrös Society, set up a research group under the aegis of the Academy to constitute a workshop for tackling the philological problems of Mongolian, Turkish, Manchu, Tungus and Inner Asian subjects. He initiated the teaching of Altaic subjects at Szeged University. He donated his private library of several thousand volumes to the Library of Szeged University.