

Denis Sinor, 1916 – 2011

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Denis Sinor

April 17, 1916 - January 12, 2011

Professor Denis Sinor, one of the founding fathers of the Permanent International Altaistic Conference (PIAC) and serving to the PIAC as Secretary General for nearly half a century, is remembered for his encyclopedic scholarly contributions to the field of Altaic Studies, his brilliant memory for persons, languages and history alike, not least to mention his warmheartedness and occasionally pointed humour. The unique combination of personal background, and academic, institutional and personal relationships he possessed, enabled him to convene annual meetings of the PIAC in then Eastern Bloc countries during the Cold War, at that time something virtually unthinkable for both Western and Eastern academic institutions. Thus, his personal contribution is by far not limited to his scholarly achievements, but indeed is much more. With the PIAC, he created a home for a world-wide community of scholars engaged in Altaic Studies and united in sharing knowledge and learning from each other across the boundaries of countries, world views and scholarly disciplines, and more often than not fostering friendship and strong personal ties.

When we look at his personal vita - a fragmentary account of which follows below - we may perhaps recognize a foundation for his lifelong quest in, and appreciation of the nomadic civilizations of the Eurasian and Altaic World.

After this personal introduction follows the account issued by his long-standing institutional home, the Department of Central Eurasian Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington/Indiana, where he was Distinguished Professor Emeritus.

He was born in Hungary on April 17, 1916 and educated in Hungary, Switzerland, and France. Between 1939 and 1948, he held various teaching and research assignments in France. During World War II he rendered modest services to the French Resistance, and he joined the Free French Forces.

From 1948 to 1962 he taught at Cambridge University in the U.K. In 1962 he moved to Indiana University where he created the Department of Uralic and Altaic Studies, now Department of Central Eurasian Studies, of which he was Chairman from 1963 to 1981. In 1967 he founded the Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, which was renamed in 2006 The Denis Sinor Institute for Inner Asian Studies. From 1963 to 1988 he was Director of the Inner Asian and Uralic National Resource Center.

A former president of the American Oriental Society, Denis Sinor was active in various national and international scholarly societies in which he held positions of high international importance. He received two Guggenheim Fellowships as well as a number of prestigious grants. He was a Corresponding Member of the French Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres. Honors received include an Honorary Membership of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, an Honorary Professorship of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, a doctorate honoris causa of the University of Szeged, Honorary Memberships of the Société Asiatique in Paris and the Societas Uralo-Altaica in Göttingen. He was awarded the Order of the Star of Hungary and the Commander's Cross Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary. He received the UNESCO 60th Anniversary Medal. The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain created in his honor the Denis Sinor Medal for Inner Asian Studies.

Denis Sinor authored 8 books and more than 160 articles in Hungarian, French, English and German, and edited 14 books, many of these were translated into other languages. He contributed to various encyclopedias, including the Encyclopaedia Britannica. He served as editor of the Journal of Asian History since its inception in 1967, and also for the Indiana University Uralic and Altaic Series (over 174 volumes) and the Indiana University Oriental Series.

Denis Sinor is survived by a sister, a daughter, three grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

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