

# Denis Sinor and Central Eurasian Studies



From Budapest to Bloomington, Distinguished Professor Emeritus Denis Sinor has always been an internationalist.

In 2003, the journal *Diogenes* asked four well-known writers, “What comes to mind when you think about your country?” One author thought about diversity; another, fairness; another, storytelling. Denis Sinor thought about his house in the woods: “with no neighbor in sight, a home I have to defend not against real burglars or imaginary terrorists but against deer that eat my flowers and raccoons that break into my porch and all that at a 15-minute drive from a superb library.”

Those who know Professor Sinor might well remember the home nestled down a winding road in the forests of the Lake Monroe watershed east of Bloomington, but if they were asked to think of a place associated with Denis Sinor, that place would be a long way from Bloomington, and it would be very big indeed. What to call it has been a contentious business—the “Uralic and Altaic” regions to some, Inner Asia or Central Eurasia to others.

The Ural and Altai mountain ranges shape the landscape of vast areas of Europe and Asia. Uralic and Altaic here refer to the areas’ two language families. Whether the two families are related is still in dispute, but the countries that make up this region share a common academic fate of being left out of most area studies curricula.

“Consider the Eurasian continent,” explains Sinor. “Then slice off those countries around the edges that we know so well. What is left is Central Eurasia.” It stretches from Hungary in the west to Mongolia (and some would add Korea) in the east, touching Finland in the north and Tibet in the south. Sinor has devoted 75 years of his life to the study of Central Eurasia, 46 of them building IU’s resources to study this part of the world, which in the public imagination seems to oscillate from shrouded mystery to world hot spot. With the fall of the USSR and with recent conflicts in Afghanistan and the Middle East, Central Eurasia is now very much a world hot spot.

This past autumn, in a room infused with the golden glow of turning leaves, Professor Sinor talked about how he found Central Eurasia and Bloomington.

He cannot remember a time, he says, when he was not an internationalist. “It was my life, you see . . . I was born in Hungary. Both of my grandmothers were Austrian and spoke German with me. I went to school in French Switzerland where I learned a little English from my British and American schoolfellows.



*Sinor with his older brother growing up in Budapest. Says Sinor: “See, even in those days I had a big head.”*



"My family traveled a lot, and for much of my childhood I studied with tutors. Each year in Budapest I took the school comprehensive exam. These were difficult, and I didn't do too well on the final comprehensive exam. I got two C's out of 10 grades. As a result, the University of Budapest rejected my application. But a friend of a family friend wrote a letter to

the dean and told him of my interest in Oriental Studies. Against all expectations, my application was moved from the 'refused' box to the 'admitted' box.

"As an Orientalist, I wanted to study the ancient Near East. When I got to the university, I met the acting dean who had taken a chance on me. He was a little man, but he said in a big voice, 'If you want to be an Orientalist, you must become expert in Turkic and Mongolic.' Not the part of the Orient I had planned to study, but, in my circumstances, what could I do but be a polite, agreeable Hungarian student? Although I started out with no interest in the subject, I found I was quite good at it, and in my last year as an undergraduate, I received a fellowship given to the best students of the university."

The "little man" was Gyula Németh, a "first-class Turcologist," who along with Lajos Ligeti (a specialist in Mongol Studies), formed the influential Hungarian School of Altaic Studies. In 1937 and again in 1938, Sinor received a grant to study in Berlin. His interest there was a collection of Old Turkic manuscripts dating from the sixth to the tenth centuries. They were brought to Berlin before WWI by German expeditions from Turfan in Chinese Turkestan (now the Xinjiang province of China). The young scholar found that conditions for research were excellent despite the political situation.



The death of his mother in September 1938 called Sinor back to Budapest. The situation in Berlin had worsened, and in August 1939, Sinor received a grant to study in Paris with Paul Pelliot, who was the "Nestor of Central Asian studies." Sinor quotes his early mentor, Professor Németh: "You will meet a man whose knowledge is borderless." When WWII broke out on September 3, Sinor's father sent him a railway ticket for his return to Budapest. "But he did not tell me to come home. I considered that the war was none of my business, Hungary was neutral," Sinor says. "Things were working out well with me in Paris; why should I not stay? So I stayed."

On June 14, 1940, the Germans occupied Paris, and millions fled south. Among them was the director of the Hungarian Institute. Sinor, asserting his Hungarian neutrality, was made acting director of the institute. In a room at the top of the institute, as the turmoil of the war transformed life around him, Sinor began to work out a concept of Central Eurasia which was to dominate his life. Instead of a scholarly vacuum, the vast regions of Central Eurasia became a world with a history and culture of its own—one that was often defined as an opposition to the dominant cultures surrounding it.

At the end of August 1939, the Second Vienna Award returned to Hungary lands lost after World War I. The 24-year-old director felt the institute should celebrate the event with a reception. Sensing the impossibility of having at the same occasion defeated French and victorious Germans, he invited only the French. Sinor had the Hungarian anthem played and, as a courtesy to the French guests, also la Marseillaise. For his French guests this was

an emotional moment because the occupying forces forbade the playing of the French national anthem. He gained the sympathy of the French present at the reception, but was to pay dearly for the gesture.

The cheeky young Hungarian kept up his scholarship and flouted what was becoming increasingly deadly politics by asserting his neutrality and wielding his excellent German. When his hotel was taken over by a special German detachment and he was about to be ejected, he argued that as a neutral Hungarian he should be allowed to stay. Not only did they let him stay, but he even gained access to their offices. Sinor came to learn that among other duties this special force was in charge

of some executions, and he came to understand the coded announcements posted in the offices. He passed on important information to friends he made in a nearby restaurant who turned out to be of the French resistance.

In September 1942 Sinor was married in Guethary, a small town in the Pyrenees. On his return to Paris, he found a summons to appear at the German Security's dreaded offices, Avenue Foch. "I thought that I could always talk myself out of things. I was interrogated non-stop for four hours. They did not hurt me, but I was amazed at how much they knew about me; for instance, that one witness at my parents' wedding was of Jewish origin! 'I wasn't there,' I said. 'I didn't know.' But the officer knew, and reminded me that I had allowed la Marseillaise to be played at the Hungarian reception two years earlier. I was marked 'politically unreliable'—a dangerous qualification. Yet, in the end I established a good relation with my interrogator, who, in veiled terms, advised me to disappear.

"I went back to my new wife and told her we had to leave. We returned to the Pyrenees and illegally crossed the demarcation line dividing occupied from non-occupied France. We were immediately arrested but, thanks to a friend, set free within a few hours." Sinor and his wife then took refuge in a Roman Catholic convent in Toulouse. In the winter of 1942–43, at the Catholic University of Toulouse, Sinor offered what was probably the first-ever course given on Central Eurasia.

Later in 1943, when the "free zone" was also occupied by the Germans, Sinor returned to Paris. The next year he joined the FFI, the French Forces of the Interior. His unit was incorporated into the Forces of Liberation of De Gaulle and participated in the occupation of Germany. Sinor was demobilized in the fall of 1945. On his slip of demobilization, the budding internationalist was described as "French by birth."

After the war, Sinor happily continued to teach and conduct research in Paris. In 1948, a handwritten letter arrived from Cambridge University; it offered him a tenured position. "So, in a period of 14 years, two of which were spent in hiding, I went from failed secondary student to tenured professor at perhaps the world's greatest university."

But why was Cambridge interested in Sinor? In 1947 Lord Scarborough presented to the British Government his *Report of the Interdepartmental Commission of Enquiry on Oriental, Slavonic, East European, and African Studies* which recommended a vigorous development in the hitherto much neglected teaching and research pertaining to the non-Western world. World War II had generated new interest "which if not encouraged now may be lost for a generation or more".

In his deadpan, self-deprecating tone, Sinor explains. "The British recognized the need to know more about the non-western world. They looked over the map, found scholars interested in the Far East, in India, in the Near East, etcetera, but in the center of the Eurasian continent there was the big, neglected area for which there was no specialist to be found in the United Kingdom. Someone must have suggested that there was this idiot in France who does research just on this region." So he got the invitation to Cambridge.

"The same thing happened in the U.S. in the '50s and '60s," Sinor raced on. To follow him requires fast-forwarding through a decade and a half in Cambridge during which Sinor taught courses as part of the Faculty of Oriental Studies, introduced the study of Hungarian, and published a major history of Hungary and scores of articles primarily on Altaic linguistics.

When Russia launched Sputnik, the U.S. suffered a massive educational inferiority attack. Congress responded with the National Defense Education Act of 1958. That act focused on science education, but like its British predecessor in the Scarborough Report of a decade earlier, it also recognized the need for foreign language training. In its "Title VI" section, it provided universities with the funds to undertake new educational initiatives in foreign language and culture studies.

Under Herman Wells, IU had seen this light much earlier, but with new funding available, the university had the means to expand the international dimension of its education. Thomas Sebeok had come to IU in 1943 to teach languages to soldiers. He stayed on to teach and study Uralic languages. In 1956, following the lead of a close friend and fellow Hungarian, John Lotz at Columbia University, Sebeok inaugurated an IU interdepartmental Uralic and Altaic program. Sebeok had the Uralic



*Sinor traveled to the North Pole when he was 89 just because he thought it would be fun. "The Russians are the only ones with an atomic ice breaker, so we traveled on a Russian ship."*

experience (Hungary and Finland), but he needed someone in Altaic studies (Turkic, Mongol and Manchu-Tunguz languages). Through Lotz, Sebeok learned of a scholar at Cambridge.

Sebeok's initial courting of the Cambridge don did not succeed. "It was the 1950s, the McCarthy years," Sinor relates. "I didn't like America, and I saw no reason to leave Cambridge." However, the juxtaposition of a sabbatical from Cambridge with an offer to be a visiting professor for a year at IU overcame Sinor's reluctance, and he arrived in Bloomington at Christmas, 1961.

His first residence in Bloomington was above a liquor store at the corner of Third and Lincoln. It was the dead



*Sinor began building his house in the woods at the same time that he accepted the charge to build IU's academic programs in inner Asia; he has lived there since 1963.*

of winter. "I laughed my head off at the terribly primitive conditions." He was put off by the (then) inadequate library and, compared to Cambridge, by the generally poor preparation of the students. A course that he could teach in eight one-hour lectures at Cambridge, needed 32 hours at IU. But Hoosier hospitality began to win him over. "I was struck by the incredible kindness of the people around me. Americans are a kind people."

Sinor credits John Ashton with setting the challenge that eventually made staying in Bloomington irresistible. Ashton's background was in English and Folklore, but as graduate dean he encouraged all ventures into new academic and interdisciplinary areas. "Ashton said to me, 'Denis, if you don't like what you see, why don't you improve it?'" In his article on his house in the woods, Sinor explains: "When I taught in Cambridge—arguably the best university in the world—my efforts were mainly directed in overcoming internal resistance. When I moved to Indiana University, I was cheerfully let loose to achieve whatever I was capable of. In the U.S., generally speaking, people like to see success and do not rejoice in the failures of others." In the can-do atmosphere created by IU President Wells, Sinor saw new possibilities.

When Sebeok's interests shifted to semiotics, Dean Ashton asked Sinor to chair the Uralic and Altaic Graduate Program and pushed him to explore additional possibilities. "He told me to go to Washington and visit the Office of Education. I told him I didn't know Washington and that somebody else would be a better choice. Still he said, 'Go,' so I went. I asked the cab driver to take me to the Office of Education. The cab driver didn't know where it was, but I eventually got there.

"When I met the gentleman I was supposed to see, I told him what he didn't want to hear. The U.S. needed some good elite scholarship in the field, and that was going to cost money. I came back with funding for a Uralic and Altaic Research Center, at that time, unique in the country."

The differences between Cambridge and IU have stuck with Sinor to this day. "At Cambridge, they let you do what you want. It was a marvelous place for research. But you couldn't build up anything. The U.S. didn't have the built-in negativism of other countries. Basically for me, Bloomington was fun. If you make the case for the importance of this part of the world, and that was not always easy to do for Central Eurasia, then you can succeed and grow."

Sinor's "fun" saw him through the establishment of the discipline as a formal IU department with its own graduate degrees in 1966, and the consolidation of research and library building represented by the Inner Asian and Uralic National Resource Center, funded by Title VI grants, and the Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, renamed in honor of his 90th birthday, the Denis Sinor Institute for Inner Asian Studies.

One can go on at length about the signal accomplishments of Professor Sinor and his many colleagues in the department, the center, and the institute, but he catches your eye with a look of simultaneous seriousness and humor, and you know it's time to listen. "Mark my words," and the twinkle in the eye grows. "John

Ryan and I did something unique and something that will remain unique in the history of the world."

The topic sentence was irresistible, and what followed was a story, which Sinor has told in detail elsewhere (*Hungarian Studies*, 2005), of the founding of the Hungarian chair at Indiana University. Blind-siding IU President John Ryan at a reception for Yugoslav dignitaries, Sinor won a promise of matching funds for whatever endowment he could generate to support a chair in Hungarian Studies. Sinor then worked his connections as an Honorary Member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. What resulted was a proposal from the Communist government in Hungary to put a quarter of a million dollars on deposit at the IU Foundation as long as the interest from those funds maintained a professorial position in Hungarian Studies. As good as his word, John Ryan matched the funds and went to Budapest in 1979 to sign the formal agreement. In his article, Sinor describes his feelings watching this event, "[H]ere we were, in the middle of the Cold War, with the Berlin Wall still standing . . . a Communist Government (with modest reserves in hard currency) . . . sends this—at the time substantial sum—to an American university, with no strings attached" and further "the President of Indiana University had the political wisdom and courage to accept such an endowment."

The mention of Hungary turned the discussion back to the "news" that prompted this visit to Sinor's house in the woods. Sinor's list of awards and honors is too long for inclusion here. Two major awards have been announced recently. The latest is an honorary doctorate from the University of Kazan, one of the top 20 universities in the Russian Federation. Also, as part of the 50th anniversary celebration of the Hungarian Revolution, Hungary has awarded Sinor the Commander's Cross Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary.

Sinor values this latest medal partly because it is the second medal from his homeland; he received a similar one, the Order of the Star, two decades earlier from the Communist Government of Hungary. "I have spent my life in scholarship that is not based in politics. I have always seen this work at politically neutral, and I especially value the fact that it has been recognized by governments with opposing political viewpoints."

Although one can hardly call a former member of the French resistance forces an apolitical figure, Sinor has always attempted to cordon off his scholarly work from current political issues. His meticulous studies of linguistic patterns and of medieval history are foundational. Others may use these materials to help build their political views, but the scholarly work itself is not offered up in service to one ideology or another. Knowledge is independent of ideology. This belief, which made Sinor flout those who would politicize his scholarly work as the world dissolved into war in the 1930s, stayed with him all his life.



*In 2007, Sinor was awarded the Commander's Cross Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary.*

Although an auto accident has slowed Professor Sinor these days, he is still very much in demand and leads an active life. "And the show must go on," he declares. A day or two earlier he had returned the proofs of the *Journal of Asian History*, Volume 41, as he had done with the proofs of every other volume of the journal he founded in 1967. And he was working on the proofs of an article about a letter the U.S. government received from Mongolia offering the hand of friendship in 1952. Even though his background was in the medieval languages, he was asked to translate the modern document during his Cambridge days. He is constantly struggling with an overflowing e-mail box, and judging from the clutter on his desk, there are more projects in the works.



### **Links**

**IU Department of Central Eurasian Studies:**

[www.indiana.edu/~ceus](http://www.indiana.edu/~ceus)

**Inner Asian and Uralic National Resource Center:**

[www.indiana.edu/~iaunrc/site/index.html](http://www.indiana.edu/~iaunrc/site/index.html)

**Denis Sinor Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies:**

[www.indiana.edu/~rifias](http://www.indiana.edu/~rifias)