

## IN MEMORIAM

*BELA L. BIRO*  
1937-2014

Founding American Hungarian Educators Association member Bela L. Biro was born in Endrod, Hungary on August 26, 1937 and died in Gyula, Hungary on October 24, 2014.

Bela L. Biro's classical gymnasium education in Hungary was interrupted by events in 1956. Following the Hungarian Revolution, he emigrated to Pittsburgh PA in 1957 where he resided with the Watson S. Ross family. Bela completed his high school education at Bethel Park High School and entered Carnegie Mellon University. Called for service in the Korean Conflict, he served in the U.S. Army Medical Corps in Germany and travelled widely to military competitions as an expert marksman. Returning to the USA after his tour of duty, Bela enrolled in the University of Pittsburgh to study geology and German. He became a U.S. citizen and changed his name from Bela Lajos Biro to William L. Biro. On May 1, 1965 he married Ruth Lind Ghering of Butler, PA. He earned his B.A. in Geography in 1969 while working full-time. Bela taught Hungarian folk dance in Cleveland and participated in Hungarian-American scout activities in Chicago while he undertook his Master's degree studies and completed his thesis in 1973 in Human and Physical Geography on "Summer Physiologic Climate of Pennsylvania: A Bioclimatic Investigation Concerning the Responses of Man". This research took Bela to many regions of Pennsylvania where Hungarian-Americans lived and he carefully noted aspects of interest for future reference and further study. He also participated in a five month Pittsburgh Geographic Expedition extensive land travel and study of South America in December 1968- April 1969. Bela was the Project Leader of Coastal Landform Studies and assisted surveys of other cultural and physical geographical phenomena, directed by Dr. Jacob Aghassy, his geographic studies mentor.

Bela launched his doctoral study in Climatology and Geomorphology at the conclusion of his M.A. in 1973 and began a decade of teaching at the branch campus of the University of Pittsburgh at Titusville ( UPT), with courses in Earth and Man, Urbanization, Geology, Meteorology, and Physical Geography. He also was faculty advisor to the student newspaper at UPI. Earlier, he had been teaching Geography in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh's main campus since 1970 -- with courses in Middle America, Geomorphic Field Studies and Laboratory, Climatology, Physical Geography, Meteorology and Meteorology for High School Teachers. He organized and supervised the Instructional Weather Station at Pitt. In 1972 he also developed and led numerous geographic and geologic field trips for students in Western Pennsylvania, often to locales of Hungarian-American immigration. Bela initiated and taught Hungarian at levels 1,2,3, and 4 in the School of General Studies and continued to engage in local Hungarian activities of the Hungarian Nationality Rooms at Pitt and the Hungarian Professional Society, the programs of the

William Penn Association, conferences of the Hungarian Association in Cleveland, Magyar Barati Kozossege - ITT-OTT, and Hungarian Chair at Indiana University, and events sponsored by the Hungarian Embassy in Washington DC. He also tutored students and professionals in the Hungarian language and culture and engaged in translations of technical and non-technical materials from English to Hungarian and from Hungarian to English.

In 1983 Bela was awarded a Ph.D. in Geography from the University of Pittsburgh. His dissertation topic was "Local Climatological Investigation of Wind Fields in the Lower Monongahela Valley of Allegheny, Pennsylvania," directed by department chairman Dr. Hubbard V.B. Kline, Jr. Active in international affairs, Dr. Kline designed the blue United Nations flag depicting the white polar ice cap, which is in use today. Because of Dr. Kline's expansive views of the world community, he often asked Bela about events in his Hungarian homeland and his activities as a Hungarian- American.

In Cleveland in 1974 Bela L. Biro and eleven others (Eniko Molnar Basa and Peter Basa, Ruth G. Biro, Ede Chaszar, Andras Ludanyi, Panni Nadas Ludanyi, Marta Pereszlenyi, Mihaly Sozan, Tamas Szendrey, and Agnes Huszar Vardy and Steven Bela Vardy) formed the American Hungarian Educators Association. He became the first treasurer, serving several cycles and presenting at many AHEA conferences concerning his research and analyses of the settlement patterns of Hungarian immigrants to the metropolitan Pittsburgh area. From 1958 onward, Bela was an occasional contributor to Hungarian- American newspapers and periodicals and supported Hungarian endeavors in his applied geographic work- related experiences. From 1966-1970, Bela was the secretary -treasurer of the Scenic View Land Development Inc., today's Penn's Scenic View of the William Penn Association that sponsors various Hungarian- American events. In the decade of the 70's he served as the Treasurer of Pannonia Development Company, Inc. in Pittsburgh, a business involved in recreational real estate planning and development, and also was a member of the board of directors of Pannonia, Inc. of Chicago, IL, which was involved in urban land development. He also served as a member of the board of directors of the Bethlen Press in Ligonier, PA, then the publisher of The Eighth Tribe. In the decade of the 80's, Bela was international business representative for Hungary, Romania, and Yugoslavia for the Robert Wholey Fish and Seafood Company of Pittsburgh and he was research associate with the United Technology Center in Pittsburgh, where he worked on East European topics. During this time he also prepared an Anyanyelvi Konferencia article on government subventions published in 1982, an Hungarian -American piece on Hungarian- Americans in Ellwood City PA in *The Eighth Tribe* in 1984, and several geographical- related articles in the USA, and one in Hungary on thermodynamic heat islands of urban centers.

For more than twenty years, Bela sold Hungarian books and resources for Puskin-Corvin of New York in Pittsburgh and other locales. With this contact, Bela hosted many Hungarian writers in Pittsburgh and arranged literary evenings for Cziné Mihály, Csóori Sándor, Fekete Gyula, Galgóczi Erzsebet, and planned programs for visiting Hungarian musicians, dancers, artists, and others he hosted. He also hosted scholars

Julianna Puskas and Ilona Kovacs several times in the 1970's and 1980's and provided assistance to Fulbright awardees Zalai Erno and Kriza Ildiko at Duquesne University in the decade of the 1970's. He hosted AHEA presenters from Hungary and the National Council of International Visitors sent to Pittsburgh, such as Ormos Maria, Szucs Pal, Jankovits Gyula, Radnai Zsofia and others. Bela made many return trips to Hungary in this timeframe and invited many other Hungarian guests to his home in Pittsburgh.

In 1984 Bela brought his niece and nephew (his sister's children) from Hungary for a lengthy visit to the USA. They attended the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles CA, which eventually led to Bela's move to California the next year to teach at California State University at Northridge, where he remained until his retirement and his return to Hungary in 2000. In the meantime, he also taught part-time geography courses at UCLA. He remarried and brought his wife Ani (the former Szatmari Jozsefne of Gyula) to California in the decade of the 1990's. They returned to live in his beloved Bekes county to enjoy the spectacular natural features and visit with relatives and friends. He attended the AHEA conferences in Budapest in 2000 and 2005.

As word of Bela's death became known to AHEA members through the diligence of AHEA Founding Member Agnes Vardy, several friends wrote to me about some of their penetrating memories. Agi and Bela Vardy had kept in touch with Bela and Ani Biro in Hungary in recent years and informed many members immediately about Bela Biro's passing. Eniko Basa, Executive Director, reported on Bela's role as a valuable and important force in the foundation and early years of the association when he formulated guidelines for the AHEA. She recalled how Bela capably enabled the Pittsburgh visit of Hungarian Folklorists who participated in the 1956 Smithsonian Folklife Festival. The group was hosted by the McKeesport Hungarian Club and was feted at a picnic at the Hungarian Park. They performed at both venues, felt thoroughly at home, and received a welcome she noted was a highlight of their US tour. Marta Pereszlenyi-Pinter, AHEA President for four terms, remembered Bela from the 1960's when he travelled to Cleveland to teach Hungarian folk dances to the scouts in the Hungarian Lutheran Church basement. His version of the amusing "rezgo csardas" remained vivid in her memory for years. Kalman Magyar, recipient of the Peter Basa Award of the AHEA in 2014, maintained contact with Bela and Ani in Hungary and stated that they decided to move back to the homeland from California following his diagnosis of cancer. They lived on 20 T street in Gyula for fourteen years. Ani, a retired gym teacher, can be reached at home at 011-36-66-362-261 or on mobile 011-36-30-318-5977. Kalman regarded Bela as a role model for his passion pertaining to Hungarian-American aspects and Hungarian matters.

In 1966 Bela made his first trip back to Hungary following his immigration to the USA in 1957. My sister and I accompanied him on a three-week journey throughout the country, visiting major sites in Hungary. I was shocked to realize how little I knew about the nation, then under Communism after World War II and Nazi occupation. Surveying the damage in Budapest, I vowed to learn more about the capital city and outlying areas. Bela's descriptions prompted my research agenda on Hungarian children's literature and Hungarian-American immigration to the USA, resulting in my later

presentations and publications in Hungary at the Anyanyelvi Konferencia and other Hungarian venues. Bela's research in Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania helped form the basis for the AHEA Ethnic Heritage Grant FY 1980-81 on Hungarian Americans in Pittsburgh, a study directed by Paul Body resulting in ten booklets. Bela also made arrangements for my sabbatical program of eight months in Budapest in 1983, which resulted in the formulation for ideas for the *Hungarian Picture Dictionary for Young Americans*, by Ruth Biro, Miklos Kontra, and Zsofia Radnai, published by Tankonyvkiado in 1989. He also lent his expertise on Hungary while I prepared a Fulbright- Hays Group Projects Abroad Grant in 1989, which I was awarded in 1990 and again in 1991. His legacy of inspiration for language, literature, geography, folklore, and ethnic studies continued over the twenty-five years of our marriage and after our divorce through my book reviews, presentations, and publications on Hungary and Hungarian-Americans.

Bela L. Biro, a committed Hungarian and Hungarian-American, will be remembered for his generous service and endeavors benefitting his homeland of Hungary and his adopted nation of the USA. May he rest in peace as his impact continues on in those he assisted and inspired.

Ruth G. Biro  
November 2014



Papp László, Bíró Ani, Bíró Béla, at the 2005 AHEA Conference in Budapest