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## **In Memoriam Thomas Szendrey**

On May 14, Thomas Szendrey, our friend and a founding member of the AHEA, passed away. It is with sadness that I inform you of this, but it was a release from a long illness and in that all can take comfort.

A professor of history at Gannon College for many years, Thomas was an excellent scholar. While he had not been active in the Association in recent years, he was a keen student of Hungarian culture and society, and actively promoted it through his professional and intellectual contacts. He will be missed by all of us.

[In Memoriam](http://www.mbk.org/index.html?name=News&file=article&sid=50) <http://www.mbk.org/index.html?name=News&file=article&sid=50>

## **The Life and Untimely Death of Professor Thomas Szendrey**

*Steven Béla Várdy, Ph.D. - Duquesne University*

March 25, 1941 - May 14, 2003

Dr. Thomas Szendrey, who for three decades was Professor of History at Gannon University died on May 14, 2003. He died after three years of illness, following a stroke on May 20, 2003. He was a loving husband, a caring father, a faithful friend, a learned colleague, and a man with a brilliant mind. He could have done so much more had fate given him a few more years to commit his brewing ideas into writing. I met Thomas during the 1950s in Cleveland, Ohio, although I did not really learn to know him well until the early 1960s. At that time I was a Ph.D. student at Indiana University in Bloomington, when that institution was the premier center of Hungarian Studies in the United States.

Being a few years older than Tom, he knocked at our door in Cleveland in the summer of 1960 to consult me about the opportunities for a historian. He too was in love in history, but he too was in a cloud about the profession. We both refused to consider the practicality and applicability of our discipline. We simply loved it, and we were convinced in the long run everything would turn out to be all right.

Given this state of mind, I certainly could not give much practical advice to Tom. I could only convey my own feelings about history, and my own emotional attachment to the discipline that I wanted to pursue all my life. After graduating from John Carroll University in 1963, Tom considered the idea of following me to Bloomington, but at the end he opted to

go to New York to pursue his doctoral work at Saint John's University. He did so under the direction of a Hungarian intellectual historian, Professor Boris de Balla (1903-1992), with whom he established a very good working relationship. Under Balla's direction he wrote a 440-page doctoral dissertation on *The Ideological and Methodological Foundations of Modern Hungarian Historiography* (1972), in which he explored the development of the discipline from the 18th century right up to the 1960s. This work turned out to be a major intellectual endeavor that should have appeared in print immediately. It was never published, for the simple reason that publishers were (and are) always more interested in books with commercial appeal, than in highly intellectual works that have little or no marketability.

After having gotten married, and after having settled down in our respective permanent positions – I at Duquesne University, and Tom at Gannon University – we began three decades of intense scholarly cooperation, punctuated by occasional debates and disagreements. We were able to cooperate in spite of our obvious dissimilarities: I being a traditional narrative historian, who was constantly engaged in writing articles, monographs and bulky syntheses for the average reader on an easily comprehensible level; Thomas being an intellectual historian, whose exposés were so sophisticated, poised, and elegant that they impressed even those who were unable to fathom the meaning of his explanations.

In the course of his three decades at Gannon University, Thomas Szendrey became a much beloved professor. At the same time he was an eminently respected publishing scholar in the field of intellectual history. He taught thousands of young people the love of learning for learning's sake, and he introduced them to the values of Western Christian Civilization. Many of his former students are now highly ranked professionals, or they are persons who occupy prestigious public or ecclesiastical offices.

Dr. Thomas Szendrey can claim authorship of about four score scholarly writings on a wide variety of topics, among them a two-volume textbook on the *History of the General Councils of the Roman Catholic Church* (Gannon, 1978). I have co-authored with him a number of these writings, and we also had grandiose plans for several major projects to be completed after our retirement. Alas, that will never come to be. Thomas Szendrey has also translated, edited, or was otherwise involved in the publication of a number of works. Among them were a history of the national theater in Central Europe by Edit Császár Mályuszné (*The Theater and National Awakening in East Central Europe*, 1980), Bálint Hóman's unpublished manuscript entitled *Ősemberek, Ósmagyarok* [Ancient People, Ancient Hungarians] (1985), the history of his own university (*The Story of Gannon University*, 1985), and the as yet unpublished millennial history of the relationship between Hungary and the Papacy (*Magyarország és a Szentszék kapcsolatainak ezer éve = The Millennial Relationship between Hungary and the Holy See*).

In addition to his family and the discipline of history, Tom's great love was his ancestral town of Tata in Western Hungary. He loved that place with the affection of a child for his mother. That is the town where he found his future wife, Enikő; that is the town that was constantly uppermost in his mind; that is the town where he planned to live out the rest of his life after retirement; that is the town where he hoped to see his valuable library deposited; and that is the town where he wanted to complete those works that were to contain much of the knowledge that he had accumulated in the course of lifelong learning.

One of these books was to be a biography of Sándor Giesswein (1856-1923), a priest, theologian, philosopher, church historian, and one of the founders and leaders of the Christian

Socialist Movement in Hungary. Giesswein was especially close to Thomas's heart, not only because they shared similar ideas and views about the world, but because Giesswein too was a native of Tata. Tom would collect everything about the life of his hero. He would write passionately about certain episodes of his life, and he would show me with affection some of the completed sections. If only fate would have given him more time to finish this work, as well as some of the others that he planned to write. The latter included a major intellectual synthesis of Hungarian history that was to follow the Dilthey-inspired *Geistesgeschichte* view of historical evolution.

Having lived 120 miles apart for the last three decades, we could not meet as often as we would have liked to meet. But we did see each other fairly often. We visited each other's homes and universities, we met at various scholarly conferences, and Tom would also come to Pittsburgh at least once a year to deliver a lecture in one of my graduate seminars. His lectures were highly popular and his perceptive view of historical evolution was always appreciated by my students.

Although unable to meet on a weekly basis, we were always in touch via the telephone. I called him at least once of week, which he would often reciprocate. Lacking colleagues with similar interests in my immediate vicinity, and bereft of people who could appreciate my addiction to the past of the Carpathian Basin, he was the only person (besides my wife, Agnes) I could speak to about issues that were dear to my heart. Figuratively speaking, he was a beacon in the barren desert that surrounded me. This beacon began to flicker there years ago when he suffered a stroke (May 20, 2000), and it was extinguished permanently a week ago (May 14, 2003). I will miss this beacon, as will his family – his wife and his children – and undoubtedly also many of his friends.

During the three long years of Tom's struggle for survival, he was aided by Enikő, his faithful wife of thirty-two years, who fought for his life relentlessly, desperately and selflessly. At the end, however, she had to give up. Her only consolation was that she had her son and daughter – Csongor/Tom and Tünde – next to her, to share some of the burdens of this uneven struggle for her husband's life. Undoubtedly, they will also be there in the future, to alleviate some of the pain and loneliness that inevitably will become part of her life during the oncoming weeks, months and years.

If the "iron chancellor" Bismarck was right when he claimed that "a really great man is known by... generosity..., humanity..., and moderation...,” then Dr. Thomas Szendrey was indeed a great man. He was gentle, generous, and moderate as a person, and gifted as an intellectual. It is a tragedy of history that fate has not given him more time to make his intellectual capacity better known to the world. Even as it stands, however, he will be remembered both through his writings and through the achievements of his students. And we – his family and his close friends – will cherish his memory for many years to come.

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AlumNotes (p. 27)

“He made history come alive.”  
by Jennifer Mailey '95

Thomas L. Szendrey, Ph.D., lived a difficult life, yet he deeply touched the hearts and minds of many of his Gannon colleagues and students, particularly, Judge John F. Cherry '73. Szendrey was Cherry's favorite professor at Gannon. “For me, Dr. Szendrey was Gannon,” Cherry said. The close relationship between professor and student developed into a lifelong friendship. Cherry recalled his first encounter with Szendrey, but it wasn't in a Gannon classroom. They met on a bus trip on Holy Thursday in 1971, both visiting Pittsburgh for Easter. Their ethnic and family traditions and their love of the Catholic Church formed a bond between them that day. Cherry was impressed with Szendrey's vast knowledge and passion for history, so he registered for his class, *The Enlightenment Period, 1648-1815*. As an undergraduate and graduate student, Cherry also enjoyed Szendrey's Church Reformation, European Senior Seminar, and Medieval History courses. It was not uncommon for Dr. Szendrey to invite his students over for dinner with his family, where lively discussions about great historians, philosophers, and the Catholic Church kept everyone entertained. “Until Tom, history was just a series of dates and events for me,” Cherry said. “He made it come alive.” After graduation, Cherry stayed in touch with the Szendreys and their children, Tunde and Csongor. Cherry judged Szendrey a genius—with a complex and intelligent mind, a compassionate heart, and beautiful soul. “He lived a simple lifestyle and always remained true to his family, his Catholic faith, his Hungarian culture, and to Gannon,” noted Cherry. Szendrey suffered a stroke in 2000, never fully recovered, and was forced to retire. “With all that he suffered, Tom Szendrey was still a gentle and kind man,” Cherry added. In 2003, Cherry accepted Gannon's Distinguished Alumni Award in Humanities. During the ceremony, he spoke about the profound impact that Szendrey made in his life and announced that he was establishing the Dr. Thomas L. Szendrey Endowed Scholarship in the amount of \$10,000.00 for a deserving Gannon student majoring in history. Szendrey was not able to attend the ceremony because he was hospitalized with pneumonia. His family accepted on his behalf. Sadly, he died just six weeks later on May 14, 2003. Cherry's reasons for establishing the scholarship were three-fold—to honor the legacy of a brilliant professor at Gannon, to keep history alive in the minds of future Gannon students, and to give back to a University that truly transformed his life.