



## IN MEMORIAM: BÁLINT CSATÁRI (1949–2019)



Photo by A. D. Kovács

### **Bálint Csátári – the Geographer of the Great Hungarian Plain**

‘The Geographer of the Great Hungarian Plain’ – Bálint Csátári was once described with this honorific title, and there is no other attributive which could capture the life and work of this exemplary person more accurately.

Bálint Csátári was born on the 13th of August 1949 in Karcag, a middle-sized town in the Hungarian Plain with Cumanian heritage. During his high school years, he attended the Arany János Secondary Grammar School of Berettyóújfalu. Bálint Csátári finished his university studies in 1973 at the József Attila University (now University of Szeged) as a teacher of mathematics and geography. After getting his degree, he stayed as an intern at the Department of Economic Geography of the József Attila University. He earned his doctoral title in 1975 with a thesis about ‘The combined effect of the natural and social environment on the population and settlement network of the Sárrét microregion’. Following his university years, Bálint Csátári returned to his alma mater in Berettyóújfalu to work as a secondary school teacher between 1975 and 1980. Not giving up on his scientific career either, he became an aspirant of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and he earned his Candidate in Geography (CSc) title in 1984 with a dissertation about the population- and settlement geography of the scattered farm system of Szeged district.

Bálint Csátári moved to Kecskemét to join the forming new research group as a research fellow and later as head of the group. In the early years, the Kecskemét group focused on settlement studies, and was part of the Geographical Research Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences at first, but soon integrated into the newly established Centre of Regional Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. From 1992 to 2008, Bálint Csátári held the position of director of the Great Plain Research Institute, which was formed within the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre of Regional Studies. After 2008, Bálint Csátári was the head of the Kecskemét Research Group of the Great Plain Research Institute, until his retirement in 2010. After his retirement, he was awarded with the title of Professor Emeritus of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 2018.

Besides advancing his research career in Kecskemét, Bálint Csátári also transferred his expertise into teaching. He became honorary associate professor, later part-time associate professor of the József Attila University in 1986, and continued giving lectures about regional development, rural studies and rural development, and the Great Hungarian Plain till the early 2010s. His deep knowledge, practical approaches, open personality and love of teaching left a great impression in his students.

As a lecturer and supervisor, Bálint Csátári was associated with two doctoral schools. Under his supervision, 9 PhD dissertations and two candidate dissertations were prepared successfully.

Bálint Csátári's colourful research carrier is connected by the themes of rurality and the Hungarian Plain. Besides scientific curiosity, Bálint research activity was also motivated by the desire to address rural challenges and improve rural life circumstances. As the following examples will show, some of his efforts were met with success.

In his early research years, in accordance with the research profile of the Kecskemét Group, Bálint Csátári focused on settlement- and population geography. One of his notable early research projects was concerned with the villages' ability to sustain and preserve their population. Since the development trends of the late state socialist era already led to the differentiation of the rural areas, this research direction had pressing practical importance.

The political and economic transition induced similar problems and challenges in wide spatial areas, which highlighted the importance of regional thinking. Bálint Csátári played a key role in the realisation of the first and second Hungarian Great Plain Research Programs. The Hungarian National Assembly accepted a resolution about the Hungarian Plain, and 6 Hungarian Plain Conferences were held to this day.

Closing to the European Union (EU) accession, Bálint Csátári's interest turned to the spatial and rural development, and to the differences in local development potentials. His works provided valuable input for the reform of the Hungarian agricultural and rural policy, significantly contributed to preparations for the EU accession and to the adaptation of the sectoral policies.

In the late years of his research career, Bálint Csátári once again turned his attention to the situation of the scattered farms, and more generally, to investigate the natural and socioeconomic problems of the rural areas. His efforts contributed to the creation of a financial support scheme dedicated to the scattered farms.

The complete bibliography of Bálint Csátári contains more than three hundred scientific papers, and he also published more than one hundred informative articles to present the social problems and spatial processes for the wider public.

In recognition of his impact on the Hungarian agricultural and rural policy, Bálint Csátári filled the position of chairman of the Hungarian National Rural Network from 2011 till 2013. He also co-founded the Hungarian Society for Rural Areas and was involved in the work of many organisations in service of the rural communities. Bálint Csátári was also an active member of the civil so-

ciety of Kecskemét. His achievements were acknowledged with many awards, including the Prima Award of Bács-Kiskun County, and the Order of Merit of the Hungarian Republic, Officer's Cross.

During his life, Bálint Csatári built up a wide network of foreign relations, including many life-long friendships. He made associations of leading researchers from the Western Bloc (e.g. Paul Cloke) as well as from distant countries like Japan (Minamizuka Shingo). The Institute was always open for foreign guests, including a group of university students from Utrecht, who organised their field trip in the Great Hungarian Plain. Maybe the most precious of them was the connection with his Polish associates and friends. The excellent relationship with Polish geographers and researchers of regional studies and with the Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization can be traced back to György Enyedi, the former Director General of the Centre for Regional Studies. Since 1985, Bálint Csatári took study trips to Poland regularly. Bálint was also actively involved in the bilateral partnership agreements, the Polish-Hungarian Geographic Seminars, the Warsaw Regional Forums, which has been regularly organised since 2004 and three East Central European Regional Seminars (organised in 2006, 2008, 2010). Many of his students followed his footsteps, and further deepened the friendship between Hungary and Poland.

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After living a fulfilling life, Bálint Csatári fell ill in the spring of 2019. He passed away on 17 September 2019, shortly after his 70th birthday. His loved ones, friends and colleagues will keep his memory alive and carry on his legacy.

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## **Bálint Csatári – a Hungarian-Polish geographer**

Bálint Csatári has been for many years the key animator of the Polish-Hungarian cooperation in the domain of socioeconomic geography. He took over this role directly from György Enyedi, the initiator of the bilateral collaboration in the field of geography, having started with the seminar in Szymbark in 1973. In the course of several decades projects were carried out continuously by the Centre of Regional Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in collaboration with the Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization of the Polish Academy of Sciences. This joint work brought regular seminars and common publications, issued by the two institutes mentioned. Agreements on cooperation were a popular basis for international scientific contacts in Central Europe before 1989. They enabled then a relatively free exchange of ideas, which was not quite common, especially in social and economic sciences. After the transformation, during the 1990s, cooperation according to this formula weakened. Academic units from the countries of the region started to look for the foreign partners mainly in Western Europe. There were, however, exceptions to this rule. One of the exceptions was Polish-Hungarian collaboration in the domain of socioeconomic geography. This was possible only due to concrete persons, who were able to endow the mutual relations with new capacities. These persons were also capable of pointing out new research themes, such as spatial effects of systemic transformation, cooperation within the border-adjacent regions, transformations of the socialised agriculture, participation in the European

integration, new directions of migration movements, as well as increase of the territorial differences in development. On the Hungarian side such a person was exactly Bálint Csatári. Among the Polish partners this role was fulfilled for many years by, regrettably, also deceased by now, Marek Potrykowski, and Andrzej Stasiak.

Owing to the engagement of Bálint Csatári the joint research projects have been carried out until 2013. Until the year 2002 the bilateral seminars had also been organised. Later on both parties concluded that the formula ought to be broadened, so as to allow for the dissemination of the joint work of researchers dealing with spatial sciences, originating from Central Europe, across entire Europe. Thus, on the basis of the seminars, and with an active participation of Bálint Csatári, the series of open scientific conferences were initiated, taking place intermittently in Poland (Warsaw Regional Forum) and in Hungary (East-Central European Regional Seminars). Warsaw Regional Forum became a visible and steady point on the map of European conferences in the domains of economic geography and regional studies. Bálint Csatári has been in the consecutive years a co-organiser and an active participant of these conferences. One should not underestimate, neither, the role played by Bálint Csatári as the person initiating and maintaining the contacts between the young scientists of both countries. He has been for years hosting in Kecskemét the successive generations of the youngest employees of the Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization of the Polish Academy of Sciences. He would then put aside his daily duties and organise full-day field studies. He also issued recommendations for visiting other centres, in which the units, belonging to the Centre of Regional Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences functioned. At the same time, the employees of the Centre were regularly delegated to Poland, both for short study visits and for the longer-term scholarships and research stays (including, for instance, Annamaria Duro and József Lennert). Without any doubt, owing to the activity of Bálint Csatári, the communities of Polish and Hungarian geographers created the relations, which could bring new joint research and collaboration among the representatives of the consecutive generations. The evidence is provided by the current joint participation of the teams from the two institutions in the international projects of the ESPON network (e.g. recently ESPON COMPASS project). Bálint Csatári had been, since 2007, until his passing away, a member of the Editorial Board of *Europa XXI* journal. He published his papers in this journal and prepared numerous reviews for it.

Together with Polish partners, Bálint Csatári jointly managed several bilateral projects, carried out in the framework of cooperation between the Polish and Hungarian Academies of Sciences, including such projects as (a) Comparative regional studies in the era of European integration – the spatial aspects of the socioeconomic transformation in Poland and in Hungary (1999-2004); (b) Comparative regional research on spatial effects of Polish and Hungarian EU accession (2005-2008); (c) Influence of the membership of Poland and Hungary in the EU on the socioeconomic situation of the peripheral areas in the two countries (2008-2010).

Bálint Csatári was also personally associated with Poland. He would often spend his family vacations in Poland. He had numerous friends among the employees of the Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization of the Polish Academy of Sciences. For many people he has impersonated the spatial studies in Hungary. First of all, though, he is remembered as a highly empathic and warm person, proud of his own country, city and family, but, at the very same time, exceptionally open to contacts with people from around the world. His interest in the collaborators and scientific partners was sincere and authentic. During the consecutive meetings he always remembered the previous talks, including, in particular, numerous details, concerning the private life of the interlocutor. He would always ask, not only of the new publications, but also of the family and private matters.

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I got personally acquainted with Bálint Csatári when being still a young researcher at the Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization of the Polish Academy of Sciences, when I visited Hungary in the framework of the bilateral exchange in 1993. Since that time we met many times over during the seminars in Poland (Supraśl, Karpacz) and in Hungary (Mátraháza, Tokaj, Kecskemét), as well as on the occasion of individual visits and at the conferences in other countries. In the years 2002-2010 I managed jointly with him the common research projects.

Bálint Csatári had this faculty, having nowadays become rare, of conducting discussion in such a way that the results of professional scientific investigations were intermixed with own personal opinions and life experiences. These experiences were specific, proper for the inhabitant of the Great Hungarian Plain. I had the honour and pleasure of participating in many such discussions, extending over several hours. The participants of such discussions not only absorbed knowledge but could also ponder on the ability of associating professional career with private life. Further, they were inspired in their scientific work, being effectively convinced that international cooperation involves not only large-scale projects and grand theories, but also common empirical field studies and interpersonal relations. That is why I shall never forget the discussions we held, in particular, on the construction site of the first Hungarian motorways, in the caves of Tokaj, while climbing the peak of Mt. Śnieżka in Karkonosze Mts., in the inns (csárdas) of the Hungarian puszta steppe, during our wanderings across Białowieża Forest, and, of course, in the unforgettable setting of the library at the seat of the Centre of Regional Studies in Kecskemét. In the scenery of all these places Bálint Csatári shall always remain in the memory of his Polish friends, including my own.

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