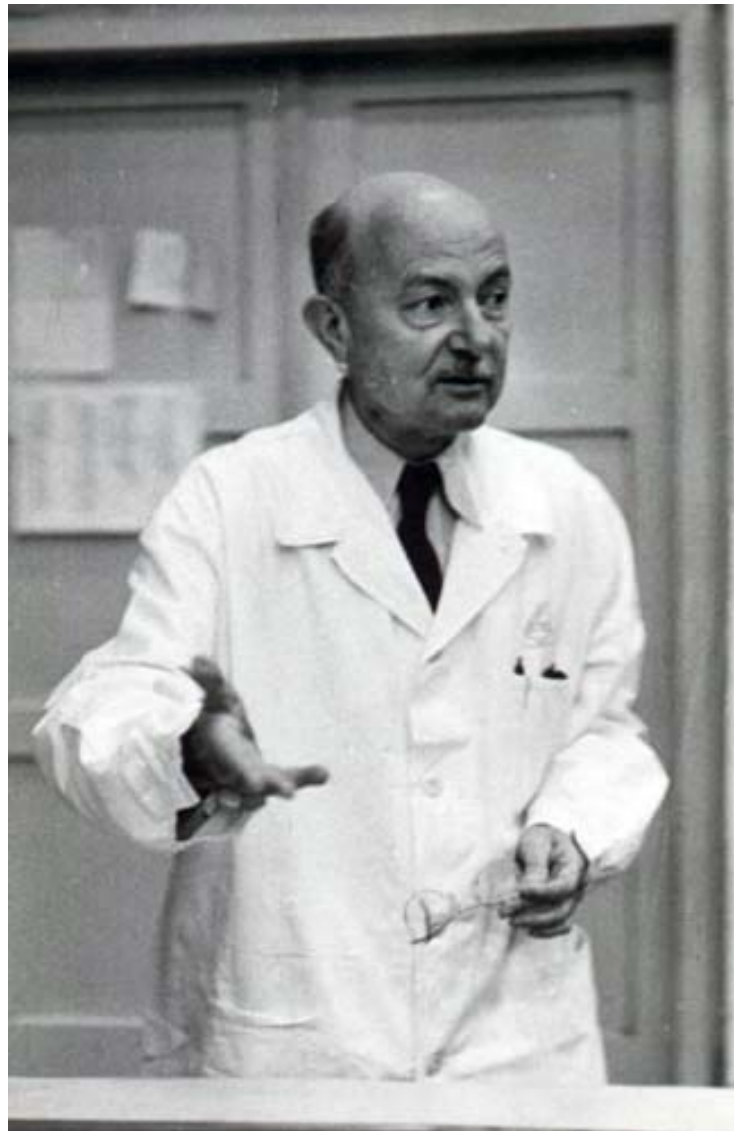


## Szilárd Donhoffer (1902-1999). Obituary

By Zoltán Szelényi



Szilárd Donhoffer. Giving a lecture (1960). Photo courtesy of Zoltán Szelényi

Professor Szilárd Donhoffer, the founder of the Department of Pathophysiology at the University Medical School of Pécs, died at the age of 97 on the 12th of January, 1999. He was born in Budapest in 1902 and studied medicine at the Pázmány-Péter University also in the capital of Hungary. He spent one semester at the University of Vienna as a medical student. In 1926 he took a job as a resident in internal medicine at the Erzsébet University of Pécs, an institution just settling down there after being dislocated from Bratislava (then called Pozsony) as a result of the Trianon Treatise closing the First World War. In 1931 he spent a year in the Department of Physiology at

the University of Aberdeen working under the leadership of Professor Macleod, a Nobel Laureate in Medicine. The next years found him in different positions in the Department of Internal Medicine at his home university, his main scientific interest being metabolic diseases and nutrition.

The Department of Pathophysiology at Pécs was founded by Professor Donhoffer in 1949. Based on his experience both in experimental medicine and in clinical practice, he was just the right person to establish not only the department itself but also the then burgeoning idea of a preclinical subject in the undergraduate medical curriculum aimed at bridging the gap between physiology and basic clinical disciplines, such as internal medicine and pediatrics. Some years later he wrote the textbook of *Pathophysiology*, the first one in that subject published not only in Hungarian but also in any other languages. This bulky volume continues to be the only one prepared by a single author at a very high standard.



Szilárd Donhoffer (ca.1965). Photo courtesy of Zoltán Szelényi

In the newly established department he was initially involved in experimental studies on nutrition, regulation of metabolic rate and food intake by thyroid hormones, goitrogens and the adrenals. Later papers of him dealt with the mechanism of hyperthermia, thermoregulatory effects of hypoxia, protein deficiency and food selection and were published in journals such as the *Experientia*, *Endocrinology*, *British Journal of Nutrition*, *Pflügers Archiv*, just to mention a few. In 1964 an additional report appeared from his laboratory in *Nature*, this time on the role of brown adipose tissue as a site of non-shivering thermogenesis in rats just a year after the discovery of this tissue in non-hibernating rodents.

Based on a long series of experiments he has arrived at the conclusion that the brain can be a site of cold-induced thermogenesis in homeothermic mammals, an idea not without opponents even in the present time. In fact, this was the topic of his monograph published in 1980 with the title "*Homeothermia of the brain*". The same year, largely thanks to his fame in the field, the Satellite Symposium on Thermal Physiology was organized by his co-workers at Pécs, he himself serving as the Honorary President of the Organizing Committee. His close collaborators were asked to edit a volume of the proceedings of that symposium (*Contributions to Thermal Physiology*) which was published by Pergamon Press.

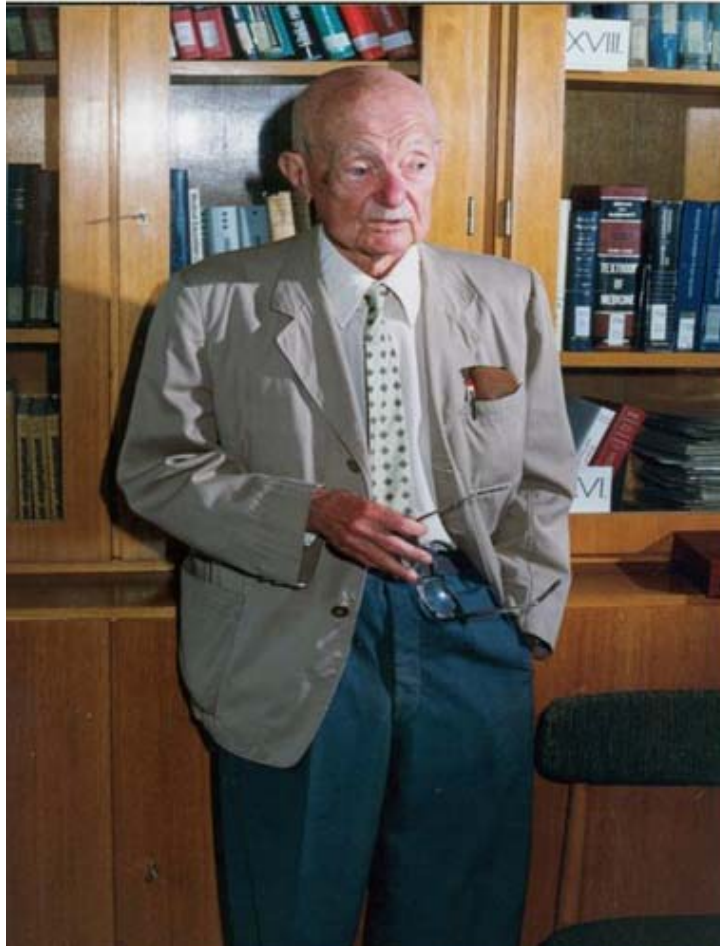
He was elected a Corresponding and later a Full Member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1964 and 1973, respectively. He served as the President of the Medical Section of this institution between 1973 and 1980. Scientists from foreign countries visiting our department from the 60's onwards have always paid tribute to him by discussing various issues either in English or in German; he was fluent in both languages since his early years. Up to three days before his death he continued to be active spending at least five hours every day of the week in his office, many times using the public transport to and from his home even under the harshest weather conditions.



Szilárd Donhoffer, passport photo (ca.1980). Photo courtesy of Zoltán Szelényi

Professor Donhoffer served as Vice-Rector and later (between 1964 and 1967) Rector of the University Medical School of Pécs. Among others, he received the Kossuth-Prize in the 60's, the highest award given for scientific achievements in Hungary, and the Honoris Causa Doctorate at his home university in 1996. He was among the founding fathers of the Hungarian Physiological Society in 1931. As the head of the department, he was one of the very few professors of his time who did his best – and was successful at that – in sending his young co-workers to Western physiological centers during the era, when attending even a short symposium West of the Iron Curtain was in the realm of dreams or at least an extremely difficult task to achieve for various reasons.

He had a small vineyard on the outskirts of Pécs, where he used to care for his fruit trees and some vine-stocks mostly for the sake of physical activity and to have some fresh air after the long working hours spent in his laboratory and office. Another hobby of him was enjoying serious music, originally playing the cello himself and later listening to music, favoring compositions from the classical and romantic period. He has been survived by his beloved family: two daughters, both of them active scientists before their retirement, seven grand-children and thirteen great-grand children (their number increasing to 16 by the present time).



Dr. Donhoffer at his 90th birthday party. Library of the Department of Pathophysiology, University of Pécs Medical School, 1992. Photo courtesy of Zoltán Szelényi

Professor Szilárd Donhoffer's death has been a great loss for his former students, friends and colleagues all over the world. He will be remembered with great reverence by all who had the fortune to know him, a great personality leaving his impact in thermal physiology and pathophysiology as a scientist, teacher and also as an advisor in all matters of life. In either role he was famous of sharply criticizing everyone for inconsistencies of logic and for disregarding data gained from careful experimentation. In this regard let me quote from his collections of *Parerga* compiled during his last couple of years: "*The great tragedy of science - the slaying of a beautiful hypothesis by an ugly fact*" (T. H. Huxley).

November 1, 2009

Citation of this article (APA style):

Szelényi, Z. (1 Nov. 2009). *Szilárd Donhoffer (1902-1999). Obituary*. Retrieved from: <http://www.feverlab.net/pages/people/History.html>