

IN MEMORIAM  
LÁSZLÓ DRECHSLER  
(1929-1990)

László Drechsler, highly appreciated personality of international statistics, former Chairman of the International Association for Research in Income and Wealth died following a year-long, painful illness, on November 20, 1990.

His name and personality were known among statisticians all over the world, owing to his widespread and manifold activity in almost all fields of economic statistics, but especially those of national accounts, index numbers and international comparisons.

Drechsler attended university from 1948 to 1952 at the Budapest University of Economic Sciences (as a classmate of the author of this obituary). While still a student he became staff member of the Chair of Statistics, where he stayed for a few years after his diploma, before moving to the Central Statistical Office. He kept contact with the University as a lecturer and, later on as a half-time professor. His lectures as well as his textbooks were very popular, owing to his clearcut explanations, well selected examples and humour.

He was 32 when he submitted his Ph.D. thesis (i.e. its equivalent in Hungary) on the measurement of standard of living and 37 at the time of acquiring "Academic Doctorat Degree" (the highest qualification in Hungary). In the thesis he discusses the methodological issues of international comparisons of "value aggregates," written a few years *before* the launching of the UN International Comparison Project. The story goes back to the early sixties, when the CMEA undertook a large-scale project to compare the national income of the member (Eastern European) countries. Drechsler soon became one of the leading persons of this project; he took part in the development of the methodology as well as in the analysis of the first results. His thesis constituted a comprehensive description of and a reference book on all the statistical issues concerned with this topic.

In 1964 he joined the Statistical Division of UN/ECE in Geneva. As the functions of the Conference of European Statisticians developed, Drechsler's activities expanded. His term with ECE coincided with the 1968 revision of the SNA. This was the period for an "MPS born" expert to get acquainted with the SNA. Drechsler immediately recognized the importance of the coexistence of the two systems and similarities of the two. Hungarian readers became familiar with the SNA through his articles, especially his comprehensive presentation of the SNA which was shaped especially for people familiar with the MPS. He contributed largely to the development of the first SNA-type accounting system in an MPS-using country.

After a decade spent in Hungary as Deputy Director of the Institute for Economic Planning, he again joined the UN (1985-89), this time the Statistical Office at the Headquarters in New York. While he learned SNA during its former

revision, he continually promoted the ongoing review. Several drafts, discussion papers and reports were prepared (many of them without the author's name) orienting the discussion of experts, summarizing the stage of the work, confronting different views, proposing solutions etc. Participants in these discussions might remember, how often, at the stage of long debates when people were so exhausted that they did not know who is arguing and for what, László quietly said: "O.K., then I will try to summarize the views, for tomorrow." The next morning, when the meeting was resumed, a paper was distributed with the systematic arrangement of the questions, the possible answers, the pros and cons of all solutions. With this in hand, and after a short discussion participants were able to come to the optimal compromise.

His contribution to the present review of the SNA was manifold. He was especially active in classifying the relationship between the two accounting systems, SNA and MPS, the reconciliation in an earlier stage, and the integration later on as conceived by the UN Statistical Commission in 1989. Recently, he provided assistance to a number of countries in Eastern Europe interested in switching from MPS to SNA. Other focal points of his activity were the treatment of the banking sector, the nature of interests, the institutional classifications, the accounts at constant prices etc.

This last topic was especially important for him, as index numbers constituted one of the basic fields of his research and publications. His concern was economical rather than mathematical, i.e. he operated with the simple and calculable formulae like Laspeyres, Paasche, Fisher, Geary etc. on one hand, chain and fixed base procedures on the other. He developed the theory and praxis of the use of the various indices, in almost all fields of economic analysis, the means to improve the reliability of the indices and especially the creation of an integrated system of the various index numbers in the framework of the accounting system. He prepared—among other publications—the "Manual on National Accounts at Constant Prices."

As a matter of fact this deep knowledge of index theory and praxis lead him to the comparison of real values and purchasing power parities. His study "Weighting of Index Numbers in Multilateral International Comparisons" (*The Review of Income and Wealth*, March 1973) is one of the basic documents on this subject, a document which is referred to everywhere when issues of country-to-country indexes are discussed. In this field he went beyond the simple formulae, he pointed out undiscovered features of Geary-Khamis, Gerardi, EKS and other multilateral systems. Another major contribution was the completion of ICP Phase V especially as the linkage of regional results are concerned and the implementation of the worldwide programme of Phase VI. In this respect Drechsler, the highly appreciated theoretician proved his organizing ability. He was travelling all over the world, providing advisory service wherever necessary, teaching newcomers, establishing regional centers, etc. What a loss, that he could not bring to an end, either Phase V or the Handbook, especially necessary for future ICP producers!

His wide linguistic ability—perfect in English, French, German, Spanish, Russian and Czech, in addition to his native Hungarian—made him a qualified person to establish contact at any point in the world. He was even able to give

lectures in all these languages, and he was invited in a large number of countries to do so.

In 1981 at the Conference in Gouvieux (France) he was elected Chairman of the Association. During his term he managed the affairs of the IARIW in an especially efficient manner. In this period e.g. a special meeting was held between the biennial General Conferences. This meeting, convened in 1982 in Luxembourg, was devoted to the theoretical and practical issues of the purchasing power parities and the comparison of real values. The discussions resulted in the clarification of a large number of questions (the various aggregation systems; fixity issues; flexibility of results etc.) and had a far-reaching effect on the future development of ICP activity.

For a long time he was present at all the Conferences of the IARIW. He was always active in preparing papers, acting as a discussant and always ready for talk on any subject of national accounts, statistics, economy etc.

In private as well as professional life he was a gentle person with a lively sense of humour, tactful in dealings. He was called by his first name (difficult to pronounce for non-Hungarians), or "Laci" by his closest friends and colleagues. These friends are now making efforts to compile his bibliography. A very difficult task! He published in many countries, in many languages, some of his papers are anonymous (mainly those he submitted in his capacity of UN staff member), but we do hope it will be as complete as possible.

This short summary cannot do justice to László Drechsler's activities and achievements. These selected indications of his extraordinary career can perhaps show his productive and creative personality.

GYÖRGY SZILÁGYI

