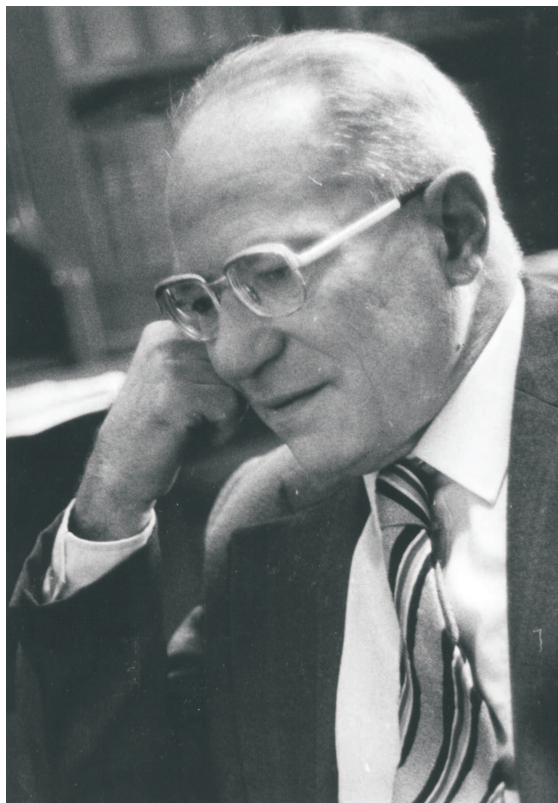




Béla Szőkefalvi-Nagy

1913 – 1998

Distinguished representative of Hungarian mathematics, world renowned doyen of operator theorists, Béla Szőkefalvi-Nagy passed away on December 21, 1998, at the age of 85. As a successor of Frigyes Riesz and Alfréd Haar, he guarded the spirit represented by the founders of the Szeged school of mathematics, and transferred it to future generations. He enriched several branches of mathematics, especially functional analysis, with fundamental achievements, contributing decisively to the development of the discipline.

Béla Szőkefalvi-Nagy was born on July 29, 1913, in Kolozsvár. His father, Gyula Szőkefalvi-Nagy was a professor of mathematics, his mother was a secondary school teacher, specialized in mathematics, physics and natural history. In 1929 his father, having lost his job in Kolozsvár, Romania, was invited to the Mathematics Department of the Teachers' Training College in Szeged, Hungary. Two years later Béla Szőkefalvi-Nagy started his university studies in mathematics and physics at the University of Szeged. As a university student he wrote his first articles in physics. However, he was deeply influenced by his professors of mathematics, Frigyes Riesz, Alfréd Haar and Béla Kerékjártó, and he wrote his PhD thesis on isomorphic function systems, a topic related to the research of Alfréd Haar. In 1937–38 he spent eight months in Leipzig, where van der Waerden and Heisenberg worked at that time. In the first semester of 1939 he continued his studies at the Universities of Grenoble and Paris, where — among others — he met Hadamard and Denjoy. In 1939, he was appointed to the Department of Mathematics of the Teachers' Training College in Szeged. In 1940 he became Privatdozent at the University of Szeged, and then in 1948 a full professor. First, he was the head of the Department of Descriptive Geometry, then he directed the Department of Analysis until his retirement in 1983.

His research embraced several fields of mathematics. He achieved significant results in the theory of Fourier series, in approximation theory, and in geometry. However, his major contributions were in functional analysis and operator theory. World-fame was brought to him by his treatise on Hilbert spaces “Spektraldarstellung linearer Transformationen des Hilbertschen Raumes”, published in 1942 in the *Ergebnisse* series of Springer Verlag. The monograph “Leçons d’analyse fonctionnelle”, written jointly with Frigyes Riesz, was published in 1952, and became a fundamental textbook of and reference in functional analysis, translated into six languages. His dilation theorem, proved in 1953, that interlinks general contractions of a Hilbert space with the well-understood unitary operators, is one of the highlights among the numerous results of Béla Szőkefalvi-Nagy. Starting from this theorem, he and Ciprian Foias developed a new branch of operator theory. They summarized their results in the monograph “Analyse harmonique des opérateurs de l’espace de Hilbert”, published in 1967.

The 167 scientific papers and the 3 monographs written by Béla Szőkefalvi-Nagy were the results of a profound research activity. He was an outstanding lecturer, characterized by a transparent, elegant style. He wrote textbooks on complex and on real analysis, the second one has an English translation. It was an honour and a real challenge to lecture on his weekly seminar, which was also frequently attended by many foreign visitors.

Acta Scientiarum Mathematicarum was launched by Alfréd Haar and Frigyes Riesz in 1922, after the university was moved from Kolozsvár to Szeged. Thanks to their dedication, it soon became a popular periodical with readers from all around the world. It was Béla Szőkefalvi-Nagy who, from 1946, continued the work of the founding editors. He was Editor-in-Chief until 1982, and after that an Honorary Editor-in-Chief until his death.

He was only in his early thirties when he was elected as corresponding member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1945. He became ordinary member in 1956. He was elected honorary member of the Soviet, Irish and Finnish Academies. He received the Lomonosov Gold Medal of the Soviet and the Gold Medal of the Hungarian Academies. He was presented the title of Doctor Honoris Causa by the Universities of Dresden, Turku, Bordeaux and Szeged. He served in many positions at the University of Szeged and at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He was a local patriot and at the same time a cosmopolite, protecting anxiously the environment. He was awarded the Grand Prize of the Foundation for Szeged in 1990, and in 1992 he became Honorary Citizen of Szeged.

He was a religious man, who loved his family and had raised six children with his wife. His human dignity, his firm belief in inner values rendered him one of the great personalities who affect us through their character and example. We preserve his teaching and his memory with reverence.

The Editors