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A life split in two:

(Re)discovering the story of the Ob-Ugrist László Knöpfler-Gombos

This paper aims to collect the available information about László Knöpfler-Gombos' life, with special attention to his role in assisting Bernát Munkácsi's study of the Mansi language. The main finding of the paper is the identification of the linguist László Knöpfler with the correspondent László Gombos, as well as bringing to light available archival materials and family memories concerning him and his linguistic career.

I. Introduction

László Knöpfler (born 16 February 1914 in Budapest) was a Hungarian linguist, especially interested in the study of the Mansi language. Only a narrow circle of specialists in Ob-Ugric studies are familiar with his name, after his paper on the word order of questions in Mansi. László Gombos (born 16 February 1914 in Budapest) was a Hungarian journalist and correspondent who worked for the Hungarian news agency MTI for 25 years. Only a narrow circle of specialists in the history of Hungarian journalism are familiar with his name, after the publications he edited in the field of political science. The present paper sets forth that these two persons are in fact identical. The life of László Knöpfler-Gombos (1914–1981) seems to be split into two disconnected parts. Those who remembered László Knöpfler the linguist, e.g. his *alma mater* in Budapest, apparently were unaware that he survived World War II. Those who knew László Gombos the journalist appear to have no information about his involvement in the history of Finno-Ugric studies and his close connection to its leading figures.

The present paper aims to collect the available information about László Knöpfler-Gombos's life, with special attention to his role in assisting Bernát Munkácsi's research into the Mansi language. As it was apparently Knöpfler-Gombos's ambition to become a linguist researching the Mansi language and to keep Munkácsi's memory alive, Knöpfler-Gombos's absence from the process of the editing and publication of the Mansi vocabulary based on Munkácsi's materials is striking. Because of this, the present paper also aims to find the possible reasons for why Knöpfler-Gombos's career as a linguist was interrupted.

The paper is based on publicly available, contemporary articles, memoirs, and documents, and also on unpublished manuscripts and letters to be found in the archives of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives, as well as in private collections. The Hungarian and Finnish quotations were translated into English by the author.

I am most grateful to László Fuchs, Dávid Fokos-Fuchs's son for sharing his memories about László Knöpfler. I am most grateful to András Sziklai, László

Knöpfler-Gombos's grandson for sharing his memories and the family relics that remained in his possession. I am most grateful to István Kozmács for suggesting the possible identity of László Knöpfler and László Gombos.

2. László Knöpfler, László Gombos

2.1. Early life

László Knöpfler was born on 16 February 1914 in Budapest to Norbert Knöpfler (16 December 1884, Lackenbach, Hungary – 5 January 1945, Budapest, Hungary) and Szeréna Krausz (Guszmán 1999). Little is known about his childhood. As a teenager, László Knöpfler together with his younger sister Magdolna enjoyed reading the children's weekly *Tündérvásár*, and at the age of twelve he even wrote a short poem about his enthusiasm for that periodical (*Margit néni postája...*). Knöpfler attended the Saint Stephen Secondary School for Sciences and Modern Languages between 1924 and 1932 and graduated with A's in German and history, while in the school-leaving exams he received satisfactory marks and compliment of merit for his diligent work in the student circle (Szent István Reálgimnázium 1932: 18, 53).

In 1932 László Knöpfler intended to start his studies at the Faculty of Arts of the Péter Pázmány University of Budapest, but his name was among the 280 applicants who were rejected by the institution¹ (*Nagy izgalom az egyetemeken...*). He therefore began attending the Franz Joseph University of Szeged in the 1932–1933 school year, where he was a classmate of the Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti² (Almanach 1933: 155). In the next school year Knöpfler was already enrolled as a student of the Faculty of Arts of the Péter Pázmány University of Budapest, with Hungarian, German, and French as his specialization. In 1937 he successfully defended his doctoral thesis, written on the subject of Finno-Ugric linguistics (Aranyi 1984), namely the syntax of the Mansi language (Schelken 1975).

1. This decision was supposedly the result of the law on the *numerus clausus*, introduced in Hungary in 1920, in order to maximise the overall ratio of students who had other than Hungarian ethnic background. The law did not explicitly mention Jews, but it was designed to limit Jewish students' access to tertiary education. The implementation of the law effected the entrance exams at the most popular faculties of the most popular universities, while other universities (especially those outside Budapest) still remained accessible to students of Jewish background.

2. Knöpfler and Radnóti certainly were not only fellow students but also friends. Knöpfler possessed a dedicated volume of Radnóti's book of poems *Járkálj csak, halálraitélt!*, published in 1936. The inscription translates "To László Gombos / sent cordially by / Miklós Radnóti / May 1940".

2.2. László Knöpfler in Cluj

No information is available on Knöpfler's life between 1937 and 1940. In 1940 he was appointed a teacher at the Jewish Secondary School for Boys of Cluj³ (Kolozsvár), probably with the help of Ödön Beke as indicated in a letter:⁴

Cluj, 22 November 1940

Deeply esteemed Professor,

I can't even tell you how happy I am, I love being here so much. In addition to the full number of lessons of those who are absent, even after their return, I am employed full-time, and I have been elected a regular teacher. The headmaster is really an extraordinary person, and I am already very attached to him and I feel that I can do a good job under his leadership.

I will always keep Professor's advice in mind and I will try to achieve scientific results during my stay here. Once again, I thank you with infinite gratitude for providing this great happiness to me with such creativity and kindness. With deep respect.

Dr. László Knöpfler

In 1940 Knöpfler started to teach Hungarian, French, and Latin (Antal 1941: 28), and the next year, after receiving his qualification,⁵ he was teaching German as well (Antal 1942: 20). Besides his educational tasks, he also directed school plays (Antal 1942: 17) and took part in social work and charity activities aiming to lessen the financial difficulties of the local Jewish community (Antal 1942: 16).

While working in Cluj, László Knöpfler married Anna Márta Porász on 26 January 1941 (Personal Column 1941). According to Knöpfler's report, his wife quickly became acquainted with Finno-Ugric studies herself, and she assisted her husband's academic work by typing up his articles.⁶

By this time László Knöpfler became a member of the Hungarian Linguistic Society, the La Fontaine Society (the association of Hungarian literary translators), the Hungary-Finland Society, the Hungarian Jewish Literary Society, the National Association of Jewish Teachers, a supporting member of the Petőfi Society, an associate of the journal *Magyar Nyelvőr* (Antal 1941: 32), the secretary of the La Fontaine Society, and a member of the cultural committee of the Neolog Jewish Congregation of Cluj (Antal 1942: 22).

3. Between 30 August 1940 and 11 October 1944, Cluj, officially Kolozsvár, along with the rest of Northern Transylvania, became part of Miklós Horthy's Hungary through the Second Vienna Award.

4. Letter from László Knöpfler to Ödön Beke. MTA KIK Kézirattár Ms 4787/94.

5. Letter from László Knöpfler to Ödön Beke. MTA KIK Kézirattár Ms 4787/95.

6. Letter from László Knöpfler to Ödön Beke. MTA KIK Kézirattár Ms 4787/96.

2.3. The Shoah

A study by Gidó and Sólyom reveals that the Jewish Secondary School tried to arrange Knöpfler's exemption, but despite having even the support of the school district's superintendent and of the lord lieutenant (*főispán*), the attempt remained unsuccessful. As a result, László Knöpfler was obliged to perform forced labor in 1944 (Gidó & Sólyom 2010: 15).

On 1 May 1944 Knöpfler had to move into the ghetto of Cluj, and soon he was deported to a concentration camp. Between 25 May and 6 June he was taken to Auschwitz, on 18 June 1944 he arrived in Dachau (Holocaust Survivors and Victims Database), on 23 January 1945 in Kaufering I, and he was liberated in the last days of April 1945 in Kaufering III (The Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names 1, 2) by the US Army, after thirteen months of imprisonment (Aranyi 1984).

Knöpfler's grandson, drawing on family memories, mentioned that after being liberated Knöpfler walked to the nearest train station,⁷ where he boarded a train and sat in a first-class compartment. In the compartment Knöpfler was approached by an angry conductor, who wanted to make him leave first class due to his dishevelled clothes, but Knöpfler explained his situation, and they spent the rest of the way having a discussion about French literature.

Knöpfler's wife Anna Márta Porász never returned to Hungary. She was last seen in Auschwitz (Personal Column 1945), and was declared missing from Ravensbrück in 1947 (Budapesti Központi Járásbíróság 1948).

László Knöpfler's return from deportation remained somewhat unnoticed as well, as his name is still mentioned among the victims of the Eötvös Loránd University both on site and online (ELTE Emlékhely), where Kaufering is mentioned as the place of his death while the year of his death is left missing.

2.4. After the Second World War

The exact date of Knöpfler changing his surname to Gombos cannot be documented. Although he published his first poem under the name László Knöpfler (Knöpfler 1934), he extensively used László Gombos as his pen name already before 1945. Although he appears under the name Gombos in every publication after 1945, in a certificate of citizenship issued by the Ministry of the Interior on 29 January 1946, he was still referred to as László Knöpfler.

After returning to Budapest Knöpfler tried to retrieve his prewar status. On 14 November 1945 he was named a secondary-school teacher by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Education and was appointed to the Jewish Secondary School for Boys of Budapest, where he remained employed until 1947 (Fuchs 1947: 23).

Between 1945 and 1948 Gombos also worked as a teacher at the Academy of Drama (Ilkei 2016: 40), and in 1947–1948 he served as the director of the Dormitory

7. The name of the train station was not mentioned, but most likely it was the station of Kaufering village, located 900 meters from the Kaufering III camp.

for Drama Students, too (*Vasárnap délelőtt...*). Also between 1945 and 1948 Gombos was employed by the Hungarian publishing houses Szikra and Atheneum as editor (Ilkei 2016: 40). In 1949 he was head of the Drama Department at the Hungarian film studio MAFILM, and in 1950 he worked for the arts journal *Színház és Mozi* as senior associate (Ilkei 2016: 40).

In 1950 Gombos married Éva Révész (Ilkei 2016: 40). They had one daughter, Zsuzsanna (*In memoriam...*) and one grandchild.

Starting from 1950, Gombos worked for the Hungarian news agency MTI (Ilkei 2016: 40). Initially he was employed as a reporter (Aranyi 1984), but in 1959 he became the shift manager of the department of foreign affairs (Ilkei 2016: 40), in 1967 foreign editor (*A Magyar ENSZ Társaság...*), and in the 1970s he worked as editor of the MTI periodical *A világ minden tájáról* (Aranyi 1984). He also served as MTI's resident correspondent in Cairo and in Bucharest. He retired in 1974.

As a reporter (Kenyeres 2001) Gombos made several excursions and study trips around the world, e.g. to Finland (*Világjárók klubja*), to Norway (*Magyar-norvég kulturális csereprogram...*), to Finnish Lapland (*Lappföldön jártam*), and to the Crimean Tatars (*Az Új Tükör...*). Gombos edited a number of publications on political science (Gombos 1962a, Gombos 1962b).

Gombos was also a noted translator, translating mostly from Russian (e.g. Trócsányi 1947, Siskov 1948, Triolet 1947), but also from English (Shaw 1947). He worked for theatres (more on this in Section 4) and even authored 25 radio plays (Aranyi 1984).

László Gombos died on 2 November 1981 in Budapest. He is buried in the Kozma Street Jewish Cemetery (DKA-022598).

2.5. Political views

Although before 1945 László Knöpfler mentioned having “engagements at the congregation”⁸ and colloquially referred to “the Good Lord” in his letters, no information is available about his religious beliefs. Correspondingly, while during his stay in Szeged he reportedly belonged to the group of *Szegedi Fiatalok Művészeti Kollégiuma* (Art College of Youth in Szeged) (Aranyi 1984), where some of the members had connections with the illegal communist movement, no information is available on Knöpfler's possible involvement.

The situation is different regarding László Gombos's political views after World War II. Gombos is reported to have been a party member since 1945, first of the MKP (Hungarian Communist Party), then of the MDP (Hungarian Working People's Party), and finally of the MSZMP (Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party) (Ilkei 2016: 40). On 7 November 1971 Gombos was awarded the gold grade of the Medal of Merit for Services to the Fatherland.

8. Letter from László Knöpfler to Ödön Beke. MTA KIK Kézirattár Ms 4787/93.

Although after 1945 Gombos was by all indications a Communist, or at least a convinced leftist, based on archival materials, he did not unconditionally obey the instructions of the Party. Before his assignment to Cairo, the state security services tried to recruit him, and although Gombos appeared to volunteer his services during the first interview, stating that his loyalty for the party and love for his country made him accept such collaboration, he later eventually cut off contact with the state security services. As a result of the threats he received for his refusal, he sought help from István Szirmai, the head of the Department of Agitation and Propaganda, causing a scandal that even reached Minister of the Interior Béla Biszku (Ilkei 2016: 37–46).

3. László Knöpfler-Gombos as a linguist

From 1936 László Knöpfler-Gombos regularly published articles in the Hungarian linguistics journal *Magyar Nyelvőr* (Rubinyi 1936), mostly about syntax and comparative-historical linguistics. From 3 December 1945 he held the position of the publisher of the journal,⁹ until his resignation on 21 February 1947.¹⁰

He authored a popular monograph on the history of the Hungarian language (Gombos 1948), both praised (Tersánszky 1948) and criticised (Deme 1949) by the contemporaries.

In 1947 he started to teach phonetics at the Hungarian Academy of Drama, being a pioneer of introducing audio (*A párisi Sorbonne-on...*) and video recordings (Varju 1948) to the training of actors and directors. As a specialist in applied phonetics, he participated in the dubbing of the first Hungarian-language film (Garai 1948), a Soviet work titled *Cruiser 'Varyag'* (*Szovjet film...*). The technical conditions were rather rudimentary, and also the original copy was destroyed over time, but with this film the history of Hungarian dubbing began (Szende 1976).

He became an honorary member of the Société de linguistique de Paris in 1947 (*A párisi Sorbonne-on...*).

9. Letter from Szikra Irodalmi és Lapkiadó Vállalat to Dávid Fokos-Fuchs. MTA KIK Kézirattár Ms 2500/340.

10. Letter from László Gombos to Dávid Fokos-Fuchs MTA KIK Kézirattár Ms 2499/129.

László Gombos was the first Hungarian linguist to mention and praise Marr's linguistic theory¹¹ in Hungary (Békés 1997: 219).¹² In his programmatic paper, Gombos argued for the importance of the research of social development, and he named linguistics, together with other disciplines of the social sciences, a tool for such research (Gombos 1946a). In the same article he promised to write a series of introductory papers, but he eventually published only the first part of the sequel (Gombos 1946c).

Gombos published a short summary of Marr's theory (Gombos 1946b), and in reviewing Marr's main claims he does not sound more consistent than other authors writing on the same subject. When discussing the significance of Marr's work, like other enthusiasts of Soviet influence, Gombos also mentions the enlightening role of the Soviet Union, and he repeats the obligatory motto concerning the end of pointless imitation of Indo-European linguistics, yet the content and style of his articles differ strongly from the tone of the Hungarian Marrist papers of 1949 and 1950. Gombos uses significantly less exaggerated adjectives, and completely absent from his writings are mentions of Marxism or the class struggle as well as contempt for bourgeois science. He does not condemn historical-comparative linguistics, nor does he attack linguistic schools, fields, or persons. Apparently, for him the most important element in the discussion of Marr's theory was liberation, the creation of equality, and the end of racial discrimination. He is convinced that languages represent equal value, thus they cannot be ranked (Gombos 1947a), and the Soviet culture acts "against the purposeful expression of discrimination, hatred, chauvinism, and racism" in the field of linguistics just as well as in the case of other disciplines (Gombos 1946c).

4. László Knöpfler-Gombos and Finnish culture

In 1936 László Knöpfler was awarded a copy of the deluxe edition of Béla Vikár's translation of the Finnish national epic *Kalevala* as a prize for a linguistic study he wrote¹³ (*Rados Gusztáv kapta...*). At the same event at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Knöpfler was introduced to the translator and literary organiser Béla Vikár

11. The Japhetic theory (colloquially also known as Marrism) formulated by the Soviet linguist Nikolay Yakovlevich Marr was popularised in the Soviet Union for political reasons. Theoretically Marrism postulated a development of originally independent languages, according to absolute laws, ultimately resulting in the creation of a universal human language. Methodologically Marr attempted to introduce the Marxist concepts of class struggle and class consciousness into linguistics, while ideologically he claimed to present a proletarian linguistics that would replace previous, allegedly bourgeois schools within linguistics, first and foremost comparative-historical linguistics. State support of the Japhetic theory ended with the publication of Stalin's paper titled "Marxism and Problems of Linguistics" in 1950, in which he condemned Marrism for being incorrect and non-Marxist (cf. Havas 2002). While Marrism was the leading theory of linguistics in the Soviet Union between 1933 and 1950, in Hungary support for it became mandatory only in 1949, only to then be rendered obsolete on account of Stalin's article the following year.

12. Gombos was not the first linguist to mention Marrism in Hungary, however. According to Békés (1997: 219), the first reference made to Marr's theory in Hungarian appeared in Lytkin's article, already in 1930 (Lytkin 1930).

13. The same prize was awarded to Ödön Lavotha, while György Lakó at the same event received the Kölber Sándor Memorial Award for his paper titled "A permi nyelvek szövégi magánhangzói".

(Aranyi 1984) and soon became his personal assistant and secretary, until Vikár's death (Schelken 1984, 1985).

In 1940, aiming to substitute the previous, deluxe edition of Vikár's translation of the *Kalevala*, which was expensive, the La Fontaine Society republished the translation in a three-volume low-cost edition. This new edition (Kalevala 1940) was edited (Balassa 1940) and annotated (Aranyi 1984) by László Knöpfler. This was the first occasion when Knöpfler used his future surname Gombos as his pen name (Antal 1941: 33).

Inspired by the *Kalevala*, Knöpfler wrote a theatre play titled *Lemminkäinen's Mother* (Gombos 1940). The play was premiered at the Hungarian Academy of Music on 31 March 1940, with the celebrated actress Piri Vaszary in the title role. The play later remained on stage as a matinee (*Kalevala-matiné...*).

In a letter to Ödön Beke,¹⁴ László Knöpfler mentions reading in the newspaper that his play was staged in Finland as well, and the same information is repeated in the Almanac of the Jewish Secondary School for Boys of Budapest (Antal 1941: 33), but no Finnish sources have yet been found to confirm this. Also limited information is available on Gombos's multiple travels to Finland (Schelken 1985).

5. Spreading knowledge about the Finno-Ugric peoples living in the Soviet Union

László Gombos wrote articles for the popular press about the situation of peoples speaking Finno-Ugric languages within Russia and later the Soviet Union. In the articles written before World War II, he mainly emphasised the relevance of research from the point of view of Hungarian prehistory (Gombos 1941), while after the war he also highlighted the reputed positive influence of the Soviet system on the life of the indigenous peoples, propagandistically quoting Lenin (Gombos 1947b) and Stalin (Gombos 1946d). He also gave public lectures on the culture of the Finno-Ugric peoples (*Népköltészet a Szovjetunióban...*).

6. László Knöpfler, the Ob-Ugrist

Besides acting as secretary to Béla Vikár, László Knöpfler established a close academic relationship with the renowned researcher of the Mansi language Bernát Munkácsi as well.

When I met Bernát Munkácsi, he was already living the life of an immortal hero in his apartment on Szondi Street. (...) No wonder that this second-year arts student felt butterflies in his stomach when he dared to knock uninvited on the door

14. Letter from László Knöpfler to Ödön Beke. MTA KIK Kézirattár Ms 4787/98.

of the apartment. I told Munkácsi that I had already been studying the Vogul language for two years and, knowing that, apart from the Finnish university professor Kannisto, he was the only living academic to visit the Vogul, I wanted to see him and to talk to him. He greeted me with the aloofness characteristic of thinking people, and initially I felt that he was perhaps a little suspicious. He got up from his desk, took a volume of the *Collection of Vogul Folk Poetry* from the bookshelf, tapped it on a random spot, and placed it in front of me to translate. I translated only a few lines. “Come over on Thursday, we’ll go to the Café Országház where I’ll introduce you to several other linguists,” he said. This is how I made the firm acquaintance of Bernát Munkácsi. We went together everywhere he turned: to cafés, to readings, to the Academy. I visited him regularly at his apartment. He taught me, we translated a lot of texts together, he talked about his field trips, his scientific thoughts, he took a stand against all the books and journals published at the time. (...) Bernát Munkácsi looked with concern on the sad reality that very few people dealt with our most national science, Hungarian linguistics. Someone should work with each of the Uralic languages, he kept insisting. (...) Kannisto and Ödön Beke convinced Munkácsi that, while he could work at full capacity in terms of his mental freshness, due to his advanced age he should hire a young linguist as an assistant to make up for his reduced energy. Thus, the manuscript of his Vogul dictionary could be brought to such a state that only the “technical” work and the editing had to be carried out. (Knöpfler 1937: 141–144)

The letter in which Kannisto suggested to Munkácsi to hire an assistant has not yet been discovered, but a letter by Kannisto dated 8 February 1935, congratulating Munkácsi on having László Knöpfler as his apprentice, is known:¹⁵

It is also very pleasant to hear that young Mr. Knöpfler, in connection with the publication of your Vogul studies, has had the opportunity to deepen his understanding of the Vogul language under your guidance. It is first and foremost a great fortune for him, but hopefully he will gradually become an even greater benefit and help to you in publishing your work as well.

Already the initial phase of Munkácsi’s and Knöpfler’s cooperation seems to have been rather cordial. The collection of Munkácsi’s correspondence deposited in the archives of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences includes three letters from Knöpfler:¹⁶ one postcard sent from the summer university organised in Graz (dated 31 July 1935), one postcard sent from his summer vacation at Lake Balaton (dated 17 July 1936), and one letter from the same location, one week later.

15. Letter from Artturi Kannisto to Bernát Munkácsi. MTA KIK Kézirattár Ms 10.276/gg.

16. Letters from László Knöpfler to Bernát Munkácsi. MTA KIK Kézirattár Ms 10.282/b.

Most esteemed Superintendent,

I was deeply moved by most esteemed Superintendent's kindness towards me that you have kindly answered my humble postcard. I am glad to hear that Superintendent's health is satisfactory.

Professors Zsoldos and Grószinger are on vacation here. We meet several times a day.

With God's help I will be at most esteemed Superintendent's apartment on Monday morning at half past nine in order to continue the work with renewed effort.

With the deepest respect:

László Knöpfler

B[alaton]szárszó, 29 July 1936¹⁷

Thanks to financial support from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, in the last years of Munkácsi's life he was able to officially employ Knöpfler as his assistant (Kálmán 1979: 124). According to Knöpfler's account, their collaboration in this period became more frequent and systematic:

Thanks to the elevated morals and benevolent understanding of my former university professors Miklós Zsirai, János Melich, and József Szinnyei, as well as the devotedness of the Academy, Munkácsi's wish, expressed at a meeting of the Linguistics Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, was met with a cordial reception. Recommended by Professor Zsirai for this task, I came into even closer contact with the Master, with whom we had now officially set the exact date of work. This unforgettable spiritual pleasure called "work" had been going on for a short time when the Master took to his bed and was hospitalised. Shortly thereafter we were already happily packing his manuscripts into a huge chest. He had asked for them. He wanted to work there too. (...) He worked with equal zeal on his Votyak manuscripts, with Dávid Fokos's assistance, and on the sorting of the Vogul dictionary tags, which we did together once a week. That's how I got to know his ideas, his way of editing, his wishes concerning the details of this work, which now, unfortunately, serve as a testament. (Knöpfler 1937: 141–144)

The fact that the story of such a close collaboration was not merely exaggerated by an idealistic young academic is supported by several details, the most remarkable of

17. Letter from László Knöpfler to Bernát Munkácsi. MTA KIK Kézirattár Ms 10.282/b.

which is the letter compiled by Bernát Munkácsi on the day of his death, written yet unsend, handed down to posterity in an envelope titled “*Munkácsi Bernát utolsó írása halála napján*” (Bernát Munkácsi’s last writing on the day of his death).¹⁸

Budapest, 21 September 1937

Dear Professor!

Due to unforeseen obstacles I have to postpone the work scheduled for tomorrow. I’ll be waiting for you on Thursday afternoon at half past five.

Best regards: B. M.

An equally memorable indicator of László Knöpfler’s devotion towards Munkácsi was the safeguarding of his master’s manuscript, entrusted to him, during the war, and especially the careful ensuring of the manuscript’s protection for the months that Knöpfler had to spend in the ghetto and in concentration camps.

László Knöpfler-Gombos often commemorated Bernát Munkácsi, both before and after the war. Besides publishing his funeral eulogy, he wrote other papers on Munkácsi’s life and work with the titles “*Ragyog a jávorszarvas*” – *Részlet egy Munkácsi-életrajzból*” (Shining elk: Fragment of a Munkácsi biography) and *Munkácsi Bernát vogulföldi útja* (Bernát Munkácsi’s journeys in the lands of the Vogul) (Bach 1943: 22).

He was not, however, involved in the editing and publishing of Munkácsi’s dictionary. The Mansi dictionary (Munkácsi & Kálmán 1986) was ultimately published by Béla Kálmán. The Hungarian Academy of Sciences appointed Kálmán to finalise the collection of Mansi lexical materials and to publish the dictionary (Kálmán 1955: 295) in 1949. In his reports about the process, Kálmán mentions that the extensive material from the Middle-Lozva dialect was arranged by Knöpfler (Kálmán 1955: 296). Kálmán also referred to the great number of errors in Knöpfler’s notes (Kálmán 1980: 297) compared to the notes made by Munkácsi, but since Munkácsi inspected Knöpfler’s notes, too, Kálmán regards them as authentic as well (Kálmán 1979: 124).

18. Letter from Bernát Munkácsi to László Knöpfler. Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives XIX_69_2_4_362; XIX_69_2_4_363. The majority of the letters in Munkácsi’s legacy relating to his academic correspondence were transferred to the archives of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, while some of his letters concerning sensitive topics or of special emotional significance, like this one, remained in the possession of his family in Hungary. These documents were, along with other items, bought by the Hungarian-Canadian businessman and philanthropist Peter Munk after the death of Bernát Munkácsi’s granddaughter Maja Munkácsi in 2013. Peter Munk (second cousin of Maja Munkácsi, as Peter Munk’s paternal grandfather Gábor Munk was Bernát Munkácsi’s younger brother) donated the legacy to the Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives. (*Apákról az utódokra...*)

7. The possible reasons behind the interruption of Knöpfler-Gombos's career as a linguist

We know nothing about young László Knöpfler's motivations for choosing an academic career, but he was surely devoted to the study of the Finno-Ugric languages if he already, as a second-year student, had sufficient knowledge of the Mansi language to convince Bernát Munkácsi to accept him as his private student, and later assistant. Although after the publication of his work on Mansi syntax (Knöpfler 1936) Knöpfler-Gombos made no major discoveries in the study of Mansi, he apparently remained interested in that language, as he was working on a paper about the passive voice in Mansi in 1941,¹⁹ and he occasionally mentioned Mansi in his scientific and non-scientific articles (e.g. Gombos 1946c: 141) after the war, too.

The existing correspondence indicates that László Knöpfler-Gombos maintained a personal acquaintance with other linguists, especially researchers of the Finno-Ugric languages. He was particularly close to Ödön Beke and Dávid Fokos-Fuchs,²⁰ who were not only Knöpfler-Gombos's academic mentors and later colleagues, but they also tried to contribute to the consolidation of Knöpfler-Gombos's financial situation by recommending him as an instructor for private students²¹ and mediating in his job applications. Knöpfler-Gombos also mentioned his first mentors, Béla Vikár and Bernát Munkácsi, with unaltered humble respect even in the last interviews he gave.

Although László Knöpfler-Gombos and Béla Kálmán were approximately of the same age, both had family connections to the same small Western Hungarian village of Lackenbach, and both attended the same department of the university, no information is available on Knöpfler-Gombos's possible relations with Béla Kálmán. While propagating Marrist theories, Knöpfler-Gombos did not take a position against Finno-Ugric studies in general, nor Finno-Ugric linguists in particular. Rather, he argued for a need to carry out synchronic research into the Finno-Ugric languages, with the help of fieldwork and taking social aspects into account, instead of mere "speculation over linguistic materials" (Gombos 1946a: 39). However, whatever understanding of Marr's theory Knöpfler-Gombos supported, he did not publish on the topic after 1947. That is, by the time Marrism had a monopoly over linguistics in Hungary, Knöpfler-Gombos did not participate in discussion of the theory. We have no information about his involvement in the persecution of Ödön Beke, Miklós Zsirai, György Lakó, and Béla Kálmán either, when on the occasion of an accusation launched against the Soviet Finno-Ugrist D. V. Bubrikh (Алатырев 1949), those four Finno-Ugrists were expected to issue a self-critical statement (Kálmán 1971) in which they condemned Finno-Ugric linguistics and committed themselves to Marr's theory.

19. Letter from László Knöpfler to Ödön Beke. MTA KIK Kézirattár Ms 4787/97.

20. The cordial friendship between László Knöpfler and Dávid Fokos-Fuchs was recalled by László Fuchs as well, who mentioned Knöpfler's frequent visits to their apartment, as well as their work together in editing *Magyar Nyelvőr*.

21. Letter from László Knöpfler to Ödön Beke. MTA KIK Kézirattár Ms 4787/93.

Among the existing records, memoirs, or correspondence no indication of any personal, professional, or ideological cause is found that would explain Knöpfler-Gombos's withdrawal from Finno-Ugric studies and linguistics in general. In his resignation letter written to Dávid Fokos-Fuchs, László Gombos mentions being extremely busy, and he expresses his hope that he "will effectively serve the cause of our science and progress in another way". He also wonders about his achievements, saying "I would be happy if I could have served the cause of *Magyar Nyelvőr*, the tradition of our great predecessors, such as Balassa, in any way and if I had done my best for *Magyar Nyelvőr*".²²

We have no information about Knöpfler-Gombos's appreciation by the community of linguists, either. Besides occasional citations of his papers, the only instance when he could have been mentioned would have been his entry in the Who's Who of Finno-Ugric studies, the *Finno-Ugric Biographical Lexicon* (Domokos 1990: 361), under the name Gombos (Knöpfler) László. Unfortunately, the article of his biography was not completed.

Thus, the true reasons behind the interruption of Knöpfler-Gombos's career as a linguist remain obscure.

8. Summary

There is certainly a reason behind László Knöpfler-Gombos' decision to interrupt his career as a linguist, thus abandoning everything that appeared to be the most important to him. It also probably demands explanation why his fellow linguists did not see a need to contact him, at least for making use of his expertise and knowledge during the work on the Mansi dictionary. In the absence of recollections by his contemporaries, the present article can only present the available, but still rather imperfect facts, while it cannot provide an explanation for them.

After the war, László Knöpfler-Gombos had a successful and interesting career as a correspondent, yet his motivation and interest in Ob-Ugric studies remained a promise that was never fulfilled. Besides being a devoted disciple and assistant for Bernát Munkácsi and other leading figures of Finno-Ugric linguistics, László Knöpfler-Gombos also must be remembered as a witness to the Silver Age of Ob-Ugric studies.

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22. Letter from László Gombos to Dávid Fokos-Fuchs MTA KIK Kézirattár Ms 2499/129.

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