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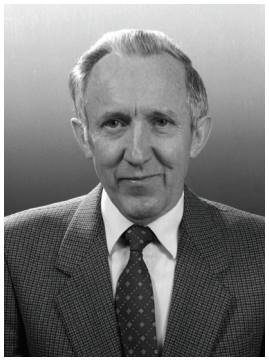
Obituary

PROF. JÓZSEF SUTKA
(1936–2010)



With the death of József Sutka, the Hungarian and international scientific community has lost a well-known and much honoured member.

József Sutka began his education in a small village school, but thanks to his outstanding diligence and ability he was granted a place at the best grammar school in the southern Hungarian city of Szeged, where he continued to make good progress. He started his university studies at the University of Agricultural Sciences in Gödöllő, but then obtained a scholarship to the Faculty of Biology and Soil Science of Leningrad University, where he received a first class degree in genetics in 1961. He also acquired a fluent knowledge of Russian, which he made good use of during his long years in the Martonvásár institute.

After obtaining his degree he worked in the Plant Breeding Department of Gödöllő University from 1961 to 1971, specialising in mutation genetics and breeding. After a few months in the newly established Biology Centre in Szeged, he started work in the Agricultural Research Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Martonvásár on May 1st 1972, becoming one of the founding members of the research staff engaged to work in the newly constructed phytotron.

He started work on wheat cytogenetics, a field then gaining momentum worldwide, and specialised in the development of monosomic series. In the course of this time-consuming, labour-intensive work he successfully developed complete monosomic series for two varieties. Later he developed numerous other basic genetic materials (substitutions, recombinant lines), which still form a valuable part of the Martonvásár Cereal Gene Bank. These lines are unique throughout the world and represent an irreplaceable treasure trove for future research on molecular genetics.

The results he achieved in genetic research on wheat frost tolerance laid the foundations of his international reputation. He was the first to determine that the most important gene for frost tolerance, Fr1, was located on chromosome

5A. This result, published in TAG in 1981 and since cited in almost 100 publications, was later confirmed by molecular genetic analysis. The basic genetic materials he developed provided an excellent foundation for the molecular mapping of the genes responsible for frost tolerance.

His scientific work was recognised in the granting of a university doctorate in 1964, a PhD in biology in 1970 and a DSc in 1989.

For József Sutka, research was more a hobby than a job. It was almost impossible to go into the phytotron in the evenings or at the weekend without finding him there. His exceptional attention to detail led to his visiting his frost tolerance experiments daily, frequently watering and caring for the plants himself. He was also extremely precise in his evaluation of the results. His whole attitude to his work set an excellent example to the next generation of scientists.

Thanks to his great knowledge and reputation for hard work, he was charged with a great many tasks over the years, all of which he completed conscientiously. For many years he was chairman of the Genetics Division of the Hungarian Society for Agricultural Sciences and of the Agriculture jury of the National Scientific Research Fund. Special mention should be made of his activities as the editor of the English language journal, Acta Agronomica Hungarica, from 1996 until 2004. With his characteristic enthusiasm and precision, he ensured that the journal was published regularly, at a high standard.

Right from the beginning, he took an active part in the teaching of cytogenetics, lecturing to both undergraduates and postgraduates, not only in Hungarian but also in English and Russian. He was co-author of eight sets of lecture notes on this subject. In recognition of his work in education, he was awarded the title of Honorary Professor in 1985 and was the recipient of the Pro Universitate medal in 1995.

His first book, entitled Cytogenetics, was published in 1980, and he was just able to finish the second, entitled Plant Cytogenetics, before his illness struck in 2004. These books were warmly received not only in Hungary but also abroad.

His love of teaching also made itself felt in his relationship with young scientists. He not only expected much of them, but also gave them great encouragement and showed his appreciation of their efforts. With his active support, several different projects were initiated in the Genetics Department, which have now developed into separate departments headed by Gábor Galiba (originally Wheat Genetics, now Plant Molecular Biology) and Márta Molnár-Láng (Department of Plant Genetic Resources), and a team headed by Géza Kovács (Cereal Gene Bank and Organic Breeding).

His prestige as an acknowledged expert in his field was indicated by the fact that he was elected to the governing bodies of numerous scientific organisations, including the Genetics Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Association of Hungarian Geneticists, and was also a member of the editorial committees of several scientific journals.