Otto von Sadovszky
1925 – 2004

PROFESSOR OF ANTHROPOLOGY, EMERITUS
Ph.L., Collegium Aloysianum, Italy; Ph.D., University of California, Los Angeles, 1970
California State University, Fullerton From 1970 To 1991
Birth: 1925; Death: May 2004

Otto was an exceptional scholar, a fine instructor as my daughter and many of our mutual
students reported, as well as an approachable and effective academic adviser for the
School of Humanities and Social Sciences. And, of course, he was my good friend.

I came to know Otto almost from the first days he joined the faculty. We learned of our
mutual experiences at UCLA, our research interests in American Indians, and the fact
that, yes, he was intrigued by my little bit of Hungarian via my maternal grandmother.
But then, and later, it was Otto’s keen and incisive evaluation of indigenous language
which I appreciated. So we regularly met and talked shop, so to speak. Otto’s research
interest in the Old World origins of Native American languages, as I best understood the
situation, was not well received by American linguistic anthropologists, thus he preferred
and was encouraged to publish overseas. Consequently, his publication record and
knowledge of the Indo-European and Ural-Altaic languages brought him considerable
esteem, but mainly in Europe.

Not many American linguistic scholars have shown much interest in the origins and
migrations of the parent languages of contemporary Native Americans. One such
example is the Penutian language group of Central California. Otto, as he related to me,
inadvertently discovered the link between these languages and the Ural-Altaic family.
He recounted his experiences when he first attended graduate school at U. C. Berkeley,
after earning degrees in Europe and coming to the states to study Sanskrit. He shared an
office with a fellow doctoral student in linguistics, whose desk was covered with pages of
material on the Miwok or Maidu Indians. Perusing these pages, he later asked her if he
was correct in identifying the meaning of countless words and phrases. He was told that
he was amazingly correct in a majority of instances, considering that he admitted to
having limited knowledge of American Indians. Otto, of course, natively spoke
Hungarian and had researched the languages of parts of western Asia, including Siberia.
This is the home-ground of the Ural-Altaic family of languages, and he had already
studied them, recognizing that many of these dialects related closely to Hungarian. Otto
ultimately relocated to UCLA in order to pursue doctoral studies in a more academically
supportive setting.

Once on the faculty at CSUF, Otto was able to arrange to visit Siberia as a guest of his
Russian counterparts. To my knowledge, he engaged in field trips at least twice among
local peoples along the Ob River and other waterways and locales, where he discovered
that the contemporary language of these communities not only related to Hungarian but to the Penutian languages of central California. He chose to identify them as the Ob-Ugrians, and the latter, the Cal-Ugrians.

In 1996, under the auspices of the Akademiai Kiadó (Budapest) and ISTOR (International Society for Trans-Oceanic Research, Los Angeles) – Otto was President and CEO of the U. S. group --, he published *The Discovery of California: A Cal-Ugrian Comparative Study*, which is a thorough-going linguistic analysis and historical and contemporary ethnography. Unfortunately, his book has not had wide distribution, so in 2002, I published a short paper that hopefully would draw more attention to his research of the migration history of this group of Native American languages. As I understand the academic perspective of linguistic study of Native America, evidence for marine migration is very limited compared to that overland via the Bering Straits land-bridge. In my estimation, this makes Otto’s findings all the more significant, considering that sea level changes virtually eliminated the possibility of recovering much of the ancient migrations along the North American west coast. Otto’s findings include archaeological as well as ethnological data to back up his linguistics findings. As one of his contemporaries told me, it may take another generation of interested scholars to recognize Otto’s contributions.

Selected publications:

*The Discovery of California: A Cal-Ugrian Comparative Study*, Istor 3 (Budapest and Los Angeles, 1996.)


Standing about six feet two, Hungarian born Otto von Sadovsky was a charismatic, imposing figure, often pacing the corridors of McCarthy hall in animated conversations with students and colleagues alike. Professor of anthropology and linguist, Sadovsky displayed grand theatrical gestures and an unusual command of several Romance, Germanic, and Finno-Ugric languages, all ensconced in a talent for storytelling. Dr. Sadovsky mesmerized generations of California State University students at Fullerton who, for decades, had the luck of landing in one of his classes. I was one such student. His enthusiasm for comparative historical linguistics was infectious, and I was fortunate enough to become one of his student assistants for my senior year in college. During that year Professor Sadovsky painstakingly taught us the rudimentary skills of comparative historical linguistics research. Dr. Sadovsky was very passionate about his work. His life’s work was a detailed comparative study of the languages and cultures of certain Uralic groups of Eurasia, and their apparent association with the languages and cultures of the Penutian Indians of Central California. He coined the term Cal-Ugrian to indicate the connection that he postulated between Asia and Central California (The Discovery of California: A Cal-Ugrian Comparative Study. Istor 3 Budapest. Akademiai Kiado. 1966.) Professor Sadovksy hypothesized that this circum-Pacific connection came about when migrants journeyed by boat from the Ob River delta in Siberia, along the coast of the Arctic Ocean, through the Bering Strait, and down along the North American west coast until they reached the San Francisco Bay area where they finally settled around 500 B.C.. In making their new home in the Bay area, Sadovsky believed, these migrants also established in the area, their language and their culture which they had brought along on their journey, including among other things, the know-how for making bows and arrows, as well as Siberian shamanism. In spite of the many differences of opinion surrounding his work, Professor Sadovksy’s enthusiasm for it remained unabated through the years. He will be best remembered by his students for the great passion that he felt towards it.

Submitted by
Angela Della Volpe
Dean, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, CSU,Fullerton

November 30, 2011
Dr. Sutton’s TRIBUTE seems to me to cover all the more important academic aspects of Otto’s career. As Imre points out, Otto gained relatively little recognition from the American linguistic “establishment.” This is quite remarkable, since Otto was the first American linguists to convincingly demonstrate a relationship between any Old World language and any New World language. He was already working on this research before he came to CSUF, and it was one of the main reasons we hired him. To put Otto’s findings in perspective, a number of other American linguists, including Edward Sapir, had suggested Old World-New World linguistic relationships – but none had been able to provide convincing empirical evidence that such relationships existed. Otto was able to do so.

As Angela Della Volpe, one of Otto’s former students says, he was an excellent and entertaining teacher. On his long and difficult journey from a Hungry under the control of the Communist Party, he spent some time working in the Italian film industry, which probably partially influenced his teaching style. To my knowledge he was the only anthropology faculty member who sometimes sang in class.

Submitted by

Richard See
Associate Professor of Anthropology, Emeritus

November 30, 2011