

BÉLA CSEJTEY 1934–2012

Béla Csejtey, Jr., a friend for four decades, died at Stanford Hospital on January 26, 2012. It was his 78th birthday. For over a decade he doggedly fought lymphoma, and despite several close calls, exceeded by many years his doctor's expectation for him. "But," Béla quipped, "much of my life has been close calls."

Born in Budapest on the verge of WWII, struggling to grow up under wartime privations, injured during an allied bombing raid, dodging the Soviet tanks of 1956, and walking into Austria with his family one dark night, constituted "Perfect training for Alaskan fieldwork," he would say



Some of Béla's secondary education in Hungary was *sub rosa* because the family's anti-communist beliefs limited the schools he could attend. Several priests recognized Béla's potential and were able to fill most of the gaps. Among his interests were the rocks and minerals of the Carpathians, so it followed that once in the U.S. and having gained some facility with English, he sought a geological education.

What sent Béla knocking on the door of Princeton's Harry Hess is unknown, however; better remembered is the warm conversation they had including a specimen quiz that featured the usual "I don't know either" rock. Princeton accepted Béla into its graduate program despite having lost all proof of his studies in Budapest. In 1962 he won a doctoral degree involving a thesis directed by John C. Maxwell on the structural geology and petrology in the Flint Creek Range of Montana. For the rest of his life Béla loved saying he had only one degree, "But it is a PhD from Princeton."

At nearby Rutgers, the new Dr. Csejtey got a job with Fiorenzo Ugolini who was studying polar soil-forming processes in Antarctica's McMurdo Dry Valleys. Béla was there in the austral summer of 1962–63, and as it happened he and Art Ford met then, sharing a double-decker bed in the McMurdo Jamesway "Vermin Villa." They went on to their field sites, but 10 years later found them both in the U.S. Geological Survey's Alaskan Branch in Menlo Park.

Béla distinguished himself in Antarctica by his diligence but also by his courage, rescuing the pilot from helicopter wreckage at his Dry Valley tent camp, for which he was cited by the Navy for this heroism. Later the Board on Geographic Names awarded “Mount Csejtey” in the Geologists Range in his honor. Béla, as the first native Hungarian scientist in Antarctica, was sponsored by the U.S. in an Academy-to-Academy exchange with Hungary. He lectured widely on the geology of Antarctica.

Béla found his way to the USGS in 1966, after two and one half years with Richfield Oil working on the LA Basin. After the requisite two quadrangles in Kentucky, Béla was transferred to Menlo Park where he joined Bill Patton’s project mapping St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea, mid-way between the U.S. and the USSR. After the St. Lawrence years, Béla worked at many places in Alaska but eventually settled into his career’s focus on the rugged central Alaskan Range in the vicinity of Denali National Park.

Primarily Béla was preparing 1:250,000-scale geologic maps. The terrain required helicopter support — always in short supply — and the project areas were so big that only a fraction of the exposures could be examined. Béla’s working method was to get intense, thorough, and precise observations at selected points, later to be woven into a map through photogeology, comparative petrography, and an extensive knowledge of the paradigms of structural geology and tectonics. The strategy probably owes much to Béla’s years with Bill Patton. He was also successful in bringing guest specialists from many branches of the Survey into his projects. People enjoyed the experience because of the magnificent terrain, as well as Béla’s complex personality, spirited geniality, and relentless courtesy.

During the span of Béla’s career, sweeping interpretations of Alaska tectonics were rife, many owing much to topography, binoculars, old geologic maps, and wide scattering of observations. Although he might cloak it in pleniloquent politesse, Béla did not shy from controversy. Over the years he was particularly aroused by (1) overuse of the terrane concept, (2) the widespread acceptance of oroclinal bending and rotation of the Alaska Range, and (3) belief in the large separation and through-going nature of the Denali Fault (for which he preferred the “so-called Denali Fault”).

Conventional wisdom on the Denali Fault is that it arcs 1900 km. across the whole State with hundreds of kilometers of right-lateral displacement. In Denali National Park, although mostly concealed by glaciers and surficial deposits, the fault was mapped in Gunsight Pass where it separated dark metamorphic rocks on the south from white granite

on the north. A week of fieldwork in Gunsight Pass by Béla and his colleagues, however, showed the prominent contact to be the intrusion of the white granite into metamorphic country rock. It was not a fault. Although the Denali Fault was well defined to the east, Béla believed that as it approached the apex of the Alaska "orocline" it splayed into a number of other faults but did not continue into western Alaska. His view has been controversial.

Béla was widely respected for his brilliant and cultured mind, his diligence, and his sound knowledge of his profession. He held opinions strongly and defended them ably. He was kind to many and a great companion in the field as well as in the pub.

Art Ford, Tom Ovenshine, Warren Yeend,
Mike Diggles, Chet Wrucke