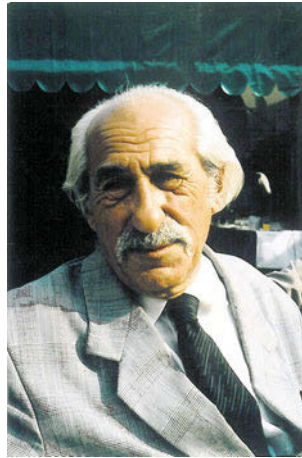


## **In Memoriam István Szamák** **(1920–2010)**



István Szamák, a member of the grand plant breeders' generation, who worked together with the pioneers of the Hungarian plant breeding, passed away 25 September 2010. Until his death he kept close contacts with the Hungarian and Slovakian breeders as well, and he had fruitful relations to the breeders' communities of both countries. Until his retirement in 1993, he had been engaged in breeding various crops for 50 years. However, his love was bread wheat, the name of which meant "Life" in the ancient Hungarian language.

István Szamák was born 17 July 1920 in Pozsony, Hungary (now Bratislava, Slovakia) in a Lutheran Hungarian family. His father was a physician. After the studies at the secondary school, he wanted to enroll in the university in Prague and to take up biology and chemistry. It was in the era preceding World War II, and he chose to study in Agricultural School, Mosonmagyaróvár, Hungary that hosted one of the oldest agricultural colleges on the Continent (1938–1941). After graduating there, he continued his studies at Komenský University in Bratislava where he widened his knowledge in biology and chemistry. He got his first and last position as a breeder in Sladkovicovo (Diószeg) where a famous private breeding firm was situated, connected to a sugar factory.

He learned from well-known masters like Ferenc Gruber, a grass breeder in Mosonmagyaróvár, Béla Friedrich, who was the founder of the famous Martonvásár Research Institute and Lajos Veeny, the plant breeder in Trychove Myto (Sóssziget). István Szamák wrote about these three breeders in a letter as follows:

*Why am I incredibly thankful to these people? Ferenc Gruber was always righteous, his opinion being always frank and his criticism severe but amiable; he loved his country and had infinite working capacity. In Béla Friedrich, the affection for biology was connected with the endeavour to find new technical solutions to mechanize the breeding*

*work. Lajos Veneny was passionately fond of books and arts. He was collecting reserves from the nut trees along the roads for years. He swam in the small Danube till November and adored the variability of populations. When quantity was the mainstream, he preferred quality.*

The Sladkovicovo Plant Breeding Station was one of the largest in Czechoslovakia. After reorganization, 50 plant species were treated there, which were later passed and distributed among 17 smaller breeding stations. In the early stage of his breeding career, he worked mainly with grasses, barley, and maize but from 1960s he invested more and more energy in wheat breeding, which became his main activity. He made more than 10,000 new wheat combinations by crossing the chosen parents, but he kept only the awned variants. As Czechoslovakia wanted to meet its cereal needs from domestic resources, the corresponding research funds were granted. The varieties resulting from the program were outstanding and gradually superseded the Yugoslavian and Soviet wheats. His first successful variety was Kosutka (1981) with excellent baking quality, from the crosses of the old Kosutszka with Mexican and Belgian types. The second one was Livia, named after his wife, which was followed by the high yielding Sana. He preferred the awned wheats with large heads and high 1000-grain mass. He invested much effort to find the right crossing partner. On a large sheet of paper he had a list of possible parents with at least fifty recorded traits. He took heed that any disadvantage of one parent should be counterbalanced by the other parent. By the 1980s, Czechoslovakia achieved self-supplying status in wheat. For this successful work, Istvan Szamák together with the other Hungarian breeder, Menyhért Bartalos, received the highest state decoration, the Klement Gottwald Award. He initiated and boosted the Hungarian–Slovakian cooperation in wheat breeding and received the László Baross Award from the Cereal Research Institute, Szeged, Hungary. Whenever there was a chance, he visited the foreign breeding stations and institutes in Eastern Europe. He esteemed the “minor” possibilities that opened a window to the world in a time when the option to travel abroad was limited.

He spoke numerous languages; besides Hungarian and the Slavic languages, Finnish, Estonian, German, English, Spanish and learned the Lappish language, too. He had a library of several thousand books allocated in the corners of his flat.

He noted down as the motto of his life, “I am the pollen of the grass flower in the hand of the Almighty God. I am one of the 15 million Hungarians. My message for young breeders is, never to look at the hardness of life at present but collect knowledge and experience for the future.”

We have lost a remarkable and dedicated plant breeder and a selfless friend. His memory is held deep within our hearts. May he rest in peace.

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