

# Portrait

Dr. László Kerényi

By Márta Boros Horváth ©



*For many years our community has been wishing for and dreaming about a home of our own—a Hungarian House, where, among other things, our school could operate. Will this dream ever materialize? Who knows—unless the workings of the Almighty, a George Soros, a Charles Simonyi or other philanthropist come to our aid, as in the story below.*

Rich with an historical past, the tiny, picturesque village of Vörösberény, Hungary is governed by its larger, better-known neighbor, Balatonalmádi. Both settlements sit by the shores of the hugely popular resort area, Lake Balaton. In the early 1990s Vörösberény, due to the privatization process taking place in Hungary, found itself without a school. The three dilapidated buildings that housed the small village's school were returned to the local Catholic church. Going to school became a pitiful and intolerable experience for the children of Vörösberény.

The mayor of Balatonalmádi, Dr. László Kerényi, who is the son of a deceased teacher from this locality, considered it his mission that Vörösberény should have a new school. However, the four small towns that he governed did not have a combined budget large enough or a treasure chest rich enough to allow for the building of a new school. So the idea existed only as an unattainable dream in the mayor's heart.

In his youth Dr. Kerényi himself attended elementary school in Balatonalmádi. His high school years were spent in the Benedictine Prep School in Győr, followed by university studies in chemical engineering. He became a biochemical scientist and went on to work at the top neurological clinics of Hungary (Budapest, Pécs and Zalaegerszeg), gaining considerable recognition in the scientific community both in Hungary and abroad. One day, however, he was asked by his party to run for the position of mayor in his small home town, Balatonalmádi. Since he had deep roots in that community and had always appreciated the history of the area, he gave in to the popular demand. At the next election he won the position of mayor with the responsibility that went with the title. For a while he wore double hats, working part of the week as a scientist in Budapest and the rest as the mayor in his hometown, 110 km apart. As he put it, "The work, the task needed to be done and I gave all my energies to it." When he assessed the local needs and the state of his union, so to speak, he found himself face to face with the lack of an adequate school in Vörösberény.

Dr. Kerényi, who is now 66 years old, had a dear old teacher from his elementary school years who had moved to a city in western Hungary. His teacher will be 100 this year, a remarkable lady in full command of her mental capacities. The mayor and his teacher have kept in close touch through the years, and every time the mayor visited his family's grave site in the western town, he never missed to call on his old teacher. Dur-

ing one of these visits he mentioned to her how he'd love to build a school for Vörösberény, but there just wasn't enough money for it.

"How much money is needed?" asked the old lady, Miss Elza Brandeisz. Well, it was a large sum of money by any measure, some 400 million Ft, but the teacher announced with great confidence that he should stop worrying; the money would materialize. "Consider it done," she said. Here my story takes an interesting turn. Miss Elza, a Christian lady respected for her remarkable character, hid a total stranger, a Jewish woman, in her home in 1944 until the end of war. In this dangerous and heroic act, she protected this stranger from Nazi persecution. The Jewish woman's name was Elizabeth Soros. When Miss Elza heard of the mayor's dream, she immediately thought of the world-famous Hungarian-American philanthropist, George Soros, who—lo and behold—is the son of the above-mentioned Jewish woman, Elizabeth Soros.

To make my narrative short, the money did materialize, just as Miss Elza promised. The modern new school was built, even better than the mayor had pictured it in his wildest, most beautiful dreams. George Soros came to Vörösberény, and in a solemn but happy ceremony Miss Elza and Mr. Soros turned over the first lump of soil with their shovels and laid down the first bricks for the foundation of the new school. When in 2001 the second phases of construction were completed, a plaque went up on the school wall with the names of Miss Elza Brandeisz and Elizabeth Soros.

Ever since I heard this story from Balatonalmádi's three-times-elected former mayor, my mind keeps returning to the fascinating coincidence, fate, luck, faithfulness, heroism and humanity that made these people's lives intersect in such a beneficial way. I do not know whether it was happenstance that gave the children of Vörösberény a new school, or the generosity of a billionaire, or the mysterious hand of the Almighty. All I know is that our retired mayor, Dr. László Kerényi, no longer has to dream an unrealized dream. Instead, he can muse about the beautiful legacy that he was able to dedicate to his deceased father, a country teacher; to his former teacher, Miss Elza Brandeisz; to the people of Vörösberény and to its fortunate pupils.

The workings of the Almighty are marvelously mysterious. Perhaps someday our community will be blessed similarly.

