Word Count: 2,068

A Hungarian-American Architect Who Lived the American Dream

February 2025

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Leslie Szak (born László Szak, 1923, Budapest – 2025, New York) passed away on January 28, 2025. He would have turned 102 this year. A Holocaust survivor, he earned his architecture and master's degrees in Renaissance architecture from Budapest University of Technology in 1950, delayed by the Anti-Jewish Laws (1938–1942) and WWII. Two years after his graduation, he is already mentioned as the architect of a Budapest nursery for 44 children.

"*The Chain Bridge is long in Budapest, but compared to the Brooklyn Bridge, it's rather short.*" —In January 1957, László, his wife Elizabeth, and their baby daughter escaped Soviet-occupied Hungary following the defeat of the revolution that started on October 23, 1956. Their guide abandoned them near the Austrian border, fearing the baby's cries would get them caught, but they pressed on and reached Austria. After time in a refugee camp, they immigrated to the US, settling in Queens. Leslie praised Austria for its kindness to refugees. The 1956 exodus of 200,000 Hungarians, including 20,000 Jews was an irreparable loss for Hungary. Many of them settled down in the New York City suburbs.

Leslie began as a draftsman at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill in New York. In 1961, he joined Edward Durell Stone's firm. Later, he worked for Philip Johnson Architects, contributing to NYU's main library atrium. He lectured on architecture at City Colleges and NYIT (1962–1982). In 1980, he was elected to the New York Academy of Sciences. In a 1990 article, László Papp mentions Leslie among many other Hungarian-American architects and reveals that "a*fter the 1956 revolution, it became almost impossible to count those who continued their professional careers [in the U.S.] Just to mention those working in the largest New York firms: at the office of (…) I. M. Pei, Gábor Ács, István Botond, György Frank, Ervin Galántay, Ádám Krivátsy, Mimi Szántó, and Ilona Törley worked simultaneously. At Philip Johnson's firm, László Szak; with Ralph Walker, (…) Gábor Mertl and János Fóti; and*

alongside Wallace Harrison, the architect of the Lincoln Center and the UN headquarters, László Miskolczy and myself."

In August 2016, I arrived in New York as a visiting scholar, returned to academia after a decade in law, and met Karen Notovitz, Leslie's grandniece, on my flight. We talked during the nearly 10-hour overseas flight, bonded and felt like we had known each other forever. Later that year, in October, I met a date outside the Morgan Library who handed me a newspaper clipping: "*Tearing Down Tyranny in Budapest: In 1956, Hungarian Freedom Fighters Broadcast the Gettysburg Address*" by Gabor S. Boritt (WSJ, Oct. 24, 2016), marking the 60th anniversary of the 1956 revolution. This wonderful gift made me understand more profoundly that, as humans, we just want to be seen—we long for our existence and suffering to be recognized by at least one other person. And perhaps, this is even more true for Hungarians. As someone wrote recently in a review of the movie, The Brutalist, "*Being Hungarian is the greatest suffering in the world*." Perhaps, it comes with an extra layer of loneliness, a feeling of isolation, a feeling of being left behind when things get rough. And with a strong sense of individualism and directness.—I agree with Adrian Brody who said in a recent interview that these are traits New Yorkers and Hungarians have in common.

"*We meet and the angels sing…*" —I met Leslie in October 2019 at the Jewish Harvest Festival, Sukkot, in the Notovitz home in Great Neck, NY. After years abroad and a lot of time alone, the family gathering was unforgettable. I brought sweet Hungarian Tokaji, a rare late-harvest nectar (available in some upscale restaurants in Manhattan, too). Karen promptly introduced us, knowing Leslie would enjoy speaking Hungarian. His daughter, Adrienne, was there too. We shared a wonderful meal, Tokaji, and heartfelt conversations. Leslie was thrilled to have some Tokaji with the entire family. We talked for hours and exchanged phone numbers.

Leslie's kind and curious eyes reflected his passion for life, optimism and love for people—traits of his generation. Despite pain and hardship, he embraced every moment, finding joy in literature, music, fine arts, and architecture. I believe this was partly because Leslie and his generation survived some of the most horrendous periods in human history and strove to make the most of the time they were given.

After Sukkot, I telephoned Leslie weekly and visited him with Karen or her father, Joe. He shared his journey from escaping Hungary after the failed ’56 uprising against Soviet rule to settling in New York. Leslie told me about how he survived the Holocaust. His memories were also published in a local newspaper (Great Neck Record, June 28, 2001, pages 3 & 13). What struck me most was that Leslie never spoke with anger or resentment. He spoke about moments that were inhuman and dehumanizing but also about how those experiences deepened his appreciation for life.

Leslie’s life-changing moment came when he and six teens pulled up the floorboards and jumped from a moving train bound for a death camp—a decision requiring immense bravery. He felt that wherever the train was going, nothing good awaited them. He risked everything for a chance at survival, a choice that ensured his descendants’ existence. In Budapest, he found refuge in a Red Cross hospital and once hid among corpses to escape Arrow Cross raids (coming to power on October 15, 1944, by a coup backed by occupying German forces, these Hungarian Nazis committed terrible atrocities, predominantly against the remaining Jewish population in Budapest, until the liberation of the city by the Soviet Army in February 1945).

Understanding why Leslie stayed in Budapest after the Holocaust one must know more about his life before the war. He grew up in a country that had fully integrated and prospering Jewish communities by 1900. Jews identified as of Hungarian ethnicity for the purposes of the post-WWI peace settlement-related census. —And perhaps this is why later the Holocaust was a particularly severe blow to Hungarian Jews. After WWII, he met his great love—a Catholic woman who, with her mother, saved Jews (see here and in Newsday, Aug. 7, 1992). Leslie’s face would light up when talking about beautiful Budapest. The architecture of the city ultimately led him to study architecture.

After high school, he attended Budapest University of Technology, which was renowned for its high-quality education. Leslie once explained that after arriving in New York, he secured a job on his second day simply by mentioning his university background. He also shared with me his feelings about leaving Hungary. For 40 years after WWII, the country was under Soviet control. He once told me that he felt a little like he had betrayed his homeland by leaving when circumstances were so difficult. However, we discussed how, under the

circumstances, leaving was the best decision he could have made. Leslie loved the United States, his new homeland dearly.

During our weekly calls, we discussed music, architecture, literature, Greek mythology, the influence of the Mughal Empire on the UK and US political systems, and much more. His stories resonated with me, as I had studied many of the same topics while growing up in Hungary. One special memory is when Leslie gave me a book that was very dear to him. He told me that, unfortunately, no one in his family spoke Hungarian anymore, so he wanted me to have it, knowing that I would treasure it. The book, *The Tragedy of Man*, by Imre Madách, was published in 1922 and bound by his father, Andor Szak, a merchant and bookbinder, in 1923, the same year as Leslie was born.

Another unexpected gift from Leslie was a phonograph. One day, out of the blue, I received a package at my Manhattan apartment—a vinyl player. It was not easy to move it safely when I later relocated to the UK, but this gift was so special to me that I needed to keep it. I still have it in my living room, and whenever I play a record on it, I remember Leslie's kindness and feel his presence.

Leslie's friendship was invaluable during a stressful time when my UN contract was renewed every three months, and I was also working on my book. Our conversations put my struggles in perspective—I was privileged to study and work peacefully, unlike his generation, which endured war. He was overjoyed when I secured my permanent professorship at the University of Leeds in 2021, writing: "*Congratulations on getting a job at a professorship level. But 'döbbenet által a szív ere fagy' ('astonishment freezes the heart', a line from the Hungarian poet, János Arany)—is it possible that I will never see you again? Otherwise, I am very happy that they finally realize what a special person you are. Important to be recognized.*" Thankfully, I visited Leslie in early 2023 and spoke with him via video call in summer 2024 when Karen brought her new baby, Zelig, to meet him. He was as happy as a person could be despite the pain and difficulties of old age. His greatest sorrow was knowing that he will never again be able to visit Rome, his favorite city. —What a great thing to say close to the end of one's life!

Leslie loved his family above all. He spoke beautifully of his wife, took pride in his children and grandchildren, and found his greatest joy in their happiness. He made time for his family

daily after work. Once, he sent me a hilarious, self-drawn Christmas card. He wrote: "*Happiness is when one's thoughts, words, and actions are in harmony.*" I believe his secret to happiness was his love of beauty, devotion to family, and ability to lead a disciplined, moderate life.

Leslie and I were 57 years apart, yet our friendship felt timeless. He opened a door in time for me, and perhaps I did the same for him. I am grateful for his wisdom, our conversations, and the few cherished items he left me. Leslie was a wonderful person, a true survivor, and a lifelong role model, much like many of his generation. Knowing him has been one of the greatest blessings of my life. May his memory be a blessing.

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Footnotes

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