# GENIUS LOCI

# LASZLOVSZKY 60

edited by
Dóra Mérai
and
Ágnes Drosztmér, Kyra Lyublyanovics,
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ARCHAEOLINGUA

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# Table of contents

## Inhabiting the Landscape / Élet a tájban



## Busy Places / Nyüzsgő terek

## Layers of the Past / A múlt rétegei



## Objects beneath Our Feet / Tárgyak a föld alól

## Marking the Place / Helyek és jelek



## Heritage Sites, Sacred Places / Örökségi helyszínek, szent helyek

## Places of Memory / Az emlékezet helyei

# Borders and Crossings: A Jesuit Scientist in the Whirlwind of Enlightened Reform

László Kontler*

Eighteenth-century societies in the Habsburg lands, as elsewhere in Europe, were marked by distances and borders, socially, spatially, and otherwise. The cultural experience of the life worlds which they separated differed significantly. The traversability of the distances and the porosity of the borders were varied and changeable, subject to diverse influences from political interest and stratagem through economic growth or decline to the development of patterns and means of communication, and more. So were the opportunities for transgressing the borders and connecting the life worlds.

The astronomer Maximilian Hell (1720–1792) was born and raised in circumstances that, in spite of appearances, equipped him well for such transgressions. Apart from his university years in Vienna, the scenes of his life before his appointment as imperial and royal astronomer in 1755 were "borderlands": relatively recently captured and stabilized possessions of the Habsburg crown whose value for it derived from its recently conceived geopolitical interests and stakes in the region east of the River Leitha. In some sense thus peripheral, these scenes were by no means marginal. Hell's birthplace, Banska Štiavnica (Selmecbánya, Schemnitz), was key, too, and several of his family members were key figures in mining, a branch of industry that assumed strategic importance in the great power aspirations of the Habsburgs. The Society of Jesus, which offered unique opportunities for mobility and which Hell joined by family decision as a young adult, was firmly established there. In Transylvania, where he was active early in his career, the order was assigned a central role in the monarchy's "civilizing mission" – thus an excellent learning ground for developing skills of creative adjustment to varying, even contradictory, constraints and requirements.

Between these two stations, Hell could already ascertain how promising the combination of his descent, his Jesuit affiliation, and his scientific talents was during the years of his university studies in the imperial metropolis, where he first began to integrate into the intertwining patronage networks of aristocratic-governmental circles and the Society of Jesus during the 1740s. The firmness of this integration and intertwining is further underscored by his appointment a few years later as the first director of the new Imperial and Royal Observatory, the creation of which was central to the larger endeavor of the Habsburg government to raise the imperial seat to the status of a European scientific capital. Accepting this position was a major "crossing" for Hell, also holding out the possibility of more of the kind. Far from severing the ties binding him to the life worlds where he was active until then, he made strenuous efforts to channel whatever worthy scientific work he saw being pursued there into the broader circulations that now opened to him. Nevertheless, at the same time he was thrown into one far grander in scale, especially as regards access to the various strands of the contemporary ferment in cultural sensibility, intellectual orientation, political program, and patterns of communication: the European Enlightenment.

It is important to emphasize how unproblematic it was for the Viennese administration to enlist a member of the Society of Jesus in the service of its reform agenda just a few years before the demise or "end" of the order began with its expurgation from the Catholic states of the West, and less than two decades before its general suppression by the pope. The analysis of the circum-

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stances and the documents of the appointment, as well as the new state servant's subsequent manner of procedure, demonstrate that in this period the unity of purpose between him and the promoters of enlightened policies and institutions could hardly have been fuller. The pursuit of anti-superstitious and utilitarian ends via the production and dissemination of new knowledge prescribed to Hell in the instructions given to him, was consonant with age-old Jesuit priorities and practices and he proved to be highly ingenious and creative in exploiting the avenues and methods of knowledge circulation characteristic of the republic of letters at home and abroad in order to earn the much-desired recognition for his patrons as well as for himself, his faith, and his order. By the 1760s, his status as a truly cross-border character, constituting himself at the intersection of domestic and cosmopolitan scenes and shrinking the distances between them, had been sealed. The invitation of the Danish-Norwegian court to lead a prestigious expedition to the Arctic region for the observation of the 1769 transit of Venus was both an acknowledgement of this fact and stretched it to its limits.

Borders and distances are relevant notions to the interpretation of Hell's figure in regard of the substance of his scientific contributions, too. Two of the most memorable among these—both the outcome of his fieldwork in the North—were his calculation of the solar parallax, i.e., his preoccupation with inquiry into the fundamental unit of measurement of distance in the solar system, and determining the virtual proximity of human communities separated by physical distance in his studies of Sámi-Hungarian linguistic kinship. Together with his work in fields of knowledge as widely divergent as the northern lights, electricity, meteorology, magnetic healing, and others, they were supposed to establish his credentials as a universal man of science with an encompassing vision who, thanks to his firm attachment to the solid methods and principles characteristic of mathematics and mechanics (as against new-fangled approaches informed by the humanities and vitalism), is capable of bringing the study of all these fields to a shared platform. Fashioning himself in this role, Hell was self-assured, even self-conceited and occasionally arrogant, and his cross-disciplinary pretensions were met with perplexity and evoked a mixed response among fellow scholars. The latter continued to recognize his outstanding merits as a practical and theoretical astronomer, but also the limits of his larger claims as well as the eccentricity and unpleasantness of some of his reactions.

In this situation, Hell, more than at any time before, was in need of support from other centers of knowledge such as the Royal Danish Society of Sciences, of which he had become a member during the Arctic expedition or the Parisian Académie des Sciences, whose *membre correspondant* he had become far earlier. The underpinnings of such support, however, had either vanished altogether or became corroded. In Denmark, the coup by Struensee in late 1770, which wiped away the mighty ministers who had facilitated Hell's recruitment as a savant in service of their monarch, was followed less than a year and a half later by a nationally oriented, "anti-German" government reluctant to lend support to cosmopolitan and multinational scientific endeavors of the kind represented by Hell and his expedition. From the French side, the reasons for a lack of support and ultimately indifference from former allies such as Jerôme de Lalande were apparently more complex. The continuing support for Ruggiero Boscovich and the lack thereof vis-à-vis Hell at least goes to show that anti-Jesuit sentiments around the climax of the suppression of the order did not trump prestige based on scientific merits and good conduct according to the long-established informal rules of the republic of letters. Hell's late publication and over-aggressive support of his Venus transit observations from Vardø in the ensuing controversy over the solar parallax were an infringement of the latter.

The uneasiness, anxiety, impatience, and frustration that filters through not a few of Hell's utterances in his later life, however, arose not only from the apparent futility of some of his scholarly endeavors, but from changing tides on the Central European public scene. Hell's personal trajectory as a Jesuit man of science and state servant under successive Habsburg reform administrations in the mid- to the late eighteenth century puts the chronology of the Enlightenment in Central Europe into relief. If there was one border that Hell was consistently unwilling

to cross, it was the boundary of the Enlightenment in the guise under which it had arrived in the Habsburg realm during the later years of Maria Theresa and especially under Joseph II. Hell is a significant figure of science in the Age of Enlightenment and the European Enlightenment is crucial to understanding Hell, while he remained peripheral to the Enlightenment—not geographically as "periphery" is most often understood in Enlightenment studies, but in the sense of the Enlightenment as a "system." Hell *accessed* the Enlightenment and both benefited from it and enriched it as a highly proficient user and improver of the mechanisms, institutions, networks, and practices which its ideas fostered and sustained, without meaningfully *participating* in its intellectual and moral universe. In fact, he cultivated a principled hostility to some core values of the Enlightenment—for instance, religious toleration. The Enlightenment of the late 1740s to the 1760s was still congenial to an ambitious Jesuit man of science with its emphasis on improving the infrastructures of (especially higher) learning, besides beginning an overhaul of the economic foundations and administrative organization of the state. Hell does not even seem to have been bothered much by the step which underlined the unity of these three aspects of the incipient transformations: the establishment of Viennese *Polizeywissenschaft*, whose logic and the governmental modus operandi which it promoted pointed towards a program of eroding estate distinctions, including the ecclesiastical estate, of the kind implemented—gradually, with varying intensity and consistency—from about the time of Hell's northern adventure.

In spite of the shock of the papal suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773, neither was the change abrupt nor did it represent an existential threat to Hell and his personal status. Though he complained about the practical implications of the suppression of his order to the work routine of the observatory, his resentment was also based on barely explicit, but unmistakable, grounds of principle. Happiness in this world, even pursued by the means of modern knowledge practices, remained to him inseparable from happiness in the next one, indeed, he regarded the achievement of scientific goals, while in the strict sense subject to its own procedural rules, as still ultimately dependent on the perpetual manifestations of divine benevolence. If "happiness" was to be attained, it therefore seemed to him indispensable to preserve the constitution of His servants exactly as it existed in the Catholic church, including its scientifically most distinguished arm, the Jesuit Order. The lukewarm, non-committal disposition of the Habsburg leadership towards the suppression and its reconciliation with the papal verdict signaled to Hell a lack of commitment on the part of the government to the principle on which the services he was performing for it were founded.

For the first time in Hell's career, the boundaries of the "life worlds" in which he had negotiated his existence were simultaneously stiffened—what had been possible for a Jesuit until quite recently was no longer feasible for an ex-Jesuit, a new type in need of new strategies of accommodation. To make matters still worse, confirming in Hell the sense of abandonment by his superiors, the developments on the Viennese scene also nurtured an Enlightenment "from below," exposing him to personal attacks in his character as a former Jesuit, now left to his own resources in fighting the battles that ensued. Hell took up the challenge, not only in the ordinary and simple sense of undertaking the necessary combats before the public eye, but more generally and impressively by re-inventing the spaces around him and relocating himself across the newly conceived borders. A would-be Viennese academy of sciences, for which he drafted a plan at the request of the government in 1774, was envisioned as such a space—a virtual refuge for "ex-Jesuit science," more than just a consolation prize but perhaps genuine compensation for the loss of the bastions of Jesuit learning. The eventual failure of this project must have embittered him all the more a few years later upon witnessing the—true, ephemeral—flowering of institutions of academic sociability under the auspices of his most fervent critics, the Viennese freemasons. Even more striking was Hell's alternative to rekindling Jesuit science in the imperial center, now hopelessly submerged in heartless, calculative enlightened rationality: a Hungary dedicated to the rejuvenation of Catholic learning, with himself as the *spiritus movens* and the bridge—physically still situated in the Viennese hub of astronom-

ical activity in the Habsburg lands, but in a capacity not derived from his official position—between this space and the wider world. Eventually, he faltered. One reason was the largely imaginary character of this space and the other his miscalculating the chances of re-fashioning (rediscovering) himself as a patriotic *Hungarus* savant. Hell was blind to the powerful survival of an archaic—but by no means obsolete—set of ideas about national identity in a freshly conceived Hungarian Enlightenment (or Magyar national awakening), which had no patience for association with the "fish-smelly" Sámi which his linguistic ventures seemed to propose.

The figure of Hell connected local, imperial, and cosmopolitan spaces—real as well as symbolic ones—of producing scientific knowledge in eighteenth-century Europe. He moved with facility in and between life worlds of different scales, from the small-town environments of the Central European periphery, through the Catholic-Jesuit hierarchy, the courtly and government circles of imperial and royal capital cities, and the international republic of learning, to the hostile climate of the colonial North. On each of these scenes he made strenuous efforts, and managed to a remarkable extent, to exploit the range of opportunities they presented for becoming "successful." When the apparent continuity established through his person among these life worlds became fragmented, it seemed a realistic hope that he would be able to pay out the credit raised in some of them against the ones where a deficit had suddenly accumulated. In the interest of maintaining his positions he might even be said to have been working across the boundaries of distinct scientific fields. Eventually, what appears to be his attempt to maintain the continuity of his ends by "de-centering" the realm which had once bred him, but then abandoned him, turns out to have failed. Yet, his story is no less instructive for the fact that it was a failure; it reveals something about what men of science operating on multiple scales in early modern Europe may —or may not—have achieved by "negotiating knowledge" at times of imperial consolidation.