

Simon Papp, a Prominent Hungarian Petroleum Geologist: How to Run Exploration Projects from a Prison Cell

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Abstract

Simon Papp was born in Kapnikbanya, Transylvania, Hungary (now Capnic in Romania) in 1886. He attended university in Kolozsvár (now Cluj, Romania) and obtained a doctoral degree in geology, petrology, and physical geography. During the First World War he carried out and conducted intensive geologic surveys, field mapping, and subsurface geologic work in connection with the oil and gas prospecting of the Hungarian government.

His activity extended from Transylvania (eastern Hungary), upper (or northwest) Hungary (Egbesz, now Gbely in Slovakia), to Galicia (now shared by Poland and Ukraine). From 1920 to 1930 Papp was engaged by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and its subsidiaries (D'Arcy Exploration Company and Bitumen) as senior geologist, advising and finally as chief geologist. He worked for these companies in Yugoslavia, Albania, Turkey, Australia and New Guinea. At the end of 1932, Dr. Papp returned to Hungary and got engaged in exploration in Transdanubia, southwest Hungary. This prospecting work was very successful, resulting in the discovery of four oil fields with a total reserve of about 100 million bbl. His company was taken over by the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey and its name changed to Magyar-Amerikai Olajipari Rt. (MAORT). Dr. Papp was director and later vice-president and manager. He retired from this assignment at the end 1947, but was retained as consulting geologist by MAORT.

In 1948, after a study trip to the United States, Dr. Papp was arrested by the Communist state security in Hungary, allegedly because of sabotage and attempting to overthrow the Communist government. After being forced to "confess" he was sentenced to death but, probably due to worldwide protest by scientific associations, the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. As his exceptional knowledge of the petroleum industry was a major asset, the Communist political police arranged for him to continue his work from his prison cell. Not only was he asked to direct oil and gas exploration and production in Hungary, but he also had to provide expert opinion on raw material exploration projects the government was interested in to build heavy industry in Communist Hungary. He was finally released from prison in 1955 and lived in retirement until his death in 1970. His post-1948 exploration "carrier" sheds light on the anatomy of the communist regimes behind the Iron Curtain, which has been, unfortunately, unknown to the Western public even today.