



By Janet Mandelstam Photography by Steve Raymer

# DENIS SINOR

SCHOLAR WITH A DASH OF DERRING-DO!



HE NEVER PLANNED TO GROW OLD IN BLOOMINGTON. IN FACT, HE NEVER PLANNED TO COME TO BLOOMINGTON AT ALL. WIDELY ACKNOWLEDGED AS A LEADING EXPERT ON THE LANGUAGES AND CULTURES OF CENTRAL EURASIA, DENIS SINOR WAS CONTENTEDLY SETTLED IN ENGLAND IN 1961, TEACHING AND WRITING AT CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY.

But the world was changing outside the walls of academe. The Soviets had sent Sputnik into space four years earlier, and the United States belatedly came to the realization that there was an enormous gap in its knowledge of the republics that made up the Soviet Union. In response, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act to support the teaching of non-western languages. The plan was admirable, but there was a problem: a lack of qualified teachers.

Almost simultaneously Indiana University and Columbia University established programs in Uralic and Altaic languages—families of languages spoken from Eastern Europe to the Pacific—and approached Sinor about coming aboard. When IU made an offer, “I didn’t see any reason to go,” he recalled recently. “I thought, ‘What is Indiana University compared to Cambridge?’” Still, with a sabbatical coming up, he agreed to accept a visiting professorship. “I intended to stay one semester.”

But something unexpected happened to Sinor in Bloomington: “I fell in love with the place.”

And 47 years later he’s still here, still engaged in scholarly pursuits, a distinguished professor emeritus, recipient of the prestigious IU President’s Medal, and the man whom Vice President for International Affairs Patrick O’Meara calls “the pater familias of the whole field of Central Eurasian studies.”

Now 93, stooped under a wisp of white hair, his walk more shuffle than stride, Sinor lives and works in the house he built in the woods on Lampkins Ridge Road in 1963. A gracious and welcoming host with Old World manners, he has brewed a pot of Chinese tea and, with the late morning sun angling through the trees, he sips from a delicate china cup and slowly, softly tells the story of his life.

It is a life—both before and after that fateful 1961 invitation—of scholarship, intrigue, adventure, honors, and more than a dash of derring-do.

**“MY FRENCH PROFESSORS AND FRIENDS NEVER FORGOT THAT I PLAYED ‘LA MARSEILLAISE’ IN OCCUPIED PARIS.”**

**No degree**

The story begins in Budapest where Sinor was born in 1916 and educated by private tutors. “Before I graduated from high school I thought I would become an orientalist, without much idea of what that was,” he recalls. But with a less than sterling performance on a final exam, his application to the University of Budapest was rejected. It took the intervention of a family friend, who wrote a letter to the dean, for Sinor to be admitted in 1934. In the Oriental Studies department he took courses in Turkish, Mongol, and the languages of Central Asia. His teachers were top scholars in the field. “It was a splendid, ruthless Hungarian education, and I turned out to be quite good at it, though I never graduated. No degree.”

There may have been no degree, but there were fellowships aplenty. Sinor received a grant in 1937 to study old Turkic manuscripts at a library in Berlin. Then, with Europe on the verge of war, he went to Paris to study with Paul Pelliot, the leading scholar of Central Asian studies.

When World War II broke out, Sinor’s father, “a businessman who had absolutely no idea of what I was doing,” sent him a train ticket to come home to Budapest. “But he didn’t tell me to come home. I looked at the war, said it had nothing to do with me—Hungary was neutral—and I stayed in Paris with Pelliot.”

When the Germans occupied Paris in June 1940, residents of the city began streaming south. Among them was the head of the Hungarian Institute who asked Sinor, then 24, to take over as acting director. He was holding that position when, later in 1940, Hungary regained territory in Transylvania that it had lost during World War I.

“To celebrate, I gave a reception at the Institute,” Sinor recalls. “I invited professors and friends of the Institute, and, since it was impossible to invite both Germans and French, I opted for the French.” As part of the celebration, he played recordings of both the Hungarian national anthem and the French national anthem—even though the French anthem was strictly banned by the German occupiers. “It was very moving. My French professors and friends never forgot that I played ‘La Marseillaise’ in occupied Paris.”

Unfortunately, the Germans didn’t forget either. “And that,” says Sinor, “begins what you would call the resistance story.”

At the time, Sinor was living in a hotel that was taken over by a German unit. “I speak very good German, and I managed to convince them I was neutral and to let me stay in my room.” Not only did the Germans let him stay, he was allowed to move freely in their offices and soon learned that the unit was in charge of executions. With his fluency in the language, he was able to read their schedules and passed that information on to what he calls “my new friends” in the French resistance.

**To appear or disappear**

In 1942 he received a summons to appear at German Security. “I thought about whether to appear or disappear.” He showed up and was interrogated for four “unpleasant” hours, during which the playing of “La Marseillaise” surfaced. “I was declared ‘unreliable politically’—a dangerous classification—and got the hint from my interrogator that it was best to disappear.”

Recently married, Sinor and his new wife fled to the unoccupied south of France. Crossing illegally into the French “free zone,” they were immediately arrested. But thanks to a friend and his own ability “to talk myself out of it,” they were released and found refuge in a convent near Toulouse.

It was in Paris that Sinor says he “invented” the region that would come to be known as Central Eurasia, which he describes thusly: “Imagine Europe and Asia. Take away everything you know. And what you don’t know in the middle, that’s me.” And it was in Toulouse, in the south, at the Catholic University that he gave what likely was the first-ever course on Central Eurasia in 1942.

Sinor’s circumstances changed dramatically in 1943 when the Germans occupied the free zone in the south of France. Soldiers came to look for him in the convent. “They would have found me had I not left a week or two earlier,” he says.

With all of France now occupied, Sinor decided he and his family—which now included a child—would be safer in a big city, and they returned to Paris. “Everything was dangerous, and I had to live on something.” He found work selling, of all things, fur coats. “But where to sell them? And to whom? I had the idea I could sell them in two places. One was the brothels; the girls needed warm coats. The other was the hotels occupied by the German army.” At one of the hotels Sinor became friendly with German railroad workers. From there he was able to learn where the trains were going and what they were carrying—more valuable information to convey to his French friends “who didn’t like the Germans.”

When Paris was liberated in August 1944, Sinor had to make a choice: “Whether I should stay there and disappear into civilian life or join the French Army.” He joined the French Forces of the Interior, and his unit eventually became part of Charles de Gaulle’s Forces of Liberation. Sinor was with the French Army in Germany when the war ended and he was demobilized in September 1945.

Despite the perils of the war years, scholarship remained a constant in Sinor’s life. The furrier’s studio was near the library, and Sinor was able to work there and later to give lectures. “By the end of the war I was quite well-known and respected as a young scholar by professors in Paris.”

**Academia beckons**

Sinor’s pleasant post-war life of research, teaching, and writing took an unexpected turn in 1948 when a letter arrived offering him a position at Cambridge University. Foreshadowing events in the United States a decade later, the British government had recognized the need for greater knowledge of the non-western world. “The university established teaching posts in Chinese and Japanese,” Sinor says,



(top) Ice skating in Budapest at the age of “18 or 19.”  
Courtesy photo



(middle) In an undated photograph with his first wife and child in France.  
Courtesy photo

(bottom) Sinor in the French Army on leave in 1945.  
Courtesy photo



**DESPITE THE PERILS OF THE WAR YEARS, SCHOLARSHIP REMAINED A CONSTANT IN SINOR’S LIFE.**

“but when they looked at the map they found they didn’t have anybody in the field of Central Asia.” Cambridge, he says, “couldn’t care less that I didn’t have a degree.” The university gave him a master’s degree and made him a tenured member of the Oriental Studies department, where he introduced courses in Mongol, Altaic studies, and Hungarian studies. “I could have stayed there for the rest of my life.”

But just as the letter from Cambridge changed the course of his life in 1948, so did the offer from IU in 1961. Despite his plan

The infant Sinor with his older brother Ivan in Budapest.  
Courtesy photo





"I was never a communist myself," says Sinor, "but you can't do Central Eurasian studies without the Russians."

to spend only a semester in Bloomington, "within a few months I decided to stay," he says, "and I've been happy ever since. I had the feeling that possibilities are endless in the United States. It all depends on you; if you have an idea at IU, people will say 'do it.'"

And Sinor was full of ideas. While the National Defense Education Act supported only the teaching of language, "as soon as I arrived I began teaching the history and civilization of the peoples involved, and there was marvelous support at IU for that."

He also began importing scholars to teach in the Uralic and Altaic department he had created. And shortly after arriving, he convinced the U.S. Department of Education to fund what is now the Inner Asian and Uralic National Resource Center, the only one of its kind in the country, which he directed from 1963 to 1988. In 1967 he founded and directed the Asian Studies Research Institute, which was renamed the Denis Sinor Institute for Inner Asian Studies in honor of his 90th birthday in 2006.

As a teacher Sinor was "enthraling," says Elliot Sperling, a Tibetan specialist who arrived at IU as a graduate student in the late '70s and later became chair of the department. "He taught the course [The Mongols and Medieval Europe] like a narrative, and you were drawn in totally."

"...IF YOU HAVE AN IDEA AT IU, PEOPLE WILL SAY 'DO IT.'"

### A chair from the communists

The list of Sinor's accomplishments, fellowships, and awards could fill pages. In what is perhaps his most improbable feat, he secured from the communist government of Hungary funding for an endowed chair in Hungarian studies at IU. Then-IU President John Ryan provided matching funds and went to Budapest to sign the agreement. "It was 1979, the height of the Cold War," Sinor recalls, "and I know of no other example of a communist government providing an endowment to an American university."

Near the top of his list of accomplishments Sinor places his success integrating communist scholars into the mainstream of Altaic studies. "I was never a communist myself," he says, "but you can't do Central Eurasian studies without the Russians." In 1954 he brought to Cambridge 20 "splendid scholars," the first Soviet delegation to participate in an international congress on the humanities. He made his first trip to the Soviet Union in 1960 for another congress.

While living in Europe and the U.S., Sinor has traveled widely in Asia, from Afghanistan to Siberia to Inner and Outer Mongolia. In the 1980s, at the invitation of Pakistani tribes, he traveled overland from Pakistan to China on the famed Karakoram Highway and may have been the first American to do so. In 2004, at the age of 88, he stood at the North Pole. Offered the chance to visit the Pole aboard a Russian atomic icebreaker, Sinor signed on. "I've always been interested in the north, and I thought it would be fun," he says.

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By now what remains of the tea is cold and Sinor offers a brief tour of the house.

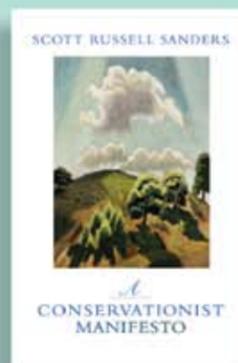
The kitchen reveals a bit of unexpected whimsy—shelf after shelf of cups and mugs adorned with roosters. "I'd had a rooster mug when I was a child," Sinor explains. During an illness in Hungary in 1970, he thought of that mug and asked his wife to bring him a rooster mug and some milk. "She couldn't find one, but she didn't forget and got one for me later." That was the start of a collection that numbers nearly 300 today.

In the library, books, including an entire shelf of his own works, line a wall from floor to ceiling. At one end of the room, with windows overlooking the woods, is the computer where he continues to edit the *Journal of Asian History* and two book series. Piles of papers mingle with photographs of grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Sinor came to Bloomington with his second wife, an Austrian countess. While he was charmed by the town, she was not, and she eventually returned to Vienna. Sinor later met Jean Trinajstic, who became chair of music education at IU. They were married for almost 30 years when she died suddenly in 1999 while attending a conference in Budapest. He has endowed the Jean Sinor Memorial Lecture Series at the Jacobs School of Music in her memory.

At 93, Denis Sinor has devoted 75 years to the study of Central Eurasia. Patrick O'Meara says, "Denis brings linguistic, historical, personal, and cultural knowledge to parts of the world that for so long were not seen as strategically important."

Those parts of the world are quite strategically important today. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, interest in the countries of Central Eurasia "has increased a hundred-fold," Sinor says. IU is perfectly situated to satisfy that growing interest. As the university's website proclaims: For Inner Asian and Central Eurasian Studies, "Professor Sinor's presence at Indiana University has made it the leading center in the world." ✨



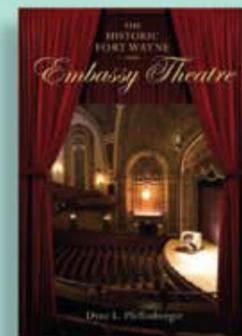
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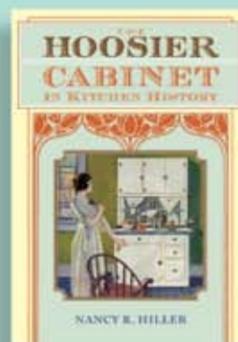
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