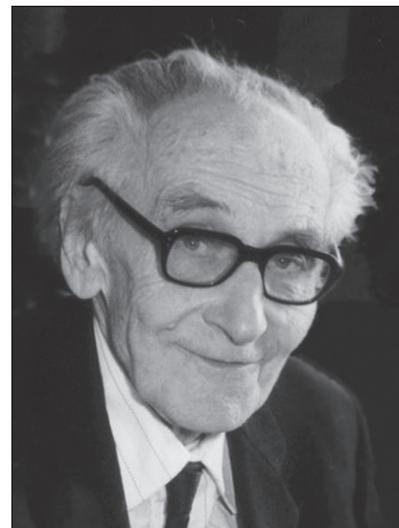


He graduated at the Faculty of Medicine in Debrecen in 1951. He specialized as internal specialist in 1955. He first worked in the Mathematical Research Institute of Budapest with Alfréd Rényi mathematician, then later in the library of the Hungarian Academy. His many fields of interest and expertise are illustrated by the fact that his works are related to the following fields of science (among others): history of medicine, history of science, history of mathematics, physics (and its history), history of literature, natural sciences, biology, general linguistics, history, history of culture, informatics, history of photography, genetics, history of encyclopedias, mechanics, chemistry, book publishing, ethnography, archeology, local history, geography, ecology, sculpture, history of libraries, history of reading, statistics, philosophy. He published more than five hundred essays on science and on popular science. His most important work is *The life of Galilei* (1998). He has received several awards after the change of regime.



László VEKERDI

(Hódmezővásárhely, July 21 1924 –)
Hungarian historian of science

Works:

- **Németh László alkotásai és vallomásai tükrében** (László Németh in the Mirror of his Works and Confessions) (1970)
- **Kalandozások a tudományok történetében** (Adventures in the History of Science) (1969)
- **Befejezetlen jelen** (Unfinished Present) (1971)
- **Így élt Newton** (The Life of Newton) (1977)
- **Európa születése. Európa a IV-XIII. században** (The Birth of Europe. Europe in the 4th–13th Centuries) (with Domokos Varga, 1977)
- **Tudás és tudomány** (Knowledge and Science). Typotex, Budapest, 1994. ISBN 963 7546 561
- **„A Tudománynak háza vagyon”** („Science has a Castle”) (1996)
- **A véges végtelen** (Finite Infinity) (with János Herczeg, Typotex, 1996, ISBN 978-963-7546-75-4)
- **Sorskérdések árnyékában – Kalandozások Németh László műhelyében** (In the Shadow of Crucial Questions – Adventures in the Atelier of László Németh) (1997, Új Forrás Könyvek, Tatabánya)
- **Így él Galilei (So lives Galilei)** (1998), Budapest, Typotex Kiadó. ISBN 963-7546-82-0)
- **A közértelmesség kapillárisai** (The Capillaries of Popular Intelligence) (2001)

Methodological peculiarities

So Lives Galilei, László Vekerdí's great book is a naturally polyphonic work. It is a biography of Galilei, detailing the life of the great master. But it is a novelty in Hungarian literature. Structurally, it consists of two parallel sectors. The first is a rather unusual biography, unlike any of its predecessors. If we want to call it novelistic, we must first explain this adjective. This part does contain a „biography” but it is much more a description of Galilei's thoughts and development. We might discover the results of Galilei's research activities, much more so than from other biographies. But what is more important is that we get a glimpse of Galilei's scientific problems, we might sense what is so special about his life at the beginning of the modern era. That a researcher must literally be a „businessman”, that he needs money to carry out important experiments, even if at the end of his life he only needs some peace and paper to be able to write „Discorsi...” and send it to Leiden from his Arcetribel prison.

The second part of *So Lives Galilei* is at least as interesting as the first. The first part is already an unconfusable Vekerdí piece. The second part of *So Lives Galilei* analyses how posteriority struggles with the gigantic heritage of „Edizione Nazionale”. Here we may witness the enormity of this heritage, as well as how the image of Galilei changes through historic eras, from contemporary literature to almost our time. And the explanations making up a separate part make it clear that his image will continue to change in the future: all historic ages select their favourite piece of the heritage. Then it tries to digest it, that is understand it, on the basis of the knowledge available. And of course it tries to reconstruct the logic of thinking, tries to understand it with the use of the intellectual means of late posteriority. It must not take us by surprise that Galilei's explanations have traits peculiar to Galilei, but also to the age of the interpreter. Vekerdí's great achievement is to show the ever-changing composition of the interpretation struggle that not only aims at deciding on (natural) philosophic identity but also on the specific course, objects and issues of Galilei's research.

Citation from *So lives Galilei*:

[...] The child played the lute brilliantly, then the piano as well. When he started to grow, his father took him to the monastery school of Vallombroso, near Florence. The child must have liked the calm life and all the music because he decided to be a novice, but his father wanted him to start a more prosperous career and quickly took him away from the monastery with the excuse that his eyesight was not good.¹ The young man learned and played music at home, then in the Autumn of 1581, his father inscribed him to the medical faculty of the university of Pisa.² At the time, even a mediocre doctor earned more than the most famous musician.

¹ Pio Paschini. *Vita e Opere di Galileo Galilei*. II. Edizione. Roma 1965 Casa Editrice Herder, 56—57. “I’m happy to hear that your Galileo is back with you”, Pio Paschini quotes from Muzio Tedaldi’s letter to Vincenzio dating from June 16, 1578. His noviceness, however, is unsure. “We must not forget, Paschini reminds us, that he was fourteen at the time; he could hardly be a novice then; it is true, however, that he might have been wearing monk’s clothes for a while.”

² Vincenzio had tried to get his son into some colleges before but without success. Paschini, 57—58. So when he inscribed his son to the university on 5 September 1581, he asked for Muzio Tedaldi’s help again. Drake, *At work*, 2.

But Galileo was not interested in medical studies. When the news spread, the worried Vincenzio – so the legend says – unexpectedly dropped in on Galileo to catch him at doing nothing. He was reassured to find his son deeply involved in reading. He did not notice, however, that Galileo was reading Euclid instead of Galen.³

³ According to another version, the suspicious father sneaked into his son’s room when he was away from home; but Galilei had carefully hidden Euclid and only left medical books on the table. *Vita scritta da Niccolo Gherardini*. EN XIX, 633—646, 637.

According to the schedule of medieval universities, doctors, theologians and lawyers all attended a preparation faculty, the so-called *facultas artium* before starting their specialized studies, and it was long believed that Galilei’s notes on Aristotle’s logic, physics and cosmology had stemmed from these courses. It turned out, however, that the notes most probably date from a much later period: Galilei copied them from printed and manuscript textbooks of Jesuit teachers when he started to work at the university of Pisa as a professor. This means that we do not know how Galilei spent his time as a student of medicine, apart from the medical studies he did not like. He probably played music, spent time with the other students and read a lot. Did he already start painting or did he only take to that hobby later, at the academy of drawing in Florence? His painter friend, Lodovico Cigoli used to say that he had learnt the tricks of perspective from Galilei, while Galilei himself once said that he should have chosen painting instead of science. Although this happened after his trial. Whatever the truth is, Galileo did not restrict himself to one single profession during his Pisa years, even if that profession was as interesting and multi-faceted as mathematics...

Interview

– At the beginning of the 1980s, I was asked to write about Galilei in the framework of a series on the history of science, intended for young people, with the title *The Life of...* I warned them that I would be writing it slowly because it is very difficult to talk about Galilei. There is an enormous amount of primary and secondary literature on the subject, and some of these are so exciting and interesting that the reader cannot avoid sinking deeper into them. I found it difficult to find my way out of them, I wrote with difficulties.

And suddenly, unexpected help arrived. In 1983, Pietro Redondi’s *Galileo eretico* (Galilei, the Heretic) was published in Turin. This book moved me deeply. When I read *Galileo eretico*, I immediately realised the striking similarities between 17th century Italy and Hungary of the 1980s. Italy was trying to reform Catholicism.

Redondi put his Galilei into this reformed Catholicism. He showed how something was being born within the Church, something opposed to strict dogmatism, seeking a more clever, more sober Catholicism. The best members of the Church were trying to find a place in this more human reformed Catholicism. They were looking for allies and Galilei became one of these allies. It turned out, however, that there is no chance for a reform. Catholicism proved to be unreformable at the time. And I suddenly realised that this is strikingly similar to our attempts at reforming Communism! (...)

What is extremely interesting is that it is precisely Galilei who is open to all these relevant images and ideologies. Galilei the heretic, the courtier, the Platonist, the anarchist, the rebellious craftsman... And all these images more or less fit Galilei... although only when the best authors form the image.

In my notes, I tried to rap contemporary Galilei-reserach on the nose. Of course I did not do it strongly, as these are all great people. Biagioli and Redondi are especially brilliant academics, great historians of science, at an unattainable distance from postmoderns. They wrote masterpieces, such as *Galileo eretico*.

This illustrates that even with a basically faulty perspective, we might be able to do something lasting. It may even be possible to lead good politics with a faulty perspective... I cannot state an example for this. But there are good examples of great books being the most dangerous ones.

I wanted to prove that Galilei was not a courtier. He was much more like the prophet Isaiah. And contemporary culture did not stem from court culture.

– Which is your image of Galilei among all these images? Which one is closest to you?

– All images of Galilei are close to me that have been written fairly and honestly professionally, humanly and stylistically. Even if I do not agree with it, it may be close to me. Do not take this as pluralism or tolerance. Politicians tend to use these stupid words. No, the integrity of the mind is not based on the same criteria as political integrity.

I do not have an image of Galilei. „You shall not make for yourself an idol” – says the scripture, and I, as a Calvinist turned into an atheist, somehow stick to this commandment. I have not tried to create, even less suggest any kind of image of Galilei in my book. I rather summed up all the different images. I think all of these images are faulty in a way. Why should I have an image of Galilei à la Vekerdí? I am not a historian, not a writer, not a scientist. I am just a...

– A simple librarian! We all know that. We also know that you are a historian, a writer and a scientist at the same time.

– No, no... You are biased. I am a simple librarian, looking at books, reviews, categorizations. I do not create images. I am aware of the fact that we cannot make authentic images of ourselves or others. It is like the tale of the sound that I cite several times in my book. We all follow in the footsteps of the man who tries to understand the secret of the sound. We know that we are on the wrong road but we still have to go all the way. But we can never say we have discovered the secret of the sound.

– Why is the title in the present tense: *So Lives Galilei*?

– There must be something in Galilei’s thinking, behaviour, attitude that is open to all these different images. Life lives in him with unbelievable energy. This man is alive. Never mind that he died blind and old. That is why the book is called *So Lives Galilei*.