

Engineer Varadi Ernest, a Resercher, Inventor and Polyhistor in Bihor County

*MAKAI Zoltan**

Abstract

In this paper the professional career of engineer Ernest Varadi (1910-1997) is presented. Engineer Ernest Varadi was employed almost all of his life at the Voivozi Mining Company, Derna sector, the local bituminous shale exploitation in Bihor County, Romania. He discovered a special oil named Polar Oil. He was a genuine researcher and inventor.

Keywords: bituminous shale, bituminous sand, Polar Oil, Ernest Varadi, chemistry and mining interdisciplinary research, psychological reactions to absolute tragedies marking the personal life.

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Introduction

The geographical characteristics of Bihor County allowed mining to appear here as well. Gold, copper and iron mining in the Băița, Vașcău area has been known since ancient times¹. In the last decades of the 19th century, as part of the general modernisation process promoted by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, geological prospecting discovered a rich area of bituminous sand and shale in the Derna-Tătăruși area. As a result, in 1874 began the exploitation and utilisation of this resource in the area. In 1880, the Magyar Aszfalt company was established and the processing of bituminous sand began in two factories in Derna and Tătăruși². Between 1908 and 1910 these two factories renewed their installations and machinery and became real refineries. They produce bitumen, asphalt board and mineral oils. Parallel with the exploitation and processing of bituminous sand, the exploitation of lignite developed in the Voivozi area. After nationalisation, all mining units in the area were taken over by the Voivozi Mining Company.

Let's stop for a moment at the Băița Bihor area. At the end of the First World War, the mining of molybdenum and bismuth are dominant in the Băița area. Between 1938 and 1939 the first molybdenum enrichment unit was built. Prospecting over the area revealed the existence of uranium in the Băița³ area as well.

Here, on this Bihorean land, began his professional activity engineer Varadi Ernest, who later became a renowned *bituminous shale* specialist; and remained here until his death.

¹ [Fodor '19] pp. 32, 35, 40, 44, 45; and [Ripoșan '19] pp. 63, 65.

² Mining in the present Bihor County at the end of the 19th century is presented in detail by K. Nagy Sándor in [Nagy '84].

³ https://fnme.ro/_files/Mineritul%20uranifer%20in%20Romania.pdf

Who was engineer Varadi Ernest?

Varadi Ernest⁴ was born on 15 February 1910 in Oradea to parents Edmund (Ödön) and Viorica-Reghina Taglict. His detailed biography was written by the professor and publicist Iosif Popa, who was a close friend of his⁵. His father was a leading lawyer of this city located on the river Crişul Repede. Varadi Ödön had been elected for more than three decades to the leadership of the Bar Association of Oradea, serving for many years as the president of the Bar. He served in the First World War and wrote the book of remembrance for the regiment in which he fought in the war. He finally reached the rank of Reserve Colonel.

His mother belonged to a wealthy noble family from Făgăraş. This family owned a thousand hectares of arable land and forests, a horse stud farm at Sâmbăta and a glass factory in Turda. During their marriage, the Varadis accumulated considerable wealth, including several premises in the central area of Oradea.

The young Varadi started his studies at the Jewish High School in Oradea and was a top student. After finishing high school, Ernest Varadi decided to study chemistry against his parents' wishes to pursue a career as an economist. This decision was based on the experience when the young Varadi participated in a high school chemistry competition and won first prize.

For higher education, he opted for the universities in Western Europe, especially Germany. Thus the young Varadi chose the Polytechnic Institute in Dresden, where he graduated in 1935 with a degree in chemical engineering and mineralogy. He returned to Oradea and married the only daughter of the well-known businessman of Oradea, Ullman Adolf. They had two sons together. The Ullmans lived in Oradea, in a representative palace built in the Secessionist style. This palace still exists today and is known to the people of Oradea as the Ullman Palace.

⁴ Ernest is the surname on the Romanian ID card and he was known by that name. The original surname is *Ernő*. *Varadi* is the name on the Romanian identity card and he was known by that name. The original name is *Váradi* and means "from Oradea".

⁵ [Pop '04] pp. 64-65.

Memories from youth

In an interview with Ms. Balla Tünde⁶, Varadi Ernest says: "My family has its roots in Transylvania since the 17th century. My grandfather was a teacher and wrote several books. A member of my family, dr. Huszar Ervin, was a Roman Catholic priest. In the last years of his life he lived in Budapest. I visited him several times and had the opportunity to discuss many different topics with him. I had a very pleasant childhood. My parents did everything for me. My father wanted me to become a lawyer, but I was not attracted by this profession. I started to fall in love with chemistry instead. I had even built a small laboratory where I did experiments. Do you know why I loved chemistry? Because it represents the essence of the exact sciences and the experiments are independent of human malevolence and stupidity!"

Starting life in production

After graduating from the Polytechnic Institute in Dresden, Varadi returns to Bihor and starts his professional activity in Băița. He first studies *molybdenum* ore and the radioactivity content of some minerals in the Apuseni Mountains. He sends samples to specialised laboratories in Germany and Switzerland. It was during this period that Ernest Varadi begins a fruitful collaboration with his former university colleagues, a partnership which continued for many years after the end of the war.

Transfer to Derna

In 1941, at the wish of his parents to be together during the war, he settled as an engineer at the Derna-Tătăruși⁷ mining operation in Bihor county. About this decision Varadi Ernest tells the following in the above mentioned interview: "For me it was a satisfaction that I was appreciated in Băița. We mined molybdenum and bismuth. Later we also discovered uranium. Since we did

⁶ *Interviu cu Varadi Ernest*: „Experiențele sunt independente de reaua voință a omului și de prostie” (Interview with Varadi Ernest : "Experiments are independent of human malevolence and stupidity"), by Balla Tünde, published in [Balla '98] pp. 65-68.

⁷ The area became part of Northern Transylvania taken over by Hungary.

not have a processing plant, we resorted only to uranium enrichment. After the Vienna Award⁸ my parents did not want us to live in two different countries⁹. So I decided to be transferred to Derna. Now I declare that I made a big mistake leaving Băița¹⁰. Since Germany had acquired the Molybdenum Preparation Plant¹¹ and needed specialists. They wanted me to return even though they knew I was Jewish. They also promised me a world passport. Unfortunately, my return to Derna did not save my parents from Auschwitz¹². Why did I not emigrate at an opportune moment? I did not want to leave my parents. If we look at the road we have travelled throughout our lives, we see that it is full of obstacles, crossroads and dead ends. Who knows where I would have ended up if I had emigrated?"

Engineer Varadi had worked as an engineer at Derna. Then, with the German occupation of Hungary and the installation of the Szálasi government, in the summer of 1944 he was sent to a labour detachment. This detachment was established in Tileagd, in a bituminous sand processing factory. Because of his skills, engineer Varadi hoped that he would escape alive. But in October 1944 he was deported to Auschwitz with his family. He survived. "Varadi had a cold and withdrawn nature, communication was hard for him, especially after 1944 when he lost both his parents, his wife and two sons¹³ in the Holocaust at Auschwitz."

Life after liberation

After the end of the war, engineer Varadi returned to Derna¹⁴ and was welcomed with open arms. Since during the war his engineer's diploma was confiscated and disappeared, he was employed as an engineer by special order of

⁸ Second Vienna Award, September 1940.

⁹ Oradea became part of Northern Transylvania taken over by Hungary.

¹⁰ The area remained part of Romania.

¹¹ The Agreement between Romania and Germany, signed on 27 November 1940, provided for the establishment of joint Romanian-German companies in all areas of economic life.

¹² His parents were deported to Auschwitz after the German occupation of Hungary on 19 March 1944 and the installation of the Sztójay government.

¹³ Local Council, Municipality of Oradea, Bihor County, Romania, *Hotărâre privind acordarea Titlului de „Cetățean de onoare al municipiului Oradea” – post mortem – lui Varadi Ernest* (Decision on granting the title of "Honorary Citizen of Oradea" - post mortem - to Varadi Ernest), Oradea, 29 September 2005.

¹⁴ The area became again part of Romania.

the Ministry of Mines. He resumed research in the field of bituminous sand mining. In Derna he set up his own laboratory in the production section. He succeeded in producing numerous products for road construction, a wide range of mineral oils and a wide range of products for the cold-technical aggregate and borehole industries. And oils for the engines of certain means of transport as well. Road building materials have been exported to many countries and were highly valued by importers. The products from Derna were superior to those produced by traditional companies in the field. Also from bitumen was produced a wide range of coloured asphalts, replacing the wood stain needed by furniture factories. Various cosmetic products were also produced.

Engineer Varadi immersed himself in his work and his passion for chemistry, but became extremely withdrawn and very quiet. The loss of his family at Auschwitz left a permanent mark on him.

The discovery of the Polar Oil

Research and hard work have led to a great achievement. He discovered a special mineral oil called Polar Oil: it had special properties because it did not freeze even at -63 degrees Celsius. With the help of this oil, the Russians made their first flight over the North Pole to America in the winter of 1952. This discovery earned *engineer Varadi the Order of Labour Glory 3rd Class and the Laureate of the State Prize in 1953.*

In the interview with journalist Balla Tünde a few months before his death, engineer Varadi said the following about this period of his life: "In Derna I have managed to prepare a particularly valuable and cost-effective material from bituminous sand. We have exported it to the United States, West Germany, Greece, Yugoslavia and Hungary. In Hungary we have supplied the special oil for all refrigeration plants and appliances. We also solved special problems. In the first years after the war, the Oradea Electric Plant had no transformer oil. I managed to prepare this special oil from the oil prepared in Derna-Tătăruși. I received the State Prize for my contribution to the production of Polar Oil from bituminous sand. I named it Polar in order give it a commercial name. With this oil I could produce low temperatures, even - 40 degrees Celsius. I always wanted to be mentioned that this product was made from the Derna-Tătăruși bituminous sands".

"We also had some funny moments," says engineer Varadi. "A specialist who had not had any inventions yet, wanted me to collaborate on one of his projects. I turned him down. Once I made up a joke, which my superiors got angry about. What did I do? In one of my papers, I listed Macsek Antonius as a collaborator. Once at Voivozi a self-righteous man asked me who this collaborator was. I told him that this collaborator is my cat, who is always by my side. The gentleman grew angry".

Work as a manager

As an engineer, Varadi Ernest was also a good organizer, in today's language – a manager. In fact, this skill is essential when objectives can only be achieved by teams of workers and technicians.

In addition to his research work, Varadi provided technical assistance in the construction of new industrial units in which his inventions were applied. This was the case at the Asphalt Board Factory in Șimleul Silvaniei. At the same time, he was directly involved in finding suppliers for export products, even in negotiating prices.

Engineer Varadi and polymers

The publicist Iosif Pop and the professor Iosif Popa¹⁵ claimed that Varadi Ernest was the first fiddle in the group of academics who prepared Elena Ceaușescu's diploma for entry into the ranks of scientists. They also claimed that engineer Varadi discovered polymers.

In view of the above I claim that the polymer was already known in the 1930s. Thus, it was not engineer Varadi who discovered the polymer. On the other hand, Elena Ceaușescu obtained her doctorate in science in 1968. Her doctoral thesis was entitled *Stereospecific Polymerisation of Isoprene*. The thesis has scientific value because the process described in it, which produces a cheap synthetic rubber, was used in industry at the Onești and Brazi plants. After 1989, no one wanted to take credit for the thesis. But this thesis has nothing to do with the field in which Varadi worked. We also have no information on his

¹⁵ [Popa '07], pp. 1-13.

participation in the academic group. Therefore, I consider that *Varadi Ernest had no contribution to this thesis*.

Fire in the laboratory

Engineer Varadi was extremely quiet and passionate about his work. He retired in 1972, but had a desire to work after retirement, regardless of age. And, if we consider the study written after 1990 preserved in my archive, he did work indeed.

Documents of particular importance that would have attested to the value of his work burned in a devastating fire in 1993, a fire that the inventor characterized as having been set by a criminal hand in order to erase all evidence of his work¹⁶. He had to find shelter in Derna. He found it with the Alexandru-Ioan Juca family, where he actually lived for four years in the last period of his life. The Juca family also became the legal heirs desired and accepted by Ernest Varadi.

In the above mentioned interview, Balla Tünde noted the following: "In intellectual solitude I found the famous chemist in Derna. He had not left his lair for years. Aged, perplexed, he was waiting for the great reckoning at the end of his life. Supported by three people, he managed to come out of his lair and eventually we were able to talk and record his ideas and thoughts. A few months later I learned that uncle Varadi had died on 2 September 1997."

Engineer Varadi wanted a good part of his inheritance, of which he had been given a part¹⁷, to benefit the needy, the elderly, and children who showed special skills. He is buried in the cemetery of Derna.

Opinions of those who knew him, noted by Iosif Popa

Engineer Emil Mierlușcă tells us that Varadi was often summoned to Bucharest. "But he was discreet, so I never found out the purpose of his visits". Varadi,

¹⁶ *ibidem*.

¹⁷ In the post-1990 retrocession fever, engineer Varadi was impulsed to ask for his fortune to be returned. Obviously not for himself.

when he dreamed something at night, would wake up and go to the laboratory in his pyjamas.

Elisabeta Cuc met him in Șimleul Silvaniei, when he was giving technical assistance to the commissioning of an asphalt board factory. She learned from Ernest Varadi that he had been to the Royal Palace the day before, where the gates were open.

Irma Rosser, his housekeeper for the last few years, has listened patiently for many days to Varadi's many testimonies about his and his parents' intellectual preoccupations. She recalled that in her parents' house in the centre of Oradea, 12 Parcul Traian Street, real cultural meetings were held. Octavian Goga and Ady Endre were also present at many of these meetings. The family had an important library.

Other opinions

The author of this article keeps the notes of his former colleague, engineer Vesselenyi Gyula Tibor from 20 March 2012, in which the following can be read: "Chemical engineer Varadi Ernest was the technologist, manager and administrator of the Derna-Tătăruși refinery for years. He lived and worked like a true scientist. He had a great prestige, especially in the 70s and 80s of the 20th century. He had at his disposal day and night a car and a special driver". But these memories appeared earlier in the local newspaper Bihari Naplo at 10 February 2004¹⁸.

Engineer Dimeny Aron, from Derna, had close, even friendly relations with Varadi Ernest. "Engineer Varadi was very familiar with the technology of processing bituminous sand and bituminous shale. Later the unit processed various materials procured from the oil refinery in Suplac de Barcău. From these he was able to obtain various special oil products," concludes engineer Dimeny his memories. After the fire in the laboratory, engineer Dimeny managed to keep a study by Varadi that was in the final stages of completion¹⁹.

¹⁸ [Vesselenyi '04]

¹⁹ *Studiu privind elaborarea tehnologiilor de exploatare a zăcămintelor de substanțe minerale utile situate sub nivelul hidrostatic în condiții hidrogeologice dificile și foarte dificile prin stabilizare.* (Study on the development of technologies for the exploitation of useful mineral deposits located below the hydrostatic level in difficult and very difficult hydro-

Actions of Varadi Ernest's sympathizers

In December 2004, the *Familia Română* (Romanian Family) magazine published an article entitled Varadi Ernest, inventator de talie mondială, la 95 ani de la naștere (Varadi Ernest, world-class inventor, 95 years after his birth). The author Iosif Pop writes the following: "Now, 95 years after the birth and seven years after the death of Ernest Varadi, those close to him wish to make his life and the merits of his scientific research better known and to eternalize his memory. We would like our thoughts to be collected in a book-documentary. In this regard we are taking the necessary steps to ensure that Dr. Eng. Ernest Varadi is proposed post-mortem - Honorary Citizen of Oradea and Derna", concludes Iosif Pop²⁰.

The action was successful and therefore on 29 September 2005 the title of Honorary Citizen of Oradea - post mortem - was awarded to Varadi Ernest.

In October 2007, a large-scale action of sympathisers took place: 97 years since the birth and 10 years since the death of chemical engineer Varadi Ernest. At the synagogue in Oradea a memorial service and a session of scientific communications was held, honouring the life and work of the commemorated. Several university professors and engineers who knew his work, praised him. An exhibition of photographs and documents was then opened, entitled *Un Einstein al Bihorului* (An Einstein of Bihor), depicting different moments in the life of this scientist. The exhibition also included a voluminous folder of articles and reports. The events were honoured by a large audience.

Interviews conducted in January 2022

Tiberiu Bălănean, a geologist-mineralogist reported the following: "I was a colleague of engineer Varadi for a considerable period of time (between 1965 and 1985). I knew him as a chemical engineer, endowed with outstanding qualities, who led the work at the Derna laboratory with great skill. He created an outstanding team and knew how to collaborate with masters and foremen. He had many notes, but they were indecipherable. On specimens and samples

geological conditions through stabilization (fragment). The document is currently in my archive.

²⁰ [Pop '04].

he applied hieroglyphic-like marks, which were not visible. He did multiple experiments with the help of the group of workers, but it was only him who knew the final goal. He knew the geological composition of the Derna-Tătăruși area perfectly.

I admired him for his hard work, tenacity and perseverance. He had many connections with German companies. He had a great knowledge of industrial chemistry. He was appreciated and protected by the company management. He was given a free hand and a large degree of freedom in research. In 1991 he was visited by former colleagues from Israel. The colleagues invited him to Israel, but he declined the invitation.

He was often invited to Bucharest, especially to the Ministry. But he was very discreet and did not divulge any information about these visits. Although he was very quiet, I managed to get close to him and was able to help him in many matters. He was a true researcher and inventor.

He had a tousled haircut that resembled the great scientist Einstein's haircut. Thus, for us engineer Varadi became an 'Einstein of Bihor', as a sign of our appreciation and sympathy for both Varadi and Einstein".

Engineer *Teodor Cladovan* was for many years director of the Suplac de Barcău Crude Oil Refinery. "I met engineer Varadi relatively late, Mr. Cladovan began telling his memories. Our collaboration started after the bituminous sand exploitation in Derna was reduced in the 1970s and 1980s. Engineer Varadi wanted to continue his research and asked for our help in securing the bituminous shale for him. We have been delivering it to him regularly, but in smaller quantities. Mr. Varadi was pleased with this collaboration, because the Suplac deposit was superior to the Derna deposit and our relationship became more collegial and closer.

Our collaboration was fruitful because Mr. Varadi was a fair partner with a great intelligence and a wide technical knowledge. He relied on a keen mind, ambition, perseverance and patience. Considered to have been a true researcher and inventor".

Engineer *Lengyel György* served as chief engineer at the Suplac de Barcău Refinery for quite a long time. "During this period I worked with engineer Varadi and got to know him quite well," says Lengyel. He dedicated his whole life to bituminous shale research. The discovery of the Polar Oil was also a moral success for engineer Varadi. He was a true polyhistor and had a great

general knowledge. He did not go after positions and thus he remained in Derna all his life. He gave no importance to written documents that is why we have almost nothing available. Both the fire in the laboratory and the deplorable state of the Voivozi Mining Company archives contributed to this situation. We must keep his memory as a polyhistorian, researcher and inventor”.

Conclusion

Engineer Varadi Ernest devoted his whole life to the profession of chemical engineering. He was in love with chemistry, considering it the essence of the exact sciences, and the experiments, ”independent of human malevolence and stupidity”, gave him great satisfaction and always motivated him. But he was also a mineralogist and, as he noted in the Study below, he was convinced that the problems of mineral exploitation and the discovery of new substances could only be achieved in ”the areas of contact between the chemical and mining disciplines”. He was a specialist who was very familiar with the bituminous shale deposits in the Derna-Tătăruși area and sought to exploit them as much as possible. He remained faithful to this region of Bihor County, and carried on the fame of the Derna-Tătăruși area. He could have emigrated at any time, but he felt at home in Derna. The discovery of the Polar Oil crowned his professional activity. He was a modest man, he did not go after positions and was always respected by the leaders of Voivozi and the Ministry of Mines. He was endowed with a brilliant mind and great intelligence. The loss of his family in the Holocaust was for him a tragedy which cannot be described in words. This explains why he became very withdrawn and, in his old age, very gloomy. He was surrounded by enigmas. He proved that through hard work and perseverance a man can overcome hardship and achieve results in his professional career. His behaviour suggested the idea that his thoughts went beyond the ordinary material horizon. A perfect peace of mind reigned there.

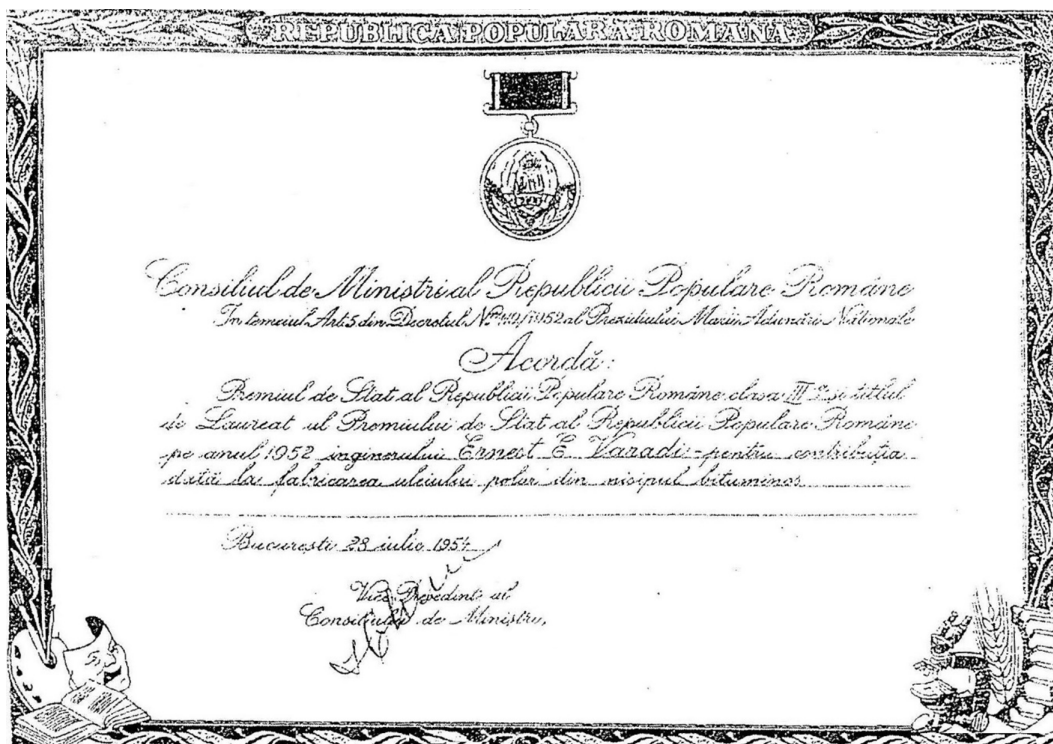
The memories of him trigger further questions. Faced with these memories, the importance of the openness of his research and communication becomes clearer to us, as well as the need to store information related to research and application, the link between research and circumscribed scientific knowledge and, on the other hand, inter- and multidisciplinary, the power of science to generate culture.

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APPENDIX

Diploma awarding the title of Laureate of the State Prize



Decision on awarding the title of "Honorary Citizen of Oradea" - post mortem - to Varadi Ernest

ROMÂNIA
JUDEȚUL BIHOR
MUNICIPIUL ORADEA
CONSILIUL LOCAL

HOTĂRÂRE

Privind acordarea Titlului de „Cetățean de onoare al municipiului Oradea” – post mortem - lui Varadi Ernest

Analizând Raportul de specialitate nr. 133.914 din data de 23 septembrie 2005 întocmit de către Direcția Juridică – Compartimentul Administrație Publică Locală prin care se propune Consiliului Local al Municipiului Oradea acordarea Titlului de „Cetățean de onoare al municipiului Oradea” - post mortem - lui Varadi Ernest,

Varadi Ernest s-a născut la data de 15 februarie 1910, la Oradea din părinții Edmund și Viorica, a urmat Liceul evreiesc, apoi cursurile renumitei Politehnici din Dresda pe care le-a absolvit ca inginer chimist și mineralog.

La unitatea din Derna unde s-a transferat în toamna anului 1940, a rămas până după pensionare. Aici și-a amenajat un laborator, prin mijloace proprii, pentru a cunoaște și a pune în valoare prin cercetări șisturile bituminoase – zăcământ deosebit de răspândit în zonă. Din inițiativa sa au fost construite aici secții de producție pentru punerea în practică a cercetărilor, produsele astfel obținute constituind marfă de export într-o serie de țări dezvoltate. A colaborat cu specialiști care lucrau la laboratoarele de profil din Germania și Elveția.

Varadi a realizat din șisturile bituminoase din ulei care rezista (rămânea fluid) până la – 60 grade Celsius, față de maximum, - 20 grade Celsius, performanță realizată până la acea dată de americani. Uleiul polar și-a găsit o largă întrebuințare în primul rând în aviație, Rusia realizând la numai câteva luni de la apariția invenției, mai exact în 1952, în premieră mondială, primul zbor peste Polul Nord. Această invenție i-a adus titlu de Laureat al Preminului de Stat și decorația Ordinul Muncii Clasa a III-a. Este autorul, fapt tot mai confirmat, a polimerilor, invenție cedată Elenei Ceaușescu, care și-a făcut un titlu de glorie internațională răsplătindu-l pe Varadi cu propunerea repetată de a deveni directorul general al Institutului de Cercetări în chimie, propunere refuzată pentru simplul motiv că Derna îi poate aduce satisfacții profesionale mult mai mari. A fost propus și pentru funcții înalte în ministerul de resort, de asemenea refuzate.

Varadi avea o fire închisă și retrasă, comunica greu, mai ales după 1944 când și-a pierdut în Holocaust, la Auschwitz, ambii părinți, soția și cei doi băieți. Varadi Ernest a dorit ca de o bună parte din averea sa să beneficieze cei nevoiași, copiii dotați și bătrânii.

În baza art. 38 alin.2 lit.v și art.46 alin.3 din Legea nr. 215/2001, privind administrația publică locală,

CONSILIUL LOCAL AL MUNICIPIULUI ORADEA

Hotărâște:

Art.1. Se acordă Titlul de „Cetățean de onoare al municipiului Oradea” - post mortem - lui Varadi Ernest.

Art.2. Cu ducere la îndeplinire a prezentei hotărâri se încredințează Direcția Juridică.

Art.3. Prezenta hotărâre se comunică cu:

- Direcția Juridică – Compartimentul Administrație Publică,
- Direcția Relații Comunicare, Mass Media,
- Fam. Varadi Ernest.

PREȘEDINTE DE ȘEDINȚĂ

Pantea Florian

Oradea, 29 septembrie 2005.
Nr.736.

CONTRASEMNEAZĂ
SECRETAR