

# OBITUARIES

## Thomas Szasz

Psychiatrist who criticised his specialty and opposed forced treatment

Ned Stafford *journalist, Hamburg, Germany*

Thomas Szasz, psychiatrist (b 1920; q 1944, University of Cincinnati), died on 8 September 2012, after falling at home



In 1964, Szasz had the honour of being invited to speak at the 120th annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association in Los Angeles. It was his first invitation to speak to the group—and his last.

Szasz was not on good terms with the association. In 1961 he had published a book attacking the specialty, *The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct*. He argued that so called mental illnesses are not diseases but instead are simply “problems in living” that might include “undesirable thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.” He called psychiatry a pseudoscience “in the company of alchemy and astrology.”

### Not amused

The psychiatry establishment was not amused, viewing the book and Szasz’s subsequent attacks as a declaration of war. At the 1964 meeting, Szasz outlined his controversial ideas. But six other psychiatrists had been invited to read papers denouncing Szasz’s ideas, including Henry Davidson, whose paper was entitled “The New War on Psychiatry.”<sup>1</sup> Some felt the proceedings had the feel of a public heresy trial.

“Tom had a natural inclination to question if not defy authority,” says Jeffrey A Schaler of American University in Washington. But Schaler, who operates a website dedicated to Szasz’s work ([www.szasz.com](http://www.szasz.com)), says Szasz was not opposed to psychiatry. “He believed in psychiatry between consenting adults. Tom did

not want coercion to exist. He was anti-coercion, not anti-psychiatrist.”

Szasz opposed involuntary psychiatric treatment, drug treatments for mental disorders, and using insanity as a defence in crimes. “I am probably the only psychiatrist in the world whose hands are clean,” Szasz once said. “I have never committed anyone. I have never given electric shock. I have never, ever, given drugs to a mental patient.”

Throughout his life Szasz remained a vocal critic of psychiatry, lecturing widely and writing 35 books and hundreds of papers, including one in the *BMJ*.<sup>2</sup> He was a hero to patient advocates around the world, while critics argued that science had proved that some mental illnesses had genetic or chemical roots.

“He influenced major aspects of psychiatry,” says Mantosh Dewan, a protégé of Szasz at Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, New York, and later chairman of the psychiatry department. “Even if psychiatry did not embrace the ‘myth of mental illness,’ Tom did force an uncomfortable focus on the arbitrariness of psychiatric diagnoses. In the 1960s his views influenced de-institutionalisation, with the discharge—freeing—of tens of thousands of patients.”

Dewan adds: “He raised awareness of the use of psychiatric diagnoses for social and political control, abuses that are much easier to see in ‘enemy’ countries such as the old Soviet Union.”

Thomas Stephen Szasz was born in Budapest, Hungary, on 15 April 1920. His father was a lawyer. In 1938, on the eve of the second world war, the family moved to the United States. Szasz studied at the University of Cincinnati, first earning a physics degree and then a medical degree in 1944. After a psychiatry residency at the University of Chicago he trained at the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis and became a staff member.

### A popular lecturer

In 1956, after two years of military service at the US Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, he joined Upstate Medical University. His lectures were lively and well attended, and Szasz quickly became the department’s most popular teacher. A quarter of new residents specifically chose Upstate to study with him.

But by the late 1950s he already was attracting, from the department’s perspective, unwanted attention for his

controversial views on psychiatry, which had social, political, and ideological undertones. His second book—*Law, Liberty and Psychiatry: An Inquiry into the Social Uses of Mental Health Practices*—was the first to use the term “the therapeutic state,” a union of government and medicine. State of New York health officials contacted Upstate officials and wanted Szasz fired, but they lacked authority to do so.

In 1969 Szasz collaborated with the Church of Scientology to found the Citizens Commission on Human Rights, which opposed psychiatric treatments. He never became a Scientology member, but the association damaged his credibility and he later distanced himself from the group. Despite all the controversies and tensions within the department, Szasz remained personally popular until retirement in 1990.

“He was the quintessential old-fashioned European gentleman: warm, gentle, gracious, and charming,” says Dewan. “Although he held very strong views and vigorously promoted them, he was supportive and generous in allowing his students and colleagues to find their own path.”

In 2010, Szasz was invited to give a keynote address at the International Congress of the Royal College of Psychiatrists to honour the 50th Anniversary edition of his first book, *The Myth of Mental Illness*. At the podium, the 90 year old man quipped: “It’s unimaginable that the American Psychiatric Association would have done this.”

Joanna Moncrieff of University College London was there. “The room was full to overflowing,” she says. “In his talk he started by saying that the thing that had motivated him above all was a love of freedom, one that was fostered through his experiences of Nazi Europe. He felt that freedom was more important than health, and that psychiatry used the language of health to curtail freedom.”

Szasz leaves two daughters, a brother, and a grandson.

- 1 Davidson HA. The new war on psychiatry. *Am J Psychiatry* 1964;121:528-34.
- 2 Szasz T. The psychiatric protection order for the “battered mental patient.” *BMJ* 2003;327:1449.

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