

Andrew Farkas

By James A. Drake, Ph.D.



Andrew Farkas and Jacob Forsell in St. Peter, 2011

In any list of debts owed to the founders and members of the prestigious international Jussi Björling Society, the name Andrew Farkas would surely be high upon that list. As almost all members are aware, he is a founding member and advisor of the Jussi Björling Society-USA, Inc., and is a contributing editor of its *Journal*. Having had the privilege of knowing him as a personal friend and university colleague (both of us are happily retired from the State of Florida higher-education system), and having benefitted (undeservedly on my part) from his wide-ranging expertise as a writer, editor, and publishing-company innovator, I have asked the *Journal* for this opportunity to write about Andrew, not only for those who may know him but also for those who have not had (but hopefully will have) that singular opportunity.

Being Floridians, Andrew and I try to get together at least once a year, an event we

began nearly twenty years ago and look forward to eagerly. We have no pre-set dates; instead, we merely decide a week or so before we meet, and we opt for one of two places: Jacksonville, where Andrew resides, or St. Augustine, which lessens the drive for me from my home near the Kennedy Space Center. Our meeting place of choice is the Columbia Restaurant, whose Cuban cuisine is known throughout Florida, thanks to the owners of the original restaurant in Ybor City, near Tampa, having decided years ago to replicate their success in other major cities in our state. Whether in Jacksonville or St. Augustine, the Columbia waiters have come to expect that the table to which they escort Andrew and me will be occupied for at least three hours.

Although I try my best to mask it, my admiration for Andrew is boundless, partly because of the entirely different lives we have led. I was born and raised in the

bountiful Midwestern U.S., where a rising middle-class family like mine had few needs and wants. Although World War Two ended when I was just an infant, and while most of my uncles and the fathers of my neighborhood friends had served in the Allied Armed Forces, none of us in the Midwest had ever been in any danger of a bomb raid from one of the Axis powers. And while our families had lived with the wartime rationing of gasoline, tires, and various food items, the shelves of our neighborhood grocery stores were never empty, and everything from fresh milk to bread to butter and eggs were delivered to our door by peddlers who bought their goods from nearby farmers.

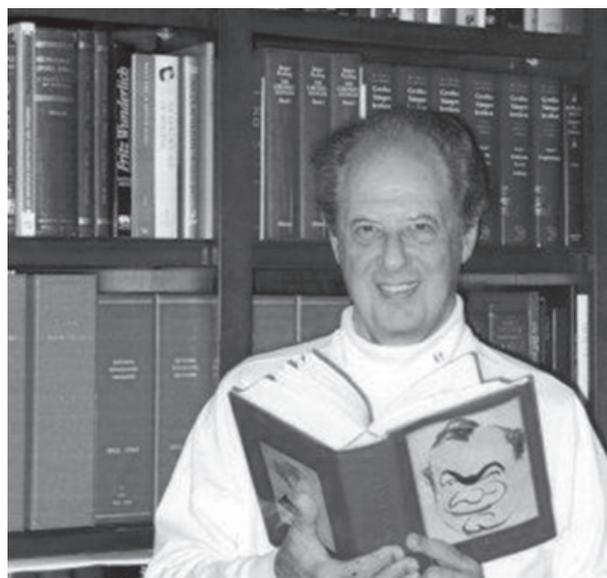
The contrast between the ultra-safe, well-fed, upward-bound life that I led in the Midwest was the polar opposite of the life that Andrew Farkas led in the strife-ridden Hungary in which he was born and raised during the war. For him and his family, and for Budapest as a whole, there was scarcely any food, let alone a phalanx of peddlers to deliver the best of fresh fruits, vegetables, and other staples to one's front door. My family could purchase three or four dozen eggs at a time; Andrew's was limited to two eggs per week—not two per person, but two eggs for the entire family.

Budapest is Andrew's birthplace; he was born there on April 7, 1936, was schooled there, and received his baccalaureate degree from the Madách Gimnázium there. He then attended the ELTE Law School in Budapest, and was a third-year law student when, on October 23, 1956, the demonstrations of his university sparked the Hungarian Revolution. His memories of the Soviet occupation of his home city are still vivid sixty years later.

A particular moment that stands out in his memory about the Revolution dates



Andrew at home in Florida, with Jussi



A. Farkas and a definitive biography.

from the early morning hours of November 4, 1956. Only two days before the U.S. elections, the Russians had nothing to fear and the tank divisions returned to Budapest. Around 6:00 a.m., Andrew watched from his fourth-story window as forty-eight T-54 Soviet tanks rolled down the narrow street where he lived. "The old apartment houses were shuddering and trembling under the immense weight," he recalls, "and it was a miracle that none of them collapsed, nor the sewer pipes under the cobblestone streets."

Twelve days after the Russian army re-occupied the country, Andrew fled to Austria and emigrated to the U.S. He was awarded two successive Foreign Student Scholarships by Occidental College in Los Angeles (1957-59) and received his Bachelor's degree in French Language and Literature in 1959.

Only three weeks after graduation, Andrew was drafted into the U.S. Army. After boot camp in Ft. Ord, with a fresh B.A. in French and with typical Army logic, he was stationed in Germany for the remainder of his tour. With great good luck he was discharged only two weeks before the outbreak of the Berlin crisis on June 4, 1961; on that very day, the Army froze all discharges.

With the political thaw that followed the Revolution, Andrew's parents immigrated to Canada in late 1962. They became

citizens, and Andrew sometimes jocularly claims Canadian descent. Following his tour of duty with the U.S. Army in Germany, Andrew earned a Master of Library Science degree from the University of California, Berkeley, assisted by an NDEA Fellowship. Partly due to his background and partly to his broad and varied academic training, he is competent in six languages, and in the course of his research and authorship he has published texts translated into English from three languages.

In July 1962, Andrew Farkas, B.A., M.L.S., commenced his professional career in the Peter J. Shields Library of the University of California, Davis. After advancing through several library positions at UC-Davis, he served for three years as Assistant Manager of Walter J. Johnson, Inc., a major international book and periodicals firm in New York City. In May 1970, he was the fourteenth person hired by the newly established University of North Florida (UNF) in Jacksonville. Appointed Director of the Thomas G. Carpenter Library (so named eleven years later in honor of the university's founding President), he held the position for thirty-three years until his retirement in 2003. Throughout his career he helped shape the course of the institution and the Florida university system libraries by his extensive intra-institutional and statewide academic-committee participation.

Concurrently with his directorial appointment, Andrew also organized, headed, and annually taught in the undergraduate Library Science program at UNF for twenty years (1972-92), carrying the additional title of Professor of Library Science. His work as librarian and classroom instructor has been recognized by several awards, most notable among these the Distinguished Professor Award (carrying the invitation to deliver the Commencement Address in 1991) and the Outstanding Faculty Scholarship Award in 2000. That same year, he also received the Honorary Alumnus Award, and upon his retirement was named Library Director Emeritus.

Except to those who have earned the title and therefore know first-hand its implications, "founder" carries with it an enormity of duties, responsibilities, and obligations from which his or her successors are mercifully exempted. Upon his appointment as founding Library Director on May 4, 1970, his mandate was to recruit and hire a library staff; establish and implement library rules, regulations and procedures; participate with the selected architect in the planning of the original library building; choose all library furnishings and equipment; and assemble a fully cataloged collection of 100,000 volumes by the university's opening day, October 2, 1972.

Although the professional literature

at the time specified that a minimum of four years would be necessary to establish a collection of 50,000 volumes (“Three or four years may be the minimum time needed in advance of opening a new library to select, acquire, catalog, and mark 50,000 volumes,” wrote the co-authors of an authoritative Library Science textbook in 1971), Andrew met all aspects of the assignment by the set deadline.

In addition to his professional work in librarianship, Andrew has been active, and amassed a significant body of scholarship, in his avocational interests: opera and singers-related research and publishing. He is the author of several dozen articles, phonograph record (vinyl) and CD reviews, performance reviews, CD liner notes, keynote addresses, and solo presentations. He also participated in radio programs and radio interviews (in English and Hungarian), a six-part interview for Vocal Images Presents (2004), and numerous conference panel discussions as member or moderator. He also participated on-camera in the 1988 A&E television biography “Enrico Caruso: the Man and the Myth,” based on his book on the legendary tenor.

Andrew Farkas has five internationally acclaimed books to his credit, each a pioneering work on the subject. Principal among these are the biography *Enrico Caruso, My Father and My Family*, co-written with son Enrico Caruso, Jr. (Amadeus Press), and *Jussi*, the first English language biography of Jussi Björling, with his widow Anna-Lisa Björling (Amadeus Press). His other books are *Titta Ruffo, An Anthology* (Greenwood Press), *Lawrence Tibbett, Singing Actor* (Amadeus Press), and *Opera and Concert Singers* (Garland Press), the last named an annotated bio-bibliography of 1,800 books by and about singers, in twenty-nine languages.

Andrew also served as Editor of the Opera Biography Series of Amadeus Press (16 titles); Advisory Editor of Opera Biographies for Arno Press (42 titles); contributing editor of *The Opera Quarterly*, contributor of opera-biographical encyclopedia essays in *International Dictionary of Opera* (St. James Press) and *The St. James*

Opera Encyclopedia (Visible Ink Press); he is also author of several biographical book chapters and singers’ bibliographies. His wide-ranging expertise in the field of singers and opera, both as an author and as a resource person, has been internationally recognized by specialists, researchers and reviewers. Beyond his involvement with the titles published in the series under his editorship, he has provided research and editorial assistance to several writers and scholars on four continents. I am but one of the numerous beneficiaries of his assistance.

In his capacity of principal editor of Amadeus Press’ Opera Biographies Series, Andrew was asked to evaluate the English translation (by Janet Björling) of Anna-Lisa’s biography of Jussi, submitted by Anders and Janet. Unquestionably, a book about the world-acclaimed Swedish tenor was due, if not overdue. The resulting biography was met with the highest praise upon its publication. “Even before his untimely death at age 49 in 1960,” wrote one reviewer in the *Star-Ledger* in February 1997, “Björling was already passing into operatic legend, but oddly, until now he had to wait for a biography that would adequately mirror his unique talents. To dub this biography adequate, however, would betray what its authors have accomplished—one of the finest books about singing ever written, and one which exhausts all critical superlatives.”

As some of us who were reasonably close to the project were aware, however, the book *Jussi* as we know it almost didn’t come about. From the start, Andrew considered it a viable prospect, but only with a lot of judicious editing, rephrasing and paraphrasing, extensive additional research and amplification, and a scholarly apparatus. The General Editor agreed and the Publisher wanted Andrew to do it. But having just finished his exhausting five-year project, *Enrico Caruso, My Father and My Family*, he turned down the invitation. Twice. Why did he relent? His response is a vintage example of Andrew’s candor. “Upon reflection,” he said, “I didn’t want someone else to write my book—badly.” ■

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James A. Drake, a retired college president in the Florida state-education system, is the author of seven books and approximately 50 articles in commercial and academic publications. A native of Columbus, Ohio, he earned a Ph.D. from Ohio State University. Four of his books are biographical works about opera singers, including: Rosa Ponselle, Richard Tucker, and Lily Pons. Jussi Bjorling commands his interest, too, as is quickly seen when one reads his (Amazon) review of the Bjorling-Farkas JUSSI.