

Professor George A. Somkuti was born in Budapest in 1936. He started his university studies in 1954 at the Agricultural University, which has been transferred to Gödöllő.

He developed a keen interest in microbiology. He approached Professor Janos Horvath who agreed to give George an unpaid part-time job as a laboratory assistant. After the bloody crush of the events of October 1956, George escaped to Austria and eventually made his way to the United States in 1957.

Through the efforts of the World University Service organization, George Somkuti was fortunate to be one of the three Hungarian college students who were „adopted” in 1957 by Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. Tufts University accepted the credits earned at the Hungarian University of Agriculture as its high academic standards were widely known and respected. Thus, George could continue his studies as a third year college student at Tufts. He graduated with a BS degree in biology in 1959, and found employment in the antibiotic discovery program of Pfizer and Co., in Groton, Ct. In 1961 he enrolled at Purdue University to pursue graduate studies in microbiology and biochemistry, and earned the PhD degree in 1966. The next two years, Dr. Somkuti’s postdoctoral research focused on the characterization of extracellular fungal enzymes and their applications in dairy food production. His work also resulted in the discovery of a novel group of cysteine-rich cationic antibacterial peptides. Dr. Somkuti joined the antibiotic research program at Lederle Laboratories (American Cyanamid Company) in 1973, where he developed ion-exchange and adsorbent assay techniques (still in use today for the rapid classification of antibiotics from soil).

In 1976, George joined the USDA as Research Leader of the microbial biochemistry group at the Eastern Regional Research Center, located near Philadelphia, PA. In addition to fermentation and natural product research, George’s team also developed new enzyme technologies for the preparation of lactose-free milk (LactAid) that later became a widely available and accepted consumer commodity. This work earned George’s team the Federal Laboratory Award for Technology Transfer, The Institute of Food Technology Industrial Achievement Group Award, and the USDA Distinguished Service Award.

In the following years, George’s pioneering research on the plasmid biology and biotechnology of thermophilic lactic acid bacteria (*Streptococcus thermophilus* and *Lactobacilli*) opened up new fields of research and contributed to knowledge on the structure and function of plasmid DNAs in these organisms that play essential roles in fermented food production.

Dr. Somkuti is a nationally and internationally recognized authority on the molecular biology and biotechnology of lactic bacteria with essential biocatalytic functions in the production of fermented dairy foods. During his research career he has authored or co-authored over 85 publications, including three patents.

In recognition of his research accomplishments, Dr. Somkuti was recipient of several awards, among them the most prestigious are the Fellowship Awards from the American Academy of Microbiology (1985), the Society for Industrial Microbiology (1989) and the American Dairy Science Association (2002).

Throughout his career, George was ready to host visiting Hungarian microbiologists, offering assistance with travel, professional engagements and creating opportunities for participation in professional scientific activities.