

Library Network Reorganisation in Hungary in Years following World War II (1945-1950)

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Between the two World Wars, the network of educational libraries was growing very slowly. Between 1927 and 1938, the Ministry of Religion and Education established 1910 new public libraries, with 400 000 books. 1700 libraries were established in villages, while 130 libraries were set up in the farm centres of the extensive circumferences of Debrecen, Kecskemét, and Szeged. Starting from 1925, the Ministry of Agriculture had distributed 1227 economical public libraries, mostly for small villages. The material put together by Ministry of Religion and Education generally consisted of 200–350 volumes, while the Ministry of Agriculture donated libraries with 50–200 volumes. In the late 1930'ies, the government distributed other stocks of books, but with less books included. Either they established basic village libraries with 50 volumes or travelling libraries with 60–120 volumes, which were relocated in another village from time to time. From among 3200 villages, there was a library in 1280 locations, and there were several smaller stocks in a number of villages or towns. The number of libraries was multiplied by the book stocks of various business organisations, industrial companies, and consumers' co-operatives. 70 % of large plants and 23% of medium plants had their own libraries, which was supplemented by 150 trade union libraries (Csapodi 1987, 389–392).

Library allocation was done based on a non-unified concept. The different organs did not discuss it. The book stock was not updated, those who were interested, had read the books quickly. It frequently happened that small villages did not have a library building. Bookcases and boxes were stored in schools, town halls, teacher's homes or parishes, so borrowing took place there. Due to the scantiness of state-owned, municipality library network, associations that had a library of their own played an important role in supplying the inhabitants with books. Most of them had a club-house, where they had a separate room for the library or a reading-room. Associations offered library service mainly to those living in suburbs, small villages and on the farms (Jobbáné 1999, 469).

World War II affected the Hungarian library network severely. During the 8 month war activities, several library rooms got damaged, most of the book stock got perished. Not only armed fights led to damages, but also the unclear conditions related to them, and the lack of order and public security. The stock of many libraries was eroded or fired by the invaders or the local inhabitants. In Szolnok County, out of 127 Ministry of Religion and Education public libraries 55 were fully annihilated – which means a 43% loss. Nation-wide out of approx. 3500 public libraries 3000 had smaller or larger damages (Szabó 1978, 133; Dancs 1988, 323–324).

The losses of the libraries were also increased by the political type of disposal instructed by the government. During the war, in spring in 1944, a decree was passed on the disposal of books written by left-wing authors or any authors of Jewish origin. After the war, libraries were forced to dispose of any publications categorised

as fascist, anti-Soviet, or antidemocratic. The first 4 centrally compiled lists contained 3730 publications. In later years, there were disposal orders implemented again and again. The issued lists included several politically neutral books, too. The works of the popular authors of the previous era had to be removed from the libraries because of their civic style, while the works of the Transdanubian writers had to be removed because of their fight against nationalism. In many cases, the local authorities acted even more severely than the regulations. For example, in many libraries all the German authors' works were disposed of (even the classics). There was no replacement instead of the books sorted out and disposed of in the libraries. Consequently, many of the smaller libraries had practically ceased to exist, because only 10–20 volumes remained from their original stocks (Trócsányi 1945, 9–10; Berza 1954, 23).

Already in 1945 Ministry of Religion and Education made steps to reorganise public libraries. In December 1945, the National Library Centre was set up. One of its tasks was to evaluate the available book stock. The National Council of Libraries was established in order to manage library related affairs, as well as to elaborate the principles of improvement and to co-ordinate implementation. This body was reorganised in 1947. It continued operation under the name of National Council of Library Affairs. Since that time, however, it had been serving the culture policy ideas represented by the left wing. Smaller public libraries often had very few books that had already been read by the library members. Therefore Ministry of Religion and Education permitted in January 1946 that public libraries exchange their stocks once with another institution so that they could provide their readers with new books. Steps were made to fuse the remnants of public libraries that survived within a village or a town (Hencz 1962, 175; Dancs 1988, 319–323).

The Ministry of Religion and Education made endeavours to replace — at least partially — the war related losses with books being available in central warehouses. A list was made about public libraries that had been partially damaged during the war, about the ones which could be reorganised. Based on local authority reports, there were 1222 such institutions. 31 681 volumes were allocated to them out of the central stocks, what meant however altogether 26 new books per library. But the government did not take charge of maintaining the libraries. This became the responsibility of the particular village or town or social organisations (Szathmáry 1947, 105).

Due to the great losses, the lack of suitable rooms, and qualified staff, the public library network could resuscitate with difficulty. Therefore, companies and associations had a very important role in providing library services. In towns, factory committees and trade unions played an essential role. In 1946, a decree was passed: each company having more than 50 employees should transfer minimum 1% of the wages to the local factory committee for cultural purposes. This was mainly dedicated to the improvement of factory libraries. Later on factory libraries became controlled by trade unions, and gradually got fused with trade union libraries. The libraries of associations were primarily important in small villages at the country-side. The approx. 2500 different associations had approx. half a million volumes of books. Frequently it was them, who supplied books to read to an entire village or farm zone (Tóth 2009, 686; Kuntár 1970, 21).

Destructions made by the war, and internal social, economical, and political changes, a gradual spatial rearrangement took place during the reconstruction of the library network. Reorganisation of libraries had accelerated from 1947. The National Committee for Organising Public libraries was set up based on the initiative of the

Hungarian Communist Party. This organisation established 1100 libraries in the country during 2 years' time. However, the stocks having narrowly 60–70 volumes contained mainly political publications that served the goals of the party, in addition to some fiction books, educational books, and manuals. The Hungarian Communist Party first of all sent libraries to the places where they wanted to enhance the party's influence – mainly to industrial zones, and to regions where the agrarian poor people lived, i.e. to North-East Hungary, and the area called „Viharsarok” (Storm Centre).

In January 1947, Ministry of Religion and Education initiated a travelling library movement. It aimed at supplying books to small villages and towns having no public library. Within the frames of this movement, during 2 years, Ministry of Religion and Education distributed 600 travelling libraries. They also contained only 50–100 volumes and had some works of political nature. MRE libraries were generally allocated to places where such libraries had already operated earlier. Despite their name, they were usually not taken to another village or town: they operated as permanent institutions. Later on they gradually got involved in the growing village public library network (Kiss 2000, 77; Kégli 2001, 469–480).

In Ministry of Religion and Education's long term prospective, the establishment of a modern library system was targeted (based on Anglo-Saxon example). In this system, smaller local institutions were arranged around the established bigger district libraries. Local library branches had only small constant stock (mostly manuals), which was supplemented with a constantly rotated larger stock from the district centre. After a longer preparation, by 1949, there were 10 district libraries set up with 60 000 volumes, to which 361 village public libraries were related. By the end of 1950, the system was extended with further 17 district institutions, which supplied 2000 depository libraries (Haraszthy 1955, 97; Sebestyén 1947, 102–103).

In the late 1940-ies, despite war related losses, uneven cultural supply inherited from earlier years, and limited state opportunities, an operable library system had formulated. The library network of municipalities, work places and social organisations being established could ensure at least minimum supply in most of the country. The rate and standard of supply showed great deviations, but books and culture became available to most of the people. As a result of the developments, the number of public libraries between 1938 and 1950 increased from 2054 libraries to 4333, while their stock increased from 1 252 086 volumes to 2 246 300 volumes. In 1950, from among 4333 educational libraries operating in 3223 villages or towns, there were 1739 village libraries, including 2594 ones that were operated by work places. The number of registered readers was around 402 600 (Tóth – Trócsányi 1997, 78–79).

Starting from 1949, unfavourable changes had taken place in the development of the library network. Instead of the earlier Western type district library concept, the Soviet library system was introduced. After the implementation of the comprehensive public administration reform and the Soviet type council system, district and town libraries were merged, and new county and township level institutions were set up. In November 1949, the Public Library Centre was set up in addition to the National Library Centre. Its main functions included supervision and theoretical control of educational and public libraries, professional and methodological development, and the central coordination of book stock improvement. This measure disrupted the nationally unified library system. It created unnecessary overlapping and made it more difficult to manage the available book stock efficiently. Within a few years' time, both central bodies were dissolved and their functions were taken over by the

Ministry of Public Education and the National Széchenyi Library (Csapodi 1987, 443; Horváth – Papp 2001, 85).

The new public library system being gradually established did not build on the formerly well functioning cultural institution system and the associations. Cultural service provision was transmitted from traditional community institutions (community house, farmers' club, parish, school) to the new centres of production and political life (factory, office of the agricultural cooperative, machine workshop, party hall). In 1949 there were already library operating in 439 bigger factories and 1087 cooperative centres, machine workshops, consumers' cooperatives had smaller or bigger book stocks. The nature of service had also changed significantly. Most of the new libraries were practically only places for borrowing books. The stock served primarily political propaganda purposes by playing no attention on readers' interest. Although new libraries were established in great number – real library activity, complex service, and the culture distribution standard had dropped significantly.

The totalitarian state being built in the period of communists taking over power regarded libraries as important propaganda tools for the „ideological transformation” of people. Therefore starting from 1949, there had been a new library establishment campaign. The 50–300 volume book stocks distributed during this project were of very low standard. They included a lot of brochures, and propaganda sheets. Literature was represented mostly by contemporary Soviet authors' socialist-realist works, while public economic literature was represented by works propagating the forming of cooperatives and planned economy (Kiss 2000, 78).

Voluntarist library development, focusing mostly on quantitative aspects and ideological and political targets caused several problems. The inhabitants of villages hardly ever got any books. Although 53% of educational libraries were established in villages, but there were not many books in them: only 31% of the total library stock. Old association-owned libraries had already been winded up, but new educational institutions had not been set up yet. In 1950, there were cultural institutions only in 41% of the villages. By the beginning of the 1950-ies, only 17% of farm schools in „Alföld” (Great Plain) had books, although before World War II there had been a few dozen books everywhere. The population hardly ever used the new „cultural focuses”, the „movement” libraries of cooperative centres and machine workshops (T. Kiss 2000, 69–70; Kovalcsik 1986, 203).

The development of the library network was adjusted to the new socialist village/town development concept. It mostly preferred towns/cities and big villages with growing industry. Investments were mostly allocated to approx. 150 bigger cities/towns and villages. Practically no proper resource remained for the cultural improvement of smaller villages (approx. 1500 villages). These measures affected negatively mostly the eastern and southern parts of the country: the regions of Békés, Bács-Kiskun, Borsod, Szabolcs-Szatmár, as well as Tolna and Somogy counties (Horváth – Papp 2001, 85).

In 1949, new lists were compiled, which contained the titles of books „not recommended” for public libraries. In practice it meant new disposal. The main charge against the disapproved books was that they represented civic taste, which was very far from the culture of workers and farmers. However, several works written by Géza Gárdonyi, Elek Benedek, or Hemingway, Cervantes, Kipling, and the Grimm brothers were also disposed of. The composition of the new stocks of public libraries did not suit the population's demands, which was well reflected by the drop in the number of borrowed books. While in 1938 in the educational (village and workplace) libraries the number of borrowed books was 2 358 906, in 1950 this number was only

796 500. This meant that while in 1938, 100 registered reader had borrowed 631 books, in 1950 only 198 books (Kiss 1988, 82; Nemes – Bárdosi 2007, 211–212.).

People first of all looked for classic literature, i.e. from among Hungarian authors for the works of Mór Jókai, Kálmán Mikszáth, Géza Gárdonyi or Sándor Petőfi, János Arany. 50% of the borrowed books were like that. Books with economic topics (stock-raising, horticulture, viticulture), educational literature (historical books, tour guides) comprised 25% in the number of borrowed books. However, almost no one read political publications printed in high numbers: therefore this comprised 5% in the number of borrowed books (Berza 1954, 21–24).

In the studied era, reorganisation of the library network was inconsistent. From quantitative point of view, war related losses were relatively successfully and quickly replaced. As for the number of libraries and books, the figures of the year 1950 significantly exceeded the rate typical before the war. The winding up of the old library system without any reason, newer and newer disposals, gradually higher and higher impact of political factors, and the decline in the book stock quality caused serious problems by the 1950-ies. The rebuilt library system was not able to serve the current readers' demands properly. In order to achieve more modern and efficient operation in the library network, a significant change in the approach was required.

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