

BOOK AND MAN SUPPRESSED. THE PERIOD OF DISASTER AND THE NATIONAL SZÉCHÉNYI LIBRARY

– PROGRAM-SERIES AT THE NSZL
BETWEEN MAY 28 – SEPTEMBER 30, 2014 –



In the series of programs organized at the Széchényi Library in 2014, a special status was assigned to this exhibition and conference, which presented, at the 70th anniversary of the period of disaster, the efforts of the National Library, as real and symbolic institution, to save book and man.

Perhaps neither the visitors nor the organizers realized that the exhibition took place, due to fortuitous or predestined circumstances, in the so-called National Relic Area of the library. The Relic Space gained its name a decade and a half ago because the extremely important values of the national past are being planned and exhibited here since then. Here were exhibited the Philostratus Corvina, the Festetics Codex or the manuscript of Kölcsey's Hymn. The symbolic meaning of the space had placed – in accordance with the aim of the organizers – the oeuvre of Gábor Halász, who was a victim of the period of disaster, the 3500 volumes saved from annihilation and last but not least the attitude worthy of a scientist humanist in these trying times of the contemporary director-general, József Fitz, between the unavoidable building blocks of the national past.

The exhibition follows the process of how the life and work of writers of Jewish descendents became

impossible after the German occupation on March 19th, 1944. A whole wall of decrees, selected by Gábor Hanák and Bea Lukács, as particular mementos of the almost completely obscure tendencies which still pointed in the same direction, crippled the life of Jews living in Hungary. Memories of witnesses and victims showed through moving images, completed with the respective episodes of the television series called *Our Century* presented in a tangible way the unfolding tragedy in the background of the MTI news and the contemporary coverage in movie newsreels.

Most probably static laws made necessary to build, during the postwar restoration of the fortress-castle, a huge pillar in the middle of our exhibition space, obviously to support the ceiling. This supporting pillar acquired multiple meaning now. Réka Pintér scenic designer covered this pillar exactly with those three thousand and five hundred volumes which the contemporary, unmanageable politics of culture condemned to annihilation. As a result of Mihály Kolosváry-Borcsa's activity, the national library received lists of Jewish writers' names and it was his job to prepare detailed descriptions of their published works. The library was supposed to give the selected works, as did other collections, publishers, book-sellers, to the brigades specialized on annihilation. But general director Fitz found the only solution to save the books. He instructed the authorities that he cannot comply to this, on one hand because he is a law-abiding officer and the effective law obliges the national library to acquire and preserve every book that was published in Hungary, on the other hand, even if he was entitled to such thing, he could not execute the decree because the complete stock of the library were carefully wrapped, according to rescue plans at war times, and, besides, it is physically impossible to go through the collection at this time. As a result of Fitz's brave and creative attitude, none of the national library's volumes ended up being pulped.



Visitor at the exhibition

Saving people was even harder and not less important as saving books for the one-time general director. The second part of the exhibition presented the career of the excellent essay-writer and impeccable librarian officer, Gábor Halász – organized by Erika Nemeskéri and Ferenc Földesi. Halász started to work in the Manuscript Collection of the Széchényi Library in the fall of 1927. According to his superiors, he was one of the best prepared and highly conscientious employees of the library. The exhibition showed his career as a literary historian and a librarian officer, integrated into his barely documented private life. General director Fitz had to step up in the interest of Halász in the summer of 1943 for the first time. After long correspondence, he succeeded in convincing the authorities to make an exception in Halász' case based on his irreplaceable scientific knowledge, and thus, Halász could return to the national library from forced labor service, at the beginning of the fall. It seems that Fitz had intuited the approaching danger and tried to set up a defense system around Halász. He promoted Halász in the fall of 1943, and put him in charge of the Manuscript Collection, then commissioned him with the organization of the grand, jubilee Kossuth-exhibition of the library. The exhibition opened on March 15th, but had to be shut down soon after the 19th of March. In a few months, Halász' Calvary had begun. He was drafted in forced labor service again at the beginning of the summer. Fitz tried everything, alluding again to Halász' scientific exceptionality,

talked to everybody from ministerial officers to the Minister of the Interior, Andor Jaross. He tried to save his colleague, who was more than an employee for him, who was a real friend. Exhibited letters from the record office of the NSZL document this hopeless struggle from week to week. Finally, the Ministry had pensioned Halász off, and took away the last tools of the general director, with which he could have helped. One of the most exceptional literators of the age, died together with György Sárközi and Antal Szerb, in the camp of Balf, on an unknown day in February, 1945.

The program series started with a conference on May 28th, 2014, where outstanding lectures of Ignác Romsics, András Szécsényi and György Haraszti presented the age. On September 30th, 2014, during the closing of the exhibition, after the lecture of the curators, there was a round-table discussion with László Boka, Erika Nemeskéri, Szilvia Szilágyiné Bánfi and Gábor Hanák as participants. They discussed the activity, the role and the possibilities of the national library during the period of disaster.

Connected to the program series, our institution published a smaller monograph, entitled: *Being suppressed. The period of disaster and the National Széchényi Library – Essays about the period of disaster and its historical preliminaries*, ed. Gábor Ujváry, Bp., NSZL, 2014.

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Guiding at the exhibition