

# THE VALUE-RESCUER

– JÓZSEF FITZ MEMORIAL EXHIBITION –



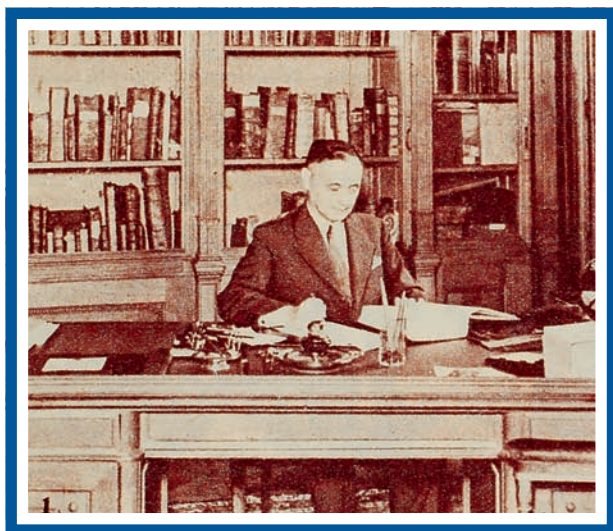
*József Fitz (1888-1964) librarian, book- and typography-historian was the director general of the National Széchényi Library for more than ten years. The Library belonged to the Hungarian National Museum at the time, but was an independent organizational unit. He contributed to the establishment of a modern, European-level Hungarian national library that corresponds to 20. century demands. In 2014, at the fiftieth anniversary of his death, our library organized three exhibitions dedicated to József Fitz's memory: two pertaining to his firm resistance during the period of disaster and a summarizing exhibition about the high level expertise he provided as the leader of the national library.*

There was a chamber exhibition entitled *The book is imperishable* (curator Szilvia Bánfi), organized in the Manuscript Collection of the NSZL, which connected to the exhibition entitled *Suppressed. The period of disaster and the National Széchényi Library* [regarding this see article written by Ferenc Földesi and Bea Lukács! – ed. note]. This one was paying respect to the Holocaust Memorial Year and opened in May. The chamber exhibition was dedicated wholly to József Fitz, who protected his colleagues and the collection of the national library displaying deep humanism and moral resistance in the face of war and other hopeless circumstances. At the end of the year, in November the Library Science Library of the Library Institute

organized a chamber exhibition in memory of József Fitz, former director general of the National Széchényi Library, entitled „...service to the last breath”. The aim of the chamber exhibition (curators: Ilona Hegyközi and Eszter Fazokas) was to present the complete life of József Fitz, according special attention to the years spent as the director of the National Széchényi Library. The exhibition could offer only glimpses into Fitz's extremely rich life as man, as library organizer and as scientist. We exhibited excerpts, documents, fragments to show in which fields acted he successfully, but we should not forget that his initiatives had a serious impact on the life of the National Széchényi Library that is felt, has a serious continuation, an afterlife today too.

József Fitz had started to work in the NSZL in 1934, and he had been the director general of the library between 1935 and 1945. We could say that his years spent in the libraries of the universities from Budapest and Pécs served as previous studies to his work in the NSZL. He was the initiator of important technical innovations; introduced different reforms and a major structural reorganization (the organization of the special collections); and made a series of significant professional decisions (about the catalogs and the national bibliography among others). His critics always emphasized that he was an exceptional expert in both, theoretical and practical fields. He had a good sense of proportion regarding pragmatism and modernism. As president of the Association of Hungarian Librarians and Archivists he did a lot for the organized librarian training in Hungary. His work as book-historian and specialist is known from his university lectures, treatise and books written in an enjoyable style. As leader, he always taught important to motivate and support librarians to do scientific work.

The title of this last exhibition from this year, „... service to the last breath” came from József Fitz's closing words from a lecture at the association. He gave the lecture in 1943, entitled *Libraries in the war*, about how can we prepare the library to the tribulations of the war, and what is the most practical way to do it, and it illustrated with foreign examples. As the director general of the NSZL, he remained true to his motto, and did everything possible during the Second



József Fitz

World War to save his colleagues and the collection of the library. Through the title, the organizers tried to express his firm resistance during the war, his service as a librarian and his commitment to readers.

As we mentioned before, the chamber exhibition entitled *The book is imperishable* presented previously Fitz's moral courage during the most tragic period of the 20. century history of Hungary, in 1944-1945. The national library was forced twice to protect its collection, when the totalitarian regime wanted to destroy part of it due to political reasons. Thanks to József Fitz's firm resistance, who opposed first the German then the Soviet power in their cleansing endeavor (destruction of books) this didn't happen, and the library was able to perform its duty, namely to save its collection for future generations. He was saving human life and cultural values exposed to mindless destruction. He opposed bravely the deformed decrees of the *withdrawal of the works by Jewish authors from circulation*, and he acted with responsibility when it came to the protection of the Hungarian spiritual values left behind in the unattended homes of the deported. Due to his intervention, Imre Kner's invaluable library of history of typography, with its 9000 volumes was saved; as well as Gábor Halász's library of 1000 volumes of history of world-literature; and the devotional objects and an illuminated manuscript from the 18. century belonging to the Jewish denomination of Nagykanizsa. He accommodated during the siege of Budapest from the National Music School a letter of Ferenc Liszt written in Hungarian, and offered protection to the Apocryph Codex which could not be returned to Sepsiszentgyörgy because of the war. He safeguarded the 16 volume Jókai-manuscripts owned by Jánosné Révai and the two autograph Ady-manuscripts (*God grant it* and *Covered with my embroidered cloak*) belonging to Dr. Ottó Fleschmann, lawyer from Szekszárd, who was deported, and when he returned, received back the manuscripts on August 8, 1945.

According to decrees from 1945, civil servants had to go through a political screening in which they had to account for their activities in the previous period of time. The Political Screening Committee of the Hungarian National Museum found József Fitz unfit for his duties as director general – in spite of many of his colleagues having witnessed for him –, but he could stay in the library as an employee. After his undeserved dismissal, he unwaveringly and effectively continued his scientific work.

Fitz achieved great results as researcher and specialist also<sup>1</sup>. His pupils continued his work in the

1 His main works: *The History of the Book*, Hungarian Review Association, 1930 (*Treasury of Hungarian Review*, 53.); András Hess,



Opening of the chamber exhibition

history of book. His colleagues used his results and improved them and became themselves internationally acclaimed representatives of the profession. Thus, the results of his work are alive today too; people read his publications; the Hungarian librarians keep his memory; and his professional reforms became part of the service system of the national library. This was also represented by the works on display in the November exhibition and his works are accessible in the reading room of the specialist library of the Science of Library, today.

In the fifty years that has passed since József Fitz's death, the community of librarians commemorated several times József Fitz and his oeuvre. The commemoration and exhibition held on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth in 1988 was outstanding. Since then exists a József Fitz book-prize, commemorating his name, which is awarded every year by the cultural ministry to the most interesting book from the previous year, selected by librarians; and it is our honor that three times the publications of the NSZL won this prize.<sup>2</sup>

Through the above-mentioned exhibitions, the library commemorated in an honorable way József Fitz's work, life and memory, and presented him as a role model for the contemporary co-workers of the national library and its readers.

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the ancient typographer of Buda, Hungarian Bibliophil Association, 1932; Gutenberg, Hungaria, 1940 (*Hungaria books*, 7); *The History of the Hungarian Typography, Publishing and Book-trade 1-2*, Akadémiai Publishing, 1. Volume: Before the Disaster of Mohács, 1959, 2. Volume: In the Age of Reformation, 1967.

2 cf. *Treasures from the Library of the Nation*, ed. István Monok; photos József Hapák, Bp., Hungarian Book Club, 2002.; *The Illustrated Book of the Hungarian Bibliophilia*, ed. István Monok, Attila Buda; photos József Hapák, Bp. Korona-NSZL, 20016.; *Inform me in letter, Contemporaries about the Establishment of the Library* by Ferenc Széchenyi, ed. Eszter Deák, Edina Zvara, Bp., Kossuth-NSZL, 2012.