Hungarian Technical University Libraries in the Stream of Modernization

József Zsidai

University of Miskolc

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LOOKING BACK ON THE HISTORY OF LIBRARIES IN HUNGARY

In the year 1001 when the founder of the Hungarian state, King Stephen I was crowned, he also founded the first library under the auspices of the St. Benedictine order in the village of Pannonhalma which library has been existing and offering services since then. From that time on libraries have been continually present in Hungarian cultural life. The landmarks of this development of more than 1,000 years were the following. In the Middle Ages the libraries of different ecclesiastical institutions and authorities: e.g. those of the Dominican, Franciscan and Premonstratensian orders, episcopacies and monasteries dominated and spread culture (especially Latin culture) but in a rather narrow range. At the end of the Middle Ages and the dawn of modern times, the second half of the 15th century, the Biblioteca Corviniana, the Renaissance Library of King Mátyás containing about 3,000 volumes of manuscripts and codices became world famous in Buda (until 1872 Buda and Pest were two separate towns on the right and left banks of the river Danube). In the 16th century under the inspiration of the German Reformation, schools and colleges were established to which excellent libraries belonged (e.g. in the towns of Pápa, Debrecen and Sárospatak). In the 17th century the Catholic church counter attacked and set up the first Hungarian university (which still exists in Budapest) in Nagyszombat in 1635 in the spirit of counter reformation. The new and significant libraries of the 18th century were set up in the palaces of the aristocrats, and in 1735, in Selmecbánya the first technical college library was founded, the stock of which was inherited by the universities of Sopron and Miskolc. The 19th century can be characterized by the establishment of more and more scientific, technical and special libraries. The National Library came into being in 1802, the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Arts and Sciences was founded in 1826, the library of the Budapest Technical University in 1848 and the predecessor of the National Technical Library and Information Centre in 1883. In our century, considerable improvements were made, mainly after World War II, when a hierarchical public library system was created between 1952–1960, and a lot of new libraries came into being in colleges, universities, research institutes and companies. At present the backbone of the Hungarian scientific library system is constituted by the following institutions: National Széchényi Library, the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Library of the National Assembly, the National Library of Foreign Languages, the Library of the Central Office of Statistics, four special national libraries in the fields of agriculture, medicine, technology and education; the Budapest Szabó Ervin Public Library (the largest Hungarian public library), 27 university libraries, 19 country libraries and about 40 research institute libraries. Besides this short review of the history of Hungarian libraries, three factors should also be mentioned because they have an influence on the present situation: since 1870 the country has officially had a library policy directed and organized by the Ministry of Education (its official name has changed a couple of times during the past 120 years); the academic professional training started in 1901, but separate university department of library sciences was only set up in 1949; now librarians graduate from two universities (after five years' study) and three colleges (after four years' study) and since 1935 the Association of Hungarian Librarians has been working, as well.
Books in printed form or some kind of electronic media? In the 1960’s Hungarian intellectuals were shocked by the McLuhan syndrome and the prediction that books have no future still comes up every now and then. But, fortunately it has not been realized so far. Our way of thinking which I am going to tell about below is considerably motivated by the historical background: in our culture books have been in the center for more than 1,000 years so the culture and influence of printed paper is extremely strong. On this basis the respect for traditions urges us to invariably believe in the future of the book. The demand for modernization and especially the value of time as spent on solving a problem that is urgent draw our attention to the newest information technologies. This duality makes us understand that we can trace some piece of information of interest very quickly by electronic devices on the one hand, and on the other, if we want to process the information acquired, traditional sources of information play an important role. From another point of view we can say that for a considerable amount of time, we do not know yet for how long, different kinds of sources, media, knowledge acquiring and information retrieval systems are going to live together. It depends on the task and circumstances given which is better to use. The situation is much the same as with travelling: besides the 150-year-old railway we have supersonic aircrafts, cars, bicycles and donkey carts (in Spain and Bulgaria) on the road. And it is a remarkable paradox that while cars become more and more efficient and perfect in terms of power and speed in most countries there is a strict speed limit on motorways and in crowded metropolitan areas and people are forced to go by underground because of constant traffic jams (and they leave their posh cars in car parks) or they ride a bicycle as in Denmark.

Let us answer the first question: evolution and revolution are interdependent concepts which cannot be separated: the concrete situation, often the sum of money in your purse and pocket determines which has priority over the other.

THE DEVELOPMENT IN HUNGARY

The electronization of information services started in the USA in the 1960’s. In Hungary some libraries followed suit relatively early. We started with buying and processing magnetic tapes produced in the USA for SDI (Selective Dissemination of Information). In 1971, the librarians of the University of Veszprém followed this route; they organized the service with Chemical Abstracts tapes. Veszprém was followed by the library of the University of Miskolc in 1973 when we acquired the metallurgical database METADEX. Both services were offered on a nationwide basis. The work which lasted 8-10 years proved to be very useful: the successful fulfilling of this task laid the foundation for computerization in both libraries so it was no problem to switch to the online technique.

The first online connection with a foreign country was made in 1978, with Austria. The period of experimentation ran between 1978 and 1981. At that time we experimented with the INIS and AGRIS databases in Vienna and with the Lockheed center in the USA. Services gradually spread from 1982. In this process, a leading role was played by the technical university libraries. In Veszprém work started in 1983, they had the highest use in 1990 with 360 searches; Miskolc started in 1983 (1989: 127 searches); Budapest in 1987 with 218 searches in 1990. Nationwide, the development was smooth and gradual, until 1990 about 50 terminals, but both the pace and the utilization left much to be desired. The 50 terminals can provide access to 800 databases of 46 hosts. This is not bad but the equipment is used for only 1,500 hours a year though it has a capacity of 20,000 hours which is most unfavorable. Things do no go well because there is a very low level demand among end-users. The information market is weak because the achievements of the economy are low.
And if there is a demand somewhere, money is lacking. In Hungary the GNP/person is $3,000 US which is hardly 30% of the productivity of more developed European countries. It is very difficult to get out of this vicious cycle, it seems that we have to work very hard and be patient for 10-15 years. I am not happy to say so but I am sure that the achievement, capability and readiness-to-work in Hungarian libraries and librarians are well above the demands of the society and the economy.

Here I should like to mention that CD-ROM appeared in technical university libraries 2 or 3 years ago. As regards its use and usability the experience is most favorable. Besides the demands and desires for modernization, we lay great emphasis on acquiring original documents. Though money is scarce, we in Hungary order about 18,000 titles of scientific periodicals a year with 80,000 copies and we purchase about 25,000 new books. Interlibrary loan data show that we can provide 78-82% of the articles demanded from home sources (libraries), but only 50% of the books, and as far as conference proceedings are concerned, the situation is even worse. In the case of periodicals to a lesser extent, but in that of books and conference proceedings we are strongly dependent on international interlibrary loan.

When speaking about home matters we cannot deny that it is a great disadvantage that we cannot provide online access to the literature of Hungarian origin, and that the catalogues of the largest 80-100 libraries are not accessible this way. The national information network is already working, but contains only 60 small databanks of minor importance.

PARADOXES AND EXPERIENCE IN THE PROCESS OF MODERNIZATION

Though we are not in the lead, we still have some experience to share.

- An information technologist-engineer working for a chemical company learned the technique of online searching in our library in Miskolc and did this work very efficiently for his company for years; but for the last one and a half years he has not been able to do it because of financial difficulties; instead he uses the numbers and registry handbooks of Chemical Abstracts which he can do free of charge, but of course, it takes him much longer.

- In our library in Miskolc traditional information provision (from handbooks, bibliographies and catalogues) and online information retrieval coexist very well. It is paradoxical that the former is done by librarians, the latter by engineer-information technologists. The same person cannot do both but we cannot employ experts in both sections, we cannot afford it and there is no demand for it.

- The contracts made with local iron and steel works make it clear that companies are satisfied with quick online information retrieval only if we can also provide the original documents (or their photocopies) very quickly either from our stock or by interlibrary loan.

- In Hungary since 1989 small companies (1-20 persons) have been mushrooming (and some of them have died very quickly). These are dynamic and impatient organizations; their experts want immediately usable information about equipment, production technologies, drafts, standards, different kinds of materials, statutes etc. We can only partially help - often traditional and modern information services both fail.
Hungarian libraries have always been open to the world. In the Middle Ages religious orders set up the first libraries; the libraries of Hungarian aristocrats followed English examples; the National Library was also founded on the model of the Library of the British Museum; and Ervin Szabó, the founder of the Budapest municipal (public) library argued using German and American data in the city council. As a matter of fact, from the end of the 19th century until about 1970 (practically up to the present) Hungarian library policy and practice was under Prussian influence and followed that pattern. In the 1950's Russian influence was remarkable but Hungarian librarians always kept an eye on western development. From 1960 western orientation has enhanced. Libraries now take an active part in the work of international organizations e.g. IFLA, FID, IATUL etc. So under all circumstances Hungarian librarians have followed the worldwide development of library science but Hungarian libraries have also preserved their unique face and character up till now.