

On Upward Path

An interview with László Boka, Director of Research and Academic Affairs of NSZL and Editor in Chief of the NSZL Publishing House

For many years now, the publishing house of NSZL has been present on the Hungarian book market with its prestigious titles. The publishing house – which is built upon the institution’s unique collection and the expertise of its research fellows – presents 24 to 40 publications annually, either individually or in collaboration with acclaimed Hungarian and foreign publishers. These publications include facsimile editions, illustrated albums, volumes of conference lectures and essays, gap-filling bibliographies and exhibition catalogues. Since 2005, László Boka has played an active role in the activities of the publishing house as a literary historian and editor. As of 2010 he has become the editor in chief of the publishing house.



Since when does the publishing house exist?

As a matter of fact, during its 215 years long history, the Hungarian national library has been continuously engaged in publishing, for example it always issued yearbooks, exhibition catalogues, various volumes of conference lectures and essays, moreover, it was its responsibility to publish different bibliographies as well. However, it did not publish these as a professional publisher. The focused and conscious publishing work started at the turn of the millennium. István Monok, the director general at that time, initiated this work, namely to collaborate with large Hungarian professional publishers in order to publish illustrated albums about our exhibitions and other unique treasures. We had been managing the book publishing shoulder to shoulder for more than 5 years, but after the first

few years I took up the baton and started to build the NSZL Publishing House brand. Then we began to launch series, that would measure up to the requirements of the modern national book collection of the 21st century.

Are the manuscripts written on the publisher's request or these would be written anyway, serving as the summary of the researches?

The results of the research come into existence anyway, as this is an expectation towards every researcher. Our task is to choose manuscripts worthy of publishing and decide whether to involve associate publishers. I am trying to measure how can the specific expectations of the national library be in balance with the expectation of the market. Most of our writers are literary historians, book historians, media historians, but we also work together with academicians, doctors of MTA (Hungarian Academy of Science), researchers with PhD and the researchers of the former 1956 Institute. Nevertheless, we have arrived at the point where we, as a publishing house, receive numerous external manuscripts. I am glad to mention that we have managed to increase the annual number of 25-30 books to 35-40 last year, this being equivalent to a medium-sized specialist publishing house.

How large and what kind of technology stands in the background to help you publish these high-standard and numerous manuscripts?

In 2010 I started to methodically build up a team around me, literally out of nothing. It is hard to frame a professional publishing structure from a large national collection, which, similarly to a robust battleship, turns slowly and uneasily and it is also hard to understand that the present does not favour the field of classic library: it is necessary to attract not only our readers, but visitors as well. The editorial office operates in the bosom of the Scientific Secretariat and it had been working mostly with external experts. The current editorial staff of 6-7 people (including editors, graphic designers, translators and proofreaders) is our own. I would like to strengthen the team further with a PR specialist and a deputy editor in chief.

Are you planning to cooperate with foreign publishers?

During the last few years we have received several foreign requests. If there is a chance for a good collaboration, we are open to it. Apart from Hungarian publishers from the Carpathian Basin, with

whom we currently collaborate, we were also contacted from Czech and German regions, their aim being to translate or republish some of our books. At the moment, the English version of the Corvina illustrated album, previously published in collaboration with the Kossuth Publishing House, is on its way of being published in China. Moreover, we are continuously invited to take part in foreign book festivals, which take place in the V4 countries and in Germany as well.

How do you sell your publications?

Currently, we are dynamically developing our marketing. Last year we have started to operate a webpage, where, though sluggishly, we are striving to present all of our publications starting from the turn of the millennium. Our only but rather significant bookshop is situated in the F building of the Buda Castle and it is being visited by tourists as well. In addition, I think that our books must be present in every place which considers itself to have a professional and high-standard educational purpose, such as the Castle Garden Bazaar and Írók Boltja (Writers' Bookshop). I have been seriously struggling with making the national library's books present in bookshop networks, this being the most important task of the current year.

It has always been harder to sell books published in collaboration with other publishers as we always had to agree on who and on what kind of terms is going to provide the books to the retailers. Since we publish books independently, this has become significantly easier. At the moment, as far as our publishing range is considered, we issue the 35-40% of our publications independently and the other 60-65% is published in cooperation with other publishers. During the last few years we have linked an internal publishing program to our projects and renowned anniversaries, such as the János Arany Memorial Year, the Anniversary of 1956, Reformation 500, Saint Martin or Saint Ladislaus Memorial Year, World War I and so on.

I can proudly state that the results confirm us. Year after year our book sales is getting higher and we have been receiving various professional acknowledgements and awards during the past 4-5 years. At last year's Beautiful Hungarian Book Competition (Szép Magyar Könyv) we had an József Antall memorial award for an exhibition catalogue and we also received a special diploma of merit. This year our beautiful facsimile edition of the Dohnányi-manuscript has received the Special Award of the President of Hungary. This is of course teamwork – it is not me, but my colleagues who have to be praised.

To what extent is that an expectation that you support your publications financially, from your own budget?

To a great extent. Although we have a limited institutional fund, we do not receive any targeted state subsidies. In fact, even the NSZL's basic tasks are underfinanced. We continuously apply for tenders, strive to publish our books and build up partnerships even at the expense of sales. Conversely, without these we would not be able to finance our book publishing project, only in a moderate manner, on a low flame so to say. We also differ from the others on the market in the sense that the national library tries to get its own publications to the 30-40 collections of the Carpathian Basin through an international substitution service.

How many new publications can the readers expect at this year's Festive Book Week?

Due to the János Arany Memorial Year, we have already published seven Arany volumes and in addition to this a new one is on its way as the memorial year ends officially in June. Besides this we will present five more new titles for the Book Week. These include a volume of conference lectures and essays, an authorial bibliography about ex-libris, our bilingual yearbook, the Arany-Petőfi correspondence book with an audiobook supplement and a Zoltán Szabó monograph, all of these being published in collaboration with other publishers.

If I am not mistaken, you have planned to launch your own collection of essays at the same time...

Indeed, but that is published by the Balassi Publishing House and examines the Hungarian literature of the first decade of the 20th century, including 14 essays on Endre Ady, Mihály Babits, Aladár Kunz, Attila József and Zoltán Jékely. It is a rather delayed book, but I am looking forward to it.

Kálmán Lafferton

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