

FOREWORD FROM THE EDITOR



Jorge Luis Borges' well-known, almost 80-year-old masterpiece *The Library of Babel* conceives the existence of a world library consisting of an infinite number of hexagonal rooms, the book collection of which is unimaginably large, identical to the size of the universe. The identical binding, length and format of the volumes lining on the shelves in the short story are not meant to depict uniformization in Borges' fictional world (in these library rooms, despite the identical punctuations and orthographies, the items are very different, and those who seek it tenaciously enough will find among them the story of their own life). Instead, the infinite amount of knowledge accumulated in these volumes stand as a synonym for flows of information and neural pathways similar to the human brain, in fact for the multitude of versions. These versions (everything that was ever thought of and written, or will ever be thought of) form a vast universe, whose rooms, units, in principle, may be once be connected, shown and explored with the post-encyclopedic need for wholeness. The national collections of European countries can also be considered as such library rooms, acting as components of the emblematic whole. Care, preservation, qualitative exploration, its conscious dissemination from time to time, categorization and, indirectly, the identification base of the individual and the members of a given nation of the cultural heritage accumulated in these simultaneously assign both specific and universal tasks to the caretakers entrusted with this, which in principle can be attached to an international universe through the technological development of digitization: they can be connected to each other, and shown, but – as Borges, who later became a national library director himself warns us – being aware that we ourselves are already active parts and special constituents of this universe. Yet one of the most enduring allegories of this short story, however, is that behind every meaningful line, processed content, act of interpretation manifesting outwards, there is a multitude of verbal rummage, incoherent or worthless works put into meaningful, valuable catalogues by the hard work of experts and their library guides. In addition, the grouping and dissemination of the most valuable contents and treasures stand for a multitude of professional filters, that is, not just the collection and preservation of everything. How and in

what form are these periodically displayed also constitutes a cardinal question. Therefore, the responsibilities of national libraries require complex programmes, national and international collaborations, systematic scientific explorations, and a series of events demonstrating value in which the coordination of diverse fields and expert work is of cardinal importance.

In the NSZL's life, the years 2018 and 2019 were both difficult and successful in many respects. The first and second parts of this sentence do not stand in sharp contrast to each other, nor do they exclude each other, they merely refer to the ambivalent situation that the nation's first and oldest public collection, founded in 1802, has been forced to face in the last decade. The *Bulletin*, the herald of the library's life (giving account on major events, national and international collaborations), shows these successes in its content, but the fact that it is forced to be published as a double issue, reflects mostly on the first half of the sentence, i.e. financial difficulties and budget deficits.

According the usual structure of thematic sections – selected by Franciska Dede this year as well –, it reports on the most important results of the last two years, memorial anniversaries and related events (in 2018 our corvina codices came under the spotlight in connection with the King Matthias Memorial Year, while in 2019 primarily the 100th death anniversary of Endre Ady provided an opportunity to present relevant treasures from our collection). Moreover, it gives account of academic findings, conferences and series of events, the recent successes of our publishing activities regardless of its many difficulties and, of course, all the transformations of the recent years behind the successful outward image, which have determined the inner life of the NSZL from two perspectives. On the one hand, the processes related to the major national project of the OKR (National Library System) launched after the expiration of term of the office of Director-General László Tüske, and, indirectly, the years of reconstruction within the framework of the Hauszmann Plan in the vicinity of the NSZL's main building, which in many cases has prevented the institution's professional work. 2018 was a particularly important and successful year regarding internal developments and professional events, but 2019 was

already quite unbalanced: successful series of events dating back many years and decades have ended, we could not organize the Night of Museums and could not continue the series of events Library Salon (partly because of lack of space, partly lack of resources). In addition, simultaneously with ideas for the partial renovation of the internal infrastructure of the F building, in the autumn only a temporary, Acting Director-General was appointed as head of the respected institution. The perpetuating financial insecurity, the inability to function in various ways (as a library, research institute, museum, publishing house, etc.) and, above all, the danger of organizing a possible institutional move at a fast pace did not do any good for the ongoing international and national professional collaborations. In addition, in the second half of 2019, the institution had to face severely high rate of resignations.¹ However, as we have repeatedly emphasized on several platforms, the unique staff of the respected institution and the knowledge of its experts were the foundations on which we have built and leant upon all the time also on the international scene. Nevertheless, we can report beautiful results and joyful processes in this issue: successful exhibitions and events, conferences and internal celebrations, academic collaborations and professional projects related to anniversaries supplementing the daily operation of the library, in addition we have also reported about web archiving workshops and primarily about the phases of the major project OKR. As it is well known, the comprehensive, long-term goal of the latter is to integrate the hitherto fragmented library services, databases and catalogues, and the service of digital documents

into a unified, national system. The new digitization centre set up on the eighth floor of the main building of the NSZL by the end of 2019 is in fact the first spectacular result of the project. In line with the above-mentioned Borges example, all this will create a unified 'format' in the world of flat screens and cloud services, which will make the contents of various documents and media available to the world library of Babel, hopefully in the foreseeable future.

Traditionally, in the personalia section at the end of our double issue, in addition to our awarded staff, we have the sad duty to enlist our colleagues who passed away, which has turned to be very long this time. In the life of the employee community of the main guardian institution of Hungarian cultural heritage – beyond the sad decline caused by the heavenly gears – large-scale changes began in 2017, which will continue after 2019. Therefore I closed the foreword of the last issue with the idea that, despite everyday difficulties, reorganizations and struggles, the library community had plenty of achievements on which it could always look back proudly and draw strength from it. After all, as Béla Hamvas writes, for the dedicated librarian and the researchers working in the library, the book, the document is at once nourishment, passion, fate, love, pleasure, rapture, adventure and destiny.

The circumstances might change, the goal will not.

László Boka
Editor-in-Chief

¹ By the time these lines come to light, the library already has a newly appointed director general, but due to a radically different, pandemic situation the institution's employee community has faced new, hitherto unknown difficulties.