

The efforts and plans of Hungarian LGBTQ archives

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Abstract:

In our presentation we would like to introduce the work of the two Hungarian LGBTQ archives. The Archives of Háttér Society (established in 1995) collects LGBTQ materials comprehensively, while Labrisz Lesbian Association (founded in 1999) concentrates primarily on Hungarian lesbian herstory. The archives receive growing attention from both researchers and journalists. We participate in the research of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences on the 20th century social history of homosexuality. We are also editing LGBTQ-related articles on Wikipedia and plan to found an LGBTQ periodical too. Háttér's electronic database will be soon available at its website.

Labrisz has conducted interviews with elderly lesbians in the framework of its lesbian herstory project (resulted in a documentary and a volume of interviews). In the last couple of years, Labrisz has also worked to construct a lesbian herstory archive, including primary documents, photos, articles, books, and audiovisual materials from the 20th century, with all the difficulty of finding traces. Its long-term aim is to serve as a resource for scholars, activists and the wider public, thus to combine the functions of research, movement, and community building (typical for LGBTQ archives).

We have contacted a few state libraries and archives, but besides the openness we have also experienced that the government-dependent institutions are afraid of supporting LGBT+ programs. The decrease of financial support also jeopardizes the future operation of LGBTQ archives and the organizations themselves. Another problem to solve is the strengthening of the awareness, interest, and activity of LGBTQ community and the reaching of non-LGBT people too. In order to learn new ideas and best practices it is important to think together and exchange views with other countries' LGBTQ archives, especially with those working in the region among similar social and political circumstances.

Keywords: LGBTQ, Hungary, archive, history

In our presentation I would like to introduce the work of the two Hungarian LGBT+ archives. The Háttér Archive of Háttér Society (established in 1995. www.hatter.hu) collects LGBT+ materials comprehensively, while the Archive of Labrisz Lesbian Association (founded in 1999. www.labrisz.hu) concentrates primarily on Hungarian lesbian herstory.

1. Háttér Society

The oldest existing LGBT+ association in Hungary: *Háttér Society* was founded in 1995 with the aim to organize various services for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex etc. people in Hungary. Háttér means (by the way): *background* with diverse meanings.

Our main services are: the *Information and Counselling Helpline* (1) which started to work in 1996, and every evening between 18-23 hours our well educated volunteers are receiving calls. *HIV/AIDS prevention program* (2) has been working since 1996 with different projects (trainings, researches, publishing information booklets, non-stop hotline for HIV+ people etc.). *Legal Aid and Counselling Service* (3) was started in 2001 (legal information, advice on any legal matter, legal aid service, publications etc.) and the *Personal Assistance Service* (4) has been working just for a few years. And the *Háttér Archive* is the fifth main project of the Society.

In addition to these main projects Háttér Society has taken an active role in *lobbying* for legal changes to end discrimination of LGBT+ people and families and to provide efficient legal responses to discrimination, harassment and violence suffered by LGBT+ people.

Háttér has participated in several *research projects* too that aim at providing a better understanding of the situation of LGBT people in Hungary.

The association regularly organizes awareness raising and *capacity building training* for members of the LGBT community, *HIV/AIDS prevention training* for students and professionals, and *sensitivity training* for professionals working with LGBT+ clients (for example: lawyers, police, teachers, child care services).

The volunteers of the Háttér Society have been taking an active part in *organizing* various *cultural and community events*: the annual *Budapest Pride* (LGBT+ Cultural and Film Festival) since 1997. (By the way, since 2001 the festival has been organized by the Budapest Pride / Rainbow Mission Foundation, of which Háttér Society is a founding member.)

In February 2013 together with Labrisz Lesbian Association we coordinated the first Hungarian *LGBT History Month*, in which more than a dozen different organizations and groups hosted various events. We launched this month-long program to start a tradition, we organize the event every year in February.

Most of our activities are run by volunteers with occasional funding for staff on a project base.

The Society is financially supported by mostly foreign donators like Open Society Foundations, ILGA-Europe, Norway Grants, programs of the European Commission.

Háttér Society is a member of ILGA-Europe and TransGender-Europe too.

For the active role in forming the LGBT community in Hungary *The Active Citizenship Award* has been given to the Háttér Society in 2012 from the Ambassador of the United States in Hungary.

2. Háttér Archive

We have been collecting books, newspaper articles, films etc. related to gay and lesbian issues from the beginning, because we needed information. In that time (the 1990's) there was not enough or up-to-date knowledge about the LGBT lifestyle, psychological origin, historical aspects etc. During this early times this was a simple collection but later we have gained more and more documents and it has become a serious amount of materials and we

have founded the Háttér Archive which is a unique LGBT+ library and archives in East Europe.

The *Háttér Archive* project is an integral part of the association, it is located in the office of Háttér Society.

The Archive currently holds about 1500 volumes of *books* including fiction and non-fiction literary works about various aspects of gay and lesbian lifestyle, the history of LGBT+ culture and movement, law, political, sociological, healthcare issues, art albums etc. We also hold academic writings, dissertations, thesis papers, essays: more than 300 issues of scientific or cultural periodicals covering LGBT+ topics. The language of most of the materials is Hungarian, but we also hold materials in English, German, French and some other languages too.

Most of the books we have got from private donations or from publishers' donations. We occasionally have funding for purchasing materials from various projects. (e.g. Open Society Institute, Norwegian Grants).

Besides the book collection, we also collect *press clippings* from various newspapers or periodicals covering LGBT+ themes (legal problems, political movements, HIV/AIDS, cultural events etc.). The press collection shows us the last 25-30 years of Hungary, and is thus a unique and valuable source of information on LGBT+ history in Hungary. We also have a full collection of Hungarian LGBT+ periodicals – for example *Mások*, which is a historical LGBT+ magazine, published every month from 1991 to 2008 and which represent the LGBT life in Hungary of this period. One of the most valuable foreign LGBT+ magazines we have is the famous historical American periodical the *One*, which we got as a donation from the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

Our audio-visual collection holds over 1000 *films* (documentary, feature films, short films) all over the world on videotapes, DVD or electronic form that have been screened at Hungarian LGBT+ film festivals or in Hungarian cinemas, or broadcasted on television or are downloadable from webpages of course. We are collecting audio records (interviews, radio programs etc.) as well.

The Archive tries to preserve the past in *pictures* too, that is why we have an archive of LGBT+ photos either (LGBT+-events, festivals, demonstrations, marches; LGBT+ scenes: bars, clubs, restaurants; LGBT+ personalities etc.) on paper or electronically displayed.

We also collect *small prints* (program guides, leaflets, flyers, brochures, invitation or entrance cards of bars, clubs, groups, festivals etc.) and *posters* related with LGBT+ cultural or community events or the LGBT+ community. We have a lot of other archival materials, gifts, T-shirts of festivals, *documents* and publications of all Hungarian LGBT+ groups etc. We collect private materials, letters and inheritance materials, legacies too.

3. Readers in the Archive

This collection can be available at a pre-agreed date in the Háttér Office for anybody who is interested. 3 main groups are the most typical: *students* who prepare their papers, theses and doctoral dissertations indicating that LGBTQI related topics are mainstreamed in the academia; *researchers* are provided access to hard-to-reach scientific materials to be used in various research projects (e.g. surveys among transgender people, young gay men, policemen, health workers etc.); *journalists* with access to larger audiences who can use our materials to show a more accurate and diverse picture of the LGBTQI community that goes beyond widespread stereotypes.

4. International and other relations

In 2008 we organized a study trip to IHLIA-HOMODOK (www.ihlia.nl), the greatest European LGBT+ Archive in Amsterdam. This project was very inspiring and gave us a lot of new ideas on what to collect more and how to process our materials. For many years we have been collaborating with IHLIA-Homodok by sending our materials (books, brochures, flyers etc.) for centralized archiving.

Since 2011 we have actively participated in the *OpenUp project* of IHLIA Homodok (http://www.ihlia.nl/english/english/english_home/OpenUpENG) and contributed to the planned creation of an international LGBTQI Heritage website as well.

We took part in *LGBT ALMS* (Archives, Libraries, Museums, Special Collections) *Conferences* in Amsterdam (2012) and London (2016) too.

In recent years, we have been invited to write essays on different LGBT+ topics, we were asked to participate in different researches (Social History of Homosexuality) or to hold lectures (e.g. HAS Courage program, which explores cultural dissent under Socialism in Eastern Europe <http://cultural-opposition.eu/>).

5. Plans for the future

The Háttér Archive is not only a special collection, but can also be an intellectual workshop that inspires research. Researchers working in Háttér Archive and we the organizers also perceive that new and undiscovered LGBT+ areas and subjects need to be explored, researched, and more materials could be explored and collected.

We consider it important to focus more on oral history in the future as well, because we have very few resources about the historical period before 1990 and information about this age. We believe that it is a very important duty to collect more interviews with LGBT+ people who were leaders or participants of the earlier LGBT+ movement in Hungary.

Since 2010 we have been working on a new *electronic catalogue* and full text *database* (of electronically available documents) similar to that of IHLIA-Homodok. The electronic database of LGBTQI-themed literary works, films, newspaper articles available in Hungary will be published on the internet soon. We are planning to extend this catalogue in the future to cover audio-visual materials as well as leaflets, posters, and other archival materials (photos etc.) we collect.

We are planning to launch a *website* on international and Hungarian LGBT+ history and also editing LGBT+-related articles on Wikipedia. We are thinking about founding a special LGBT+ *periodical* too where we can publish essays using the materials of the archive.

Some colleagues participate in the research of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS) on the 20th century social history of homosexuality – led by Dr. Judit Takács, researcher of the Institute for Sociology of HAS Centre for Social Sciences.

The present and future modernizing method of several libraries and archives is *digitization*, so we need to decide how we digitize our materials and how we publish them and finance it.

6. Labrisz Lesbian Association

Labrisz Lesbian Association was called into life by the need for an initiative which, apart from providing a community space, reflects on the social position of lesbian and bisexual women in a more organized form. It was officially registered in 1999, but the core group of the organization had been facilitating meetings and discussions since 1996. The most important purpose of Labrisz Lesbian Association is community building, strengthening the

self-acceptance and visibility of lesbian and bisexual women, and creating a discourse with society through cultural and community events, publications and our school program. We also seek to facilitate the exploration and documentation of lesbian culture and history. See <https://labrisz.hu>

7. Labrisz – Lesbian herstory project

Labrisz has been collecting and publishing written and audio-visual materials related to the association and the history of (Hungarian) lesbians. The main purpose of our forming [archives](#) is to more systematically collect and arrange autobiographical writings, correspondence, and other personal documents, as well as published articles and books related to women attracted to women in Hungary. We try to reveal all the different forms and shades of same-sex attractions in the past from cross-dressing and butch-femme relationships to intimate friendships, secret loves and out lesbians. The purpose of the archives is also to collect documents of the Hungarian lesbian movement including fanzines, fliers, leaflets, official papers, letters, as well as photo and video materials.

There are very few traces and resources of lesbian existence in Hungary from before the regime change, not to mention the pre-war period. Paradoxically, the fact that only male homosexuality was criminalized in Hungary (until 1961), involves that one of the main resources of pre-war homosexual lives (court cases) is missing in the case of women. The few available traces of female same-sex attractions before WW2 derive from the field of psychiatry, the contemporary tabloid press, or from a few personal documents of close female friendships (of married or “single” women). The stories of the few women loving women have been preserved mostly due to their public cultural/social position (like poet [Minka Czóbel](#), journalist [Sándor/Sarolta Vay](#), writer [Cécile Tormay](#), or poet [Sophie Török](#)). From the years after WW2, the private heritage of two out lesbians, writer [Erzsébet Galgóczi](#) and actress [Hilda Gobbi](#) are still waiting to be uncovered and are currently only partly accessible.

At the end of the 2000s, a founding member of Labrisz, film director Mária Takács, launched an oral history project, which set out to record the lives of middle-aged and elderly women who lived as lesbians during state socialism. The resulting documentary [Secret Years](#) was released in cinemas in 2009 and on DVD with subtitles in eleven languages in 2011. In 2015 its male “counterpart” [Hot Men, Cold Dictatorships](#) was presented too. Following each documentaries, a volume of interviews has also been published. Recently the interviews of *Secret Years* have been translated into [English](#); we found it important to make them available for a broader international audience, since access to such stories in Hungary (and the whole Central and Eastern European region) is quite limited.

The narratives of the interviewees create a colorful picture of recent Hungarian social history: the state socialist Kádár era and the period of transition. The women, aged forty to eighty, are professionals, employees, artists, and catering workers, and their stories span the oppressive atmosphere of the fifties through the gradually increasing openness of the sixties, seventies and eighties. Their stories reveal the hidden and semi-public urban spaces where lesbian women were able to meet. Some of them chose a kind of departure or “exodus” from society: The story of Szatina, a Hungarian village and its lesbian “colony” is especially intriguing in this respect. This experience offered the inspiration for Agáta Gordon’s novel [Kecskeríz](#) [Goat Rouge].

The English *Secret Years* interviews are the first ‘exhibit’ of our online [archives](#). We will be gradually adding digitized versions of further pieces of the archival materials and continue to collect, organize and catalogue written and visual documents of 20th-century Hungarian lesbian herstory. The long-term aim of the Hungarian Lesbian Herstory Archives is to serve

as a resource for scholars, activists and the wider public and to give place to cultural events related to lesbian culture and history. The space of the archives could thus combine the functions of research, movement, and community building. We are also interested in cooperating with other lesbian/women's/LGBT archives in the region and in 'Western' countries.

8. Summary

The two archives of Háttér and Labrisz make efforts to build professional contacts with foreign LGBT+ libraries as well, and apply new ideas in conferences and other forums. It is very important and useful to learn new ideas, best practices and exchange views with LGBT+ archives from other countries, especially with organizations in the region which have similar social and political circumstances. So we need to build partnerships onward.

Háttér Archive is open to cooperate with the Hungarian non-lgbt public libraries too. In 2016, we contacted the leaders of the Budapest Ervin Szabó Library. They were also open to cooperate. But it is also commonly seen that government-dependent institutions: libraries, museums, etc., beware of openly undertaking LGBT+ topics. For example, we organized a guided tour in one of the most prestigious Hungarian museums' exhibition of an openly transsexual artist in an LGBT Historical Month. The museum was very glad about that, but the museum's name was not allowed to appear in the program guide of the LGBT History Month. So the cooperation has limitations. It is not the same as in London, where the National Archives, a university, and other public cultural institutions served as venues for LGBT ALMS conference in 2016.

There are some kind of indifference/stolidity towards the librarians and the archivist professionals and – unfortunately, the members of the LGBT community too. We were connected to an information e-mail list of librarians, where an article about Háttér Archive's activity was very popular, but since then only one librarian has been interested in the collection.

The decrease of financial support also jeopardizes the future operation of LGBTQ archives and the organizations themselves.

The Archive does not have a place of its own, but we think that in a favorable political climate, we can more likely establish an LGBT+ community house where the Archive(s) can get an appropriate, independent placement. Here it would be possible to further develop the concept of the intellectual workshop, complemented with the function of a museum.

Another problem to solve is the strengthening of the awareness, interest, and activity of LGBTQ community and the reaching of non-LGBT people too. But I hope that events such as international conferences will give us the opportunity to get to know each other's organizations, methods of work and use in the archives, organization and financing. We need to understand each other: librarians, archivists all over the world.

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Documents of Háttér Society and Háttér Archive

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