

## Széchenyi National Casino

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### Abstract:

*The National Casino Association was founded in 1827 by István Széchenyi. For nearly 120 years, while it has existed, it was an integral part of the Hungarian public life and culture. The methodically collected and systematized library exceeded the country's public libraries qualitatively and quantitatively as well.*

*Terrible disasters hit the country and the members of the association as well: firstly the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 and the ensuing Hungarian War of Independence, then the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, later the First World War and the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, and finally the Second World War.*

*The Hungarian Minister of Interior dissolved the National Casino with a decree in the year 1945, because it proved to be a legal person contrary to the interests of the state.*

*According to the association's statutes, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences inherits all assets of the Casino in case of dissolution. And so it happened, now the library of the National Casino is part of the Library and Information Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences' collection. We had to wait for a long time for the processing. We talk about nearly 20.000 books, but the processing hasn't been finished yet, so we don't know the exact number. Until the end of the year 2015 about half of the collection has been catalogued to the Aleph electronic catalogue, in MARC21 format.*

**Keywords:** National Casino, István Széchenyi, Hungarian cultural heritage, library, Hungary

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### Introduction

Hungarian people have a very vicissitudinary history. This past motivated everybody who wanted to change the fate of Hungary. In this aspect there was a very important period of our history when the changes started. It was the Hungarian Reform Era (19<sup>th</sup> century) and one of the most determinative personalities was Count István Széchenyi. He represented the awakening of the Hungarian national identity. He introduced a lot of important reforms in order to progress. One of his merits was the foundation of the National Casino Association in 1827.

During its nearly 120 years of existence, it was an integral part of the Hungarian public life and culture. The National Casino established its own library for its members. They collected

the books from every disciplines and countries. The methodically collected and systematized library exceeded the country's public libraries qualitatively and quantitatively as well.

### **István Széchenyi and the National Casino**

After Széchenyi became acquainted with the European model he created a public forum for the Hungarian nobility. The National Casino soon became an unofficial parliament, where the Hungarian elites could discuss. However, the politics were banned. The founders wanted only a place to transcending caste divisions between nobles and bourgeois elites, where they can meet and smoke and read the journals together without stiffness or restraint. The casino attracted members from most prominent Hungarian families, ignoring the noble rank. And it was opened to the worthy strangers as well.

Széchenyi's visions were to establish civil society in Budapest, modernize Hungary, making also an economic modernization, and consolidate the Hungarian language instead of Latin. Széchenyi was thinking in a whole unit, he organized railroads, public horse races, Danube steamboats, and the first permanent bridge linking Buda and Pest; also supported cultural initiatives, his spectacular decision to donate his one year's income in order to contribute to the establishment of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (1825) traditionally marks the beginning of the Reform Era. For his actions, views and achievements we consider him as "the greatest Hungarian". Széchenyi was concerned about the future of Hungary and he really had a fear of national death. (Maxwell 2014)



With the foundation of the Casino he inspired a nation-wide trend for the liberal Hungarian nobility to make a civil society, to make Casinos in the countryside, in the big cities across the country and also in Transylvania. The Habsburg absolutism watched this movement very carefully, because casinos played central roles in Hungarian public life during the Reform Era. The most of the casinos served the purpose of association and concentration for nobles and commoners.

The National Casino turned into the most fashionable club in this era. Each year they published the current fund rules, policies and members' names. Strict rules related to the operation of the casino, membership and card games, if somebody did not repay the debt of the game, he could have been excluded. In István Széchenyi's testament, he bequeathed a gold cup to the Casino, and he requested to organize a dinner in his honor each year. This was the



Széchenyi feast, held every year during the operation of the association (with the exception of the war years).

### **The Library of the Casino**

When Széchenyi established the Casino, in 1827, he offered his own collection to the library of the association. His donation contained 338 books, and the members of the Casino collected 250 more for the beginnings. Seven years later, in 1834 the library owned 3000 volumes already. Most of the works were written in foreign languages. (Gyuricza 2016) The Casino helped spreading the Hungarian literature in the countryside. In the next decades the library has acquired more and more Hungarian works. (Maxwell 2014)

The library wasn't open for the public, only the members could use it and only locally. The collection contained books, newspapers, journals, magazines, maps and other printed matters. Most of the members donated more or less books for the library. In the nineteenth century there always was an official librarian who systematized, maintained the collection and documented the events. In the next century it was not always possible, they haven't got enough staff.

In the National Casino, the library consisted of one big hall, three rooms and one reading room. The books were in the hall, the journals and newspapers in the rooms. Several library catalogues facilitated the use (Gyuricza 2016):

- an alphabetical card catalogue (1873)
- a topic card catalogue (1873)
- an index in which books and new purchases are listed in alphabetical order
- and a printed catalogue (1852)



The library used a bibliographic and library classification based on Munich model. The books have been classified in 10 different fields, and in these fields the Hungarian, the related to Hungary and the foreign-language works were separated. The collection contains a large number of Hungarian literature, Hungarian history, Hungarian scientific literature, most of the Hungarian music, and all publications of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Kisfaludy Society. It was considered the oldest and most prestigious library in the country in the 1880s.

From a historical point of view terrible disasters hit the country and the nation which have affected the association as well: firstly the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 and the ensuing Hungarian War of Independence, then the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, later the First World War and the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, and finally the Second World War. In these terrible and heavy periods the National Casino was working continuously. After the historical disasters it stood up again and again. Support was given to his members.

The library of the National Casino had nearly 40.000 books before the Second World War. The leaders and the members tried to protect the property of the association, when they have sensed the danger, but after the World War II they were unable to recover the collection.

## The end of the Casino

The Minister of Interior of Hungary dissolved the National Casino with a decree in the year 1945, because it proved to be a legal person contrary to the interests of the state. According to the association's statutes, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences inherited all assets of the Casino in case of dissolution.

In this time, the National Casino owned the following items:

- two buildings that got a serious bomb attack in the war
- movable property objects (the members of the Casino tried to save these to the countryside before the war, but unfortunately most of these destroyed)
- some hunting trophies (the Academy has given these to the Natural History Museum as an eternal deposit)
- the catalogues and indexes of the Casino (we have never seen them anymore)  
➔ all of the documentation of the association and the library were destroyed

The library was in one of the bombed buildings<sup>1</sup> (Gyuricza 2016):

- 20-23.000 books were immediately transferred to the Library of the University (October 1945)  
➔ these were further transported to the building of the Academy (June 1947)
- the rest 6-10.000 books stayed in the bombed building for more than half a year  
➔ these were transported to the building of the Academy (May 1946)
- the more valuable books were hidden before the war in the cellar of the Parliament, where the enemy soldiers burned them



## The National Casino in the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences

Now the library of the National Casino is part of the Library and Information Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences' collection. We've been waiting for a long time process them but in the end of 2014 we started to explore this collection. We talk about nearly 20.000 books, but we don't know the exact numbers, as the work is not finished. The Hungarian Academy of Sciences asked me to research and cataloguing of the remained collection of the National Casino.

In the end of the last century was made a calculation. According to this, we have 13000 books and 6770 journals and magazines (around 450 titles). There are nearly 6000



<sup>1</sup> The numbers of the books differ from each other in the various written sources.

book records in the Aleph catalog of our library at the moment. About 4000 of them are Hungarian documents, rest of them are German, French, English, Latin or Italian materials. These books were published in the 19th century or at the first part of the 20th century. The numbers of the old books are more than 800 volumes. (Gyuricza 2016.) The first phase was the cataloguing of the Hungarian books, this work has been finished.



The library of the Academy lent 2500 volumes of journals for an exhibition some years ago to the Hungarian National Museum. These are still there, in the memorial room of Ferenc Széchenyi, the father of István Széchenyi.

The collection of National Casino is in one of our external warehouse sections, we didn't merge it with the main collection. These volumes are very dusty, damaged and musty. Some of these are shot through or contains bullet. Readers have limited access to this collection. The most books have half-leader or canvas binding, in the same style. A seal and ex libris can be found in every volume of the National Casino. Many volumes need restoration.

### **The present and future of the library of the Casino**

Until now more than half of the collection has been recorded to the Aleph electronic catalogue, in MARC 21 format. Beside this work, we started to research the history of the Casino and its library.

This collection is very important for the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and also for its library, it is a part of the Hungarian cultural heritage.

When we finish the processing of the books, we will start the statistical research of the collection.

### **Acknowledgments**

The source of the images from the National Casino and its library:

- Metropolitan Ervin Szabó Library, Budapest Collection, Budapest
- Budapest City Archives, Budapest

Pictures from the books are the author's own recordings.

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