István Monok, Director General of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Library and Information Centre, “Female Book Owners and Female Readers in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Hungary”

Nominated and introduced by Katalin Szende, Central European University, Budapest

István Monok (b. 1956) graduated from the University of Szeged in History and Hungarian Language and Literature (with a special strand in Latin) and later earned a further degree in Library Science. He received his doctorate from the same university in 1983, and was awarded the C.Sc. in Literary Sciences by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS) in 1992. His habilitation took place in 1993 and he became Doctor of the HAS in 2011. Following a career at the Central Library at the University of Szeged (at that time József Attila University), in the School of Library Science, and in the Institute of European Civilisation in Szeged, he was appointed Director General of the National Széchényi Library in Budapest and served in this capacity from 1999 to 2009. During his directorship he promoted the library’s international contacts and collaborations and the digitisation of its holdings for the Hungarian Electronic Library (MEK). He was also involved in the creation of EUROPEANA as a European Library board member and he is member of the advisory board of several major European libraries, including the Vatican Library.

Since 2010 he has been professor at the Károly Eszterházy College in Eger and at the University of Szeged, where he taught ever since his own graduation. In 2013 he was appointed Director General of the HAS Library and Information Centre and President of the Commission of the History of European Civilization. In the course of his teaching activity, he devised a special educational program for librarians working with old books and founded the Institute for Cultural History at the University of Szeged. He initiated and designed Cultural Heritage Studies programs both in Eger (2008) and in Szeged (2010).

His theses and dissertations submitted for the aforementioned academic degrees were all connected with the history of books and reading cultures from a social-historical point of view. As early as 1979, when he was still a graduate student, he initiated a research project on books and reading culture in Hungary in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. This choice of topic was closely connected to international research on these subjects in the 1970s conducted by Paul Raabe among other important researchers, aiming at investigating types of readers, reading habits and reading materials in their historical contexts. Monok recognised from the outset that the best sources for such inquiries were the various lists of private libraries which come down to us most frequently in probate inventories, testaments, court protocols, lists of confiscated property, canonical visitations, and so on. These lists are all the more precious as sources in the Hungarian context, because many other kinds of primary evidence on book production and publishing businesses – including many of the books themselves – were destroyed during the turbulent period of the Ottoman occupation in the Carpathian Basin after 1526 and the re-conquest of the country at the end of the seventeenth century.

Work on the inventories of books, such as collecting relevant archival material, transcribing and editing the documents and analysing their contents, required the concentrated effort of several dozen scholars, mostly Monok’s close colleagues and students, who formed a school in the proper sense of the word. The series ‘Adattár XVI-XVIII. századi szellemi
The three most important questions that Monok and his school addressed on the basis of this material were

1. which social strata were represented among the readers?
2. which books were read?
3. how did reading habits change over time?

Answering these simple-sounding but in fact rather complex questions and assessing the impact of the books listed as property of the members of various social strata on the spiritual formation of their owners and the intellectual life of their time means studying other kinds of sources as well, for instance diary entries discussing reading experiences and private correspondence regarding the ownership and use of books, and even records connected to bookbinders and bookbinding. Going beyond these references, entries of ownership, mark-ups, and interlinear and marginal glosses in surviving books need to be consulted.

The article offered here in translation is a representative example of what results can be produced by complex research based on these sources, with additional attention to issues of gender and of female agency in the preservation, use, and production of books. It also shows that the kingdom of Hungary and the principality of Transylvania were part of one and the same intellectual landscape during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This milieu was extremely open and receptive to the diverse currents of European intellectual life, the main vehicles of which – apart from personal contacts of varying intensity – were printed books.