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The Trophy Collection of Books from *Sárospatak* in Cultural Context of the New Millenium

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Strange as it may seem, the problem of cultural valuables displaced as a result of wars is discussed as a cultural issue in the last place. Yet the very roots of this problem are related to basic cultural archetypes, compared to which all legal and political aspects are secondary. Originally, victors treated captured “cultural valuables” (as we call them now) as material valuables and, at the same time, as sacral ones. Under modern civilization cultural and sacral values have merged in many ways: the fruits of other people’s spiritual culture are their sacred objects, so to appropriate such objects means, consequently, to defeat the enemy’s spirit. That is why the issue of “trophy” objects of art and books is so important to the tolerant mentality which will not stand either victory or defeat in spiritual sphere.

One may hope that, in the end, legal and political aspects of displaced valuables will stop being a problem of interest to mankind as a whole. Some particular disputes to be settled in courts will probably remain, and more displaced objects will be discovered and dealt with one way or another in accordance with established regulations, but nothing will survive of political issues which people endeavor to settle in connection with questions of displaced valuables at present.

However as it has not happened yet, it is quite reasonable to consider this problem from another point of view: what role do or can displaced book collections in their present state play in culture?

First of all I would like to note that there exists a very small number of books whose value is comparable to that of masterpieces of fine art, so that when it comes to books, only large collections are valuable first

of all while the value of every separate book is relatively low. But book collections were, as a rule, split during displacement thereby losing their value.

This time I am going to speak about the trophy book collection from a Hungarian town of Sárospatak. First, to touch upon such subject is natural for a librarian; second, the staff of the Library for Foreign Literature took an immediate part in this project; and, in the third and highly important place, this project sets an excellent example of international cooperation, enriching culture of humanity as a whole.

In my opinion, displaced books are valuable mainly because they used to be (and virtually still are) parts of *larger collections* put together in former times.

This applies in full measure to the Sárospatak Reformed College's collection, transferred as a result of World War II to one of Russian libraries, namely to the Nizhny Novgorod State Regional Scientific Library (then Nizhny Novgorod was named Gorky).

To begin with, Sárospatak is a small town in the North-East of Hungary. From the 16th century on it has been widely known in Europe as an educational and cultural centre. The Reformed College's Library was founded in the 16th century - at the same time as the College itself. The core collection consisted mainly of Protestant theological books in both Hungarian and foreign languages. In building up the Library stock the decisive factor was that it had been conceived as a large collection of printed books and manuscripts on the history of Hungarian education, upbringing and culture.

By the beginning of World War II the collection amounted to 73 719 volumes. In 1938 for reasons of safety the most precious books had been transferred from Sárospatak to Budapest and deposited in two metropolitan banks (the Hungarian Commercial Bank and the First National Savings Bank) where they were kept during World War II. However at the end of the War both banks were demolished and the most valuable part of the Sárospatak collection vanished. It was believed to have been lost forever until the 1990s when most of these books were found in the Nizhny Novgorod State Regional Scientific Library.

While laboriously reconstructing the fate of the Sárospatak books on the territory of Russia, we managed to find out that in 1945 a unit of the Soviet Army returning from Germany brought to Gorky a large collection of Hungarian cultural valuables. Among them there were books which were later identified as those from the Sárospatak Reformed College. It is still not quite clear how such large collection of Hungarian valuables happened to arrive in Gorky on the same train as this unit of the Soviet Army. This issue is yet to be thoroughly studied. Unfortunately, no actual witness left any record of the events, and documents kept at the museum are rather inadequate and of a later origin. Nevertheless, we managed to establish some facts. At first, all valuables had been housed in the building of the Gorky Commandant's office, on the Novgorod Kremlin's territory, and were kept there for some time.

Then military and civil authorities came to an agreement on moving all valuables to the Gorky Fine Arts Museum. There the exhibits were placed in three separate storerooms. The books were set up in a small room of about 10 square meters on open shelves rising from the floor to the ceiling. First inventories of and documentation on Hungarian valuables moved to the Museum were made a number of years later since the military administration refused to sign any acts of delivery. The list of the book collection was made even later, and no trophy books, except publications in French and German, were ever described by the Museum workers at that. The whereabouts of all trophy Hungarian valuables transferred to the Museum was a matter of utmost secrecy. Thus, the books had been kept in the Gorky Fine Arts Museum in the atmosphere of complete oblivion until March of 1960, when Vladimir Baturo, newly appointed director of the Museum, decided to expand the facilities at the expense of the room where the trophy books were stored. The books mostly did not meet the Museum's specialization, and this also helped in their transfer to the Gorky Regional Scientific Library. In the spring of 1960 about 1000 books in different European languages including Latin were delivered to the Library in three days under a verdict of the regional cultural administration. Kapiton Kustov, deputy director of the Library, supervised the delivery.

There the books became “hostages of silence” once again, sharing the typical fate of all trophy books transferred to the Soviet Union.

The books were kept in a secret (so-called “special”) storeroom, inaccessible not only to general public but to majority of librarians as well. Those seeking access to the books had to obtain a special admission of the state security bodies. The books had no inventory numbers, no bibliographical descriptions and not a soul in the library knew of their existence at all but the three staff members, who had taken part in their delivery.

The books were finally ‘revealed’ 50 years later, in 1994, after the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation had given an order to open up “special” storeroom in cultural institutions. By that time even the experts working in the Library for many years could not say what were these books and how they had found their way in a “special” storeroom. Only one woman who had been involved in the delivery in 1960 was still alive to identify the books.

In this case we have to deal with a highly significant part of a large collection of printed books and manuscripts on the history of Hungarian education, upbringing and culture which is of great bibliographic, historic and cultural value.

Suffice it to say that the Catalogue of the Sárospatak collection brought out in Moscow by the Rudomino Publishing House in 1997 and compiled by librarians of the Library for Foreign Literature in Moscow and of the Nizhny Novgorod Regional Scientific Library jointly with Hungarian specialists contains descriptions of 1337 old-printed books, as well as of manuscripts and fragments thereof.

The most precious items of the collection transferred to Russia are certainly incunabula, among which there are such rarities as a unique “Catholicon” printed in Mainz 1460, an illustrated edition of the Bible printed in Nuremberg by Anton Koberger in 1483, 172 specimens of publications of the 17th century by the famous Elzevir’s Publishing House, some of which are exceptionally rare. The collection also contains many publications in the old Hungarian language either printed in Hungary or belonging to Hungarian authors but brought out abroad. Among these publications there is the first edition of lyric poems by Bálint Balassi, one of the most renowned Hungarian Renaissance poets. There is no need to point out that the manuscripts and numerous abstracts of dissertations in this displaced Collection are unique because either there is just one copy of them in existence or they were brought out in a small number of copies. Yet it is essential to note in this respect that quite a number of the most remarkable printed editions in question, being most rare and important as they are, are represented, some of them by up to four copies, in collections of some other Russian libraries - such as the State Library and the National Library.

Russian–Hungarian co-operation on the issues of reciprocal restitution of cultural valuables has been going on for eight years now. It was in 1993 that the two parties agreed to establish a joint Russian–Hungarian working group to settle reciprocal restitution claims concerning cultural valuables displaced during World War II. One of the group’s main activities was in particular identification of the books from the Sárospatak Reformed College’s library kept in Nizhny Novgorod.

In view of the law “On Cultural Valuables Displaced to the USSR as a Result of World War II and Located on the Territory of the Russian Federation” adopted in 1999, the hopes of Hungarian officials as to returning the Sárospatak book collection back to Hungary have become well-grounded.

Under Article 8, clause 2, of the above-mentioned Law cultural valuables which were property of religious organizations or private charities and which were used exclusively for religious or charitable aims and did not serve the interests of militarism or Nazism can be returned to the country of origin. Guided by this Article of the Russian Law, Hungarian authorities sent in a claim to the Government of the Russian Federation concerning, among other things, restitution of all books from the Sárospatak Reformed College’s collection. At present the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation in its capacity as a

plenipotentiary federal body charged with the preservation of cultural valuables is considering this claim and carrying on constant consultations and negotiations with Hungarian representatives. As far as I know, one of the main problems obstructing practical solution of the question of returning the book collection is that so far there is no legislation in the Hungarian Republic on gratuitous return of Russian cultural valuables plundered during World War II which are or may be located on the territory of Hungary. Moreover, in accordance with an examination made by experts of the Russian State Library, the books from the Sárospatak Reformed College's collection are of great historic, cultural and bibliographic importance. That is true, but what this wording actually means in the framework of the Russian legislation is: a special Federal law must be adopted to allow the return of this particular collection, which, in its turn, entails delay in the process of restitution. But in my opinion, the most important thing is that the process has not only started but is progressing even if slowly and can hardly be stopped. We have already got some positive results in the field of restitution. For example, this year 115 stained-glass windows from Marien Kirchen kept in the Hermitage storerooms for over 50 years have been returned to Germany under the Federal law specially adopted towards this end.

In conclusion I would like to emphasize that the residence of the Sárospatak book collection in Russia for a long span of time is an important fact of cultural history. After all it is in Russia that these books have gained a new life since they filled up to a certain degree the gaps made in our culture by the Soviet regime based on total ideological control: when books arrived by cargo car loads, censorial supervision willy-nilly became weaker. Maybe, but for the World War II, Soviet scholars would have never got many important old theological and philosophic works at their disposal.

I am not trying in this way to justify illegal actions when they were illegal indeed, I want to illustrate a rather simple idea: residence in Russian libraries is an important "biographical" fact in the life of books and book collections. That is why, even when these books should unquestionably be returned to their previous owner, this fact is only a part of the problem.

The Sárospatak Reformed College's collection could be simply returned to Hungary on the basis of preliminary lists of books, since the printed catalogue jointly compiled by Russian and Hungarian colleagues has not so much put information on these publications into scientific use as rather has recorded a certain stage in the Sárospatak collection's biography. Such experience should by no means remain unique. It is regrettable that some owners when discovering parts of their former collections try to "skip" the procedure of bibliographical description, thinking that it makes no sense at all. An opportunity to return a collection is at the same time an opportunity to comprehend what has happened to it, and every reasonable human being should take interest in it. In other words, displacement of book collections in space, even violent and barbaric, is in itself an essential fact of culture. To neglect it and pretend that it has no significance is to impoverish human culture, while, on the contrary, to record and comprehend this fact means to enrich culture.