

## **ERNŐ BALLA: THE READING LIBRARIAN AND THE LIBRARIAN READER (1927-2000)**

The history of Cluj University Library, one of Eastern-Central Europe's most famous libraries, is only sketchy, and will not be written for a long time yet. The archive of the institute, mixed with the archive of the University itself, is kept in the National Archive, without being catalogued.

However, despite changes in the formal structure of institutes, their history is always connected to human fate. Moreover, the way in which certain people's fate works out in certain periods of time, in connection with certain institutes, is perhaps as characteristic or typical for a period than the changes within the institutes.

Despite his strong individuality, the fate of Ernő Balla in the library can also be considered typical. Similarly to the famous name dedicated the library, Lucian Blaga, he became a librarian when his post at the university was suspended. "Burying" in the library was a usual practice between the 1950s and the 1980s for those who were sent away from the University for various reasons. It is true, that this way worthy people came to libraries who would never have thought of becoming librarians. However, it is another question how libraries made use of this opportunity...

Ernő Balla was born in 1927 in Nagyszalonta (Salonta), a country-town in the Western corner of the country. This is the native town of János Arany, one of the most renowned Hungarian poets. As the son of a family moving from building site to building site, he went to elementary school in Bucharest, then in Nagyenyed (Aiud), in the Școala Normală de Aiud, and continued his studies in Salonta.

In spring 1945 when the Soviet army overran the country, he was in Budapest. In the meantime he took an active part in the work of the Christian Youth Union.

In 1946, he entered the Faculty of Letters and History of the "Babeș-Bolyai" University.

In January 1948 he went to Budapest to receive and help his brother who had returned from captivity. However, this trip proved to be ominous: at his return the frontier guards arrested him because of the confused situation and “paper problems” and handed him over to the authorities.

The examination amounted to a show trial – because of his activity in the Christian Youth Union too – and the Military Court in Cluj sentenced him to 3 years of imprisonment and a fine of 4000 lei.

He served his term in the Văcărești prison in Bucharest. He worked in the printing press of the prison and continued with a work that he began earlier: he translated *Amintiri din copilărie* (*Childhood Memories*) by Ion Creangă which has already become a classical work in Romanian literature, into Hungarian.

After ten months, in a looser moment and as a consequence of the examinations he was released so that he could take his examinations. He finished his university studies in 1950 and was appointed assistant at the Romanian Department of the University.

He was officially rehabilitated in the summer of 1957. However, he bore the invisible and silent mark of his sentence until his retirement.

In 1964, his post was suspended due to staff-reductions at the unified “Babeş-Bolyai” University and he became librarian at the Documentation Department of the Central University Library in Cluj. He worked there for 23 years until his retirement in 1987.

His work as a teacher and librarian was accompanied by his activity as a researcher and translator, although with varying intensity. He was mainly interested in Romanian-Hungarian relationships and the relations and links between Romanian and Hungarian history, culture and literature. He also paid attention to the history and culture of Transylvanian Germans in a characteristic Transylvanian way. His research activity and translations were based on this too. Therefore he was hard hit by his dismissal from the University. Afterwards he hardly wrote or published anything.

It is also true that the internal policy of the Romanian regime after 1964 stressed national communism more and more, therefore the authentic approach of the various ethnic groups in Romania was no longer a desirable political objective. On the contrary!

Regarding the opportunities and impasses of Hungarian-Romanian relations, Ernő Balla was most interested in the double decomposition of the revolutions in 1848. He considered the Central-Eastern European fate of 1848 the model of the historical weight of and responsibility for common ideals and missed opportunities, a model with ominous consequences and conclusions.

This is why he translated, commented and edited texts of Cezar Boliac, an important and clear-sighted revolutionist-writer from Muntenia (the Southern part of Romania), and this is why he wrote an introductory analysis to the play by Camil Petrescu about Bălcescu, another important Romanian revolutionist-intellectual.

In the writings of these two politicians he looked for the common possibilities of the 1848 Hungarian and Romanian revolution, but also the limits and deadlocks of history, as something on which one must build but of which one must also be wary of.

The traps of 1848 preoccupied him perhaps until the end of his life, but on this subject and *in this spirit* less and less could be published in Romania after 1964.

The translation of the novel *Ciocoi vechi și noi* (*Old and New Masters*) by N.Filimon, another important Romanian writer, which had its third edition in 1988, is also linked by its subject matter to the history of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romania (Muntenia). This book is about the circumstances preceding and leading to 1848, and deals with the internal aspects and characters of the history of Muntenia, rather than Hungarian-Romanian relations. (Many Romanian intellectuals and literary historians think that this novel has its actuality from the point of view of characters in contemporary Romanian society, because its central character is an unscrupulous careerist completely matching the Balkan humus, a character that unfortunately is also present today.)

As to the cultural-historical and symptomatic aspects of this third edition, Ernő Balla wrote a postscript but this was not published because of censorial reasons. The reasons for this are clear: Ernő Balla stated that the previous (1954 and 1964) editions were incomplete (the same as the Romanian and German editions.)

Obviously, the ambiguous sentences referring to utopian communism or characterisations different from the evaluations of the official Romanian historiography and observations regarding the Russian Army had been omitted.

The postscript written by Ernő Balla focussed exactly on these... therefore another postscript was published which did not even mention these relevant aspects.

In the meantime he worked at the Documentary Department of the University Library as a reference librarian. Moreover, he devised the concept of the Reference Room of the library in 1964-1965, as well as the system of its functioning and use. He had soon become the “grey eminence” of the library who was much appreciated by university professors, researchers, students and many of his colleagues.

In spite of this, I think that his career in the library was a dead-end job to which the distrust of the political and administrative leadership had doomed him. His knowledge and judgement could only be “used” within these narrow frames...

However, such worthy people could not completely be dispensed with, although they had come to certain institutions because of situational reasons. Anyway, on account of his education and inclination to research he had an interest towards everything regarding the arrangement and retrieval of information in culture and science, with special regard to reference services. He presented several papers on this subject in scientific sessions.

Ernő Balla belonged to the small group of librarians who were denoted in the literature of the 1980s with the fashionable term of “librarians of double specialization”. They said this, perhaps unconsciously, about people who were familiar with information processing techniques and were scholars of another cultural field and had therefore, obviously, a clearer view of the *sense* of library activities as well.

They were also called, perhaps again unconsciously, “research librarians”, although it is unclear what is the meaning of the word “research”, whether it is restricted - in an intensive way – to research related to librarianship...

These more or less consistent fashion words flow into or get drowned in the term “librarian specialist” which seems to denote someone who has a knowledge and skills of IT in the context of libraries (equipment and networks too). In spite of its content, this concept has its rootlessness too...

Therefore I feel that Ernő Balla would have rather be called a reading librarian or librarian reader. However, we must bear in mind that there are only a few such people, even in other parts of the world, even though for completely different reasons.

Nevertheless it is paradoxical that communism has inflated the number of these librarians in all countries and on the other hand has isolated them or wasted the living-space around them and the possibilities offered by it.

Ernő Balla was not a traditional librarian “of encyclopaedic (pseudo) knowledge”, on the contrary, in the organicity of his own research he discovered the library as such again and again. This is why he was so open towards new developments in library technology in other places.

He remained therefore a reading librarian and librarian reader all along.

I.K.

## **A BIBLIOGRAPHIC INSTITUTION : ZOE BUZ**

Research librarians are almost an endangered species in Romania. It was a result of the communist policy of education, research and culture that people capable and inclined to conduct research ended up in libraries (and public libraries) before 1989. After the 1989 events human resource management in libraries was mainly determined by the confusion and dynamics of the