

Documenting the Hungarian Heritage of the US: Efforts at Home and Abroad

Rutgers University has made this article freely available. Please share how this access benefits you.

Your story matters. <https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/52299/story/>

This work is an **ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT (AM)**

This is the author's manuscript for a work that has been accepted for publication. Changes resulting from the publishing process, such as copyediting, final layout, and pagination, may not be reflected in this document. The publisher takes permanent responsibility for the work. Content and layout follow publisher's submission requirements.

Citation for this version and the definitive version are shown below.

Citation to Publisher Niessen, James P. (2013). Documenting the Hungarian Heritage of the US: Efforts at Home and Abroad. *Slavic & East European Information Resources* 14(4), 234-241. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15228886.2013.850611>.

Citation to this Version: Niessen, James P. (2013). Documenting the Hungarian Heritage of the US: Efforts at Home and Abroad. *Slavic & East European Information Resources* 14(4), 234-241. Retrieved from [doi:10.7282/T3F76G12](https://doi.org/10.7282/T3F76G12).

Terms of Use: Copyright for scholarly resources published in RUcore is retained by the copyright holder. By virtue of its appearance in this open access medium, you are free to use this resource, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings. Other uses, such as reproduction or republication, may require the permission of the copyright holder.

Article begins on next page

Documenting the Hungarian Heritage of the US: Efforts at Home and Abroad

JAMES P. NIESSEN*

Alexander Library, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA

Resources on the history of Hungarians the US have been an object of extraordinary interest among information professionals in Hungarian in recent years. The article describes the creation of the major US Hungarica collections and efforts to document Hungarica in the United States.

KEYWORDS Hungary, Hungarian, Hungarica, United States, émigré, collections, libraries, archives, collaboration, cooperation

Resources on the history of Hungarians the US have been an object of extraordinary interest among information professionals in Hungarian in recent years. The accompanying studies by my colleagues in Hungary will describe the efforts there with regard to both library and archival institutions. My contribution will seek to draw them together by examining the institutional landscape in the US and establishing an international context.

With the special exceptions of the Library of Congress and National Archives, the great research collections about Hungary in the United States have arisen at universities where Hungarian Studies is pursued as an academic field: Columbia, Indiana, Illinois, and (on a smaller

* Address correspondence to James P. Niessen, World History Librarian, Alexander Library, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ 08901-1169, USA. E-mail: niessen@rutgers.edu

scale) Rutgers, Pittsburgh, Case Western Reserve, and a few other schools. The academic field dates primarily to the period after 1945. Rarely did it arise in places with a large Hungarian population. The support of ethnic organizations and populations was truly important for study programs at Case Western Reserve University and in Cleveland in the 1950s and at Rutgers in New Brunswick in the 1960s thru 1980s. However, the programs at Columbia and Indiana have reached a dramatically higher level in terms of curricular offerings, degree programs, and the size of their book collections.¹ The ethnic community had a negligible impact here. Academic leadership and funding opportunities provided by the Cold War were decisive.

We observe a different situation in the case of public libraries. The massive influx of Hungarian immigrants from the 1890s to 1914, parallel to that of other East European peoples, coincided with the expansion of public library services. This expansion found its expression in a philosophical change (adopting a more supportive, less didactic stance toward users' reading tastes) and library buildings' construction funded by the philanthropy of Andrew Carnegie. The prevailing American policy of welcoming the immigrant found its counterpart in the policy of the American Library Association to support collection development in the immigrants' vernacular. Vernacular collections, it was argued, would ultimately encourage assimilation by helping immigrants adjust to live in America and feel at home. To this end the ALA distributed title recommendations for foreign language acquisitions and vernacular translations of primers on American history and government. A monograph by Ilona Kovács shows the evolution of these policies and of the Hungarian collections in the Hungarian neighborhoods of four cities up to 1940: New York, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis.²

The assembly of collections about the Hungarian-Americans was for many years the work of just two individuals. Charles Feleky (1863-1930) worked in the theater in New York City. He sought to assemble a comprehensive collection of works in English about Hungary and Hungarians, be they books, periodicals, clippings, broadsides, scores, and maps. By virtue of the language, much of this material pertained to Hungarian-Americans and not Hungary. After his death, Hungarian authorities purchased the collection from his widow and used it to constitute the core of the Hungarian Reference Library in New York, which operated from 1937 to 1942. The library's brief existence was a lively one, attracting many visitors not only for the collection but also for lectures, exhibits, concerts, dancing, and other activities. The librarian and deputy director, Joseph Szentkirályi, was also Columbia's instructor in Hungarian language and literature during these years. After the onset of war with Hungary in 1942, the American government sequestered the collection of the library, and it was stored at Columbia. Finally the Library of Congress acquired the collection in 1953. Eventually the Columbia library acquired the titles not needed by the Library of Congress.³

The other great Hungarian-American bibliophile, Edmund Vasváry, focused more explicitly on American Hungarica. Vasváry (1888-1977) lived in Pittsburgh. His collection includes clippings, manuscripts, photographs, and over 1000 books and pamphlets published in Hungarian America. The collector willed the collection to Szeged, Hungary where it forms the core of a collection of American Hungarica residing in the Somogyi Library. Microfilms of the collection may be found in the Library of American Hungarian Foundation in New Brunswick, New Jersey and in the National Széchényi Library in Budapest.⁴

The collections of Feleky and Vasváry helped raise awareness of the importance of Hungarian-American documentation that might be found in other repositories. We must bear in mind not only the disparate location of collections, but the different kinds of collecting institutions: ethnic organizations, churches, private and academic libraries and archives, and the Library of Congress and National Archives. By examining these categories, we can understand the different degrees to which materials are adequately described and available for research. The institutional context is also important for appraising whether these collections, and not only those of private individuals, may end up in repositories back in Hungary.⁵

Hungarian ethnic organizations followed the example of Feleky and Vasvári in developing libraries, archives, and museums that would receive resources donated by Hungarian individuals and make them available for research. Relying primarily on donations, they often suffer from the lack of a coherent collecting policy, collection description, or distinction between materials pertaining to Hungary and to Hungarian America. The funding for these institutions also often relies upon donations from the Hungarian-American community, which is subject to the ebb and flow of immigration, assimilation, and an aging population. This financial basis is a source of uncertainty about these repositories' future viability; their staffing and hours of operation are limited. Four such organizations should be mentioned here, though there are many much smaller ones whose viability is even more questionable. The largest has its own entry in this guide, the Hungarian Heritage Center of the American Hungarian Foundation in New Brunswick. Much smaller but still important, especially for its collection of Cleveland Hungarian books and periodicals, is the Hungarian Heritage Museum and Library, maintained by the Cleveland Hungarian Historical Society.⁶ The American Hungarian Library and Historical Society of New York, which also has an entry in this guide, is an example of a smaller ethnic

organization that surrendered part of its manuscript collection to the National Széchényi Library. The Bethlen Museum and Archives in Ligonier, Pennsylvania, an hour from Pittsburgh, is an officially registered non-profit organization in Ligonier, Pennsylvania that deposited most of its collection, similar in its heterogeneity to the Vasvári Collection, in the Hungarian Heritage Center in 1998. A smaller portion of the collection remained in Ligonier, and now the organization is reportedly building a new archival facility for Reformed Church records that could conceivably also house the Bethlen Collection some day.⁷

Churches have long been important institutions in Hungarian community life. The sacramental records make church archives valuable for Hungarian genealogy. But the churches and their pastors were community leaders and participated in the organization of community festivals. Hence the archives often include papers with correspondence about the Hungarian community, photographs, and the records of affiliated groups. Almost never do they boast staff dedicated to collection support and research assistance, although church secretaries may fill this role. As populations age, assimilate, or move away, many churches close. Catholic canon law stipulates that the sacramental records of suppressed churches be taken over by the parishes into which they are subsumed, but the fate of non-sacramental records is less clear. The disposition of Protestant church records is even less clear. Fortunately the efforts of the Bethlen Archives have salvaged many Reformed congregations' records.

Several major private and academic repositories have collected newspapers and records of East European ethnic groups. These institutions are managed by professional staff, have good collection descriptions, and facilitate convenient access for researchers. There is a firm and reliable institutional commitment to the preservation of their material. The Balch Institute for

Ethnic Research no longer has an independent existence, but its collections have been fully integrated into the holdings of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Some of the papers of Hungarian individuals and organizations there have a regional focus, but many do not. The holdings of the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota have a broader geographical scope, and include important organizational records. The website of the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago has a database for US and Canadian Ethnic Newspapers that lists 19 Hungarian titles, all available via Interlibrary Loan to institutional members.⁸ The Hoover Institution at Stanford University is rich in the personal papers of émigré politicians. Our guide identifies the papers of important Hungarians at Columbia and Princeton.

The Library of Congress has relatively modest holdings of Hungarian-American newspapers, but the papers of several important Hungarian-American scientists and good holdings of books in English about Hungary and Hungarians thanks in part to its purchase of the New York Hungarian Reference Library (NYHRL) collection. The biographical files of the NYHRL, covering 920 individuals, are also available in microfilm from the Library of Congress.⁹ The repositories of the National Archives and Records Administration are essential for the investigation of Hungarian immigration, the involvement of the Hungarian government in the immigrant population, and the lobbying of émigré organizations with the American government. The public mission of these national institutions ensures that they will preserve this material and make it accessible, but likely not give it the degree of attention and research support it would receive in institutions with a more focused collection scope.

The Hungarian-American collections are the object of growing attention in Hungary today. National libraries everywhere, and especially in Eastern Europe, have the mission of

identifying, and if possible acquiring copies of, publications and papers that belong to their national heritage. The National Széchényi Library defines these documents of the national heritage, Hungarica, as works in Hungarian, by Hungarians, about Hungarians, or originating in a territory that belonged at that time to Hungary. The pioneer of Hungarian bibliography in the nineteenth century, Károly Szabó, was at pains to include publications appearing abroad, or forgotten in far away collections, in order to provide scholars with a complete understanding of national heritage. This heritage had to include those patriots who were forced to publish abroad due to censorship at home, as well as those territories that had been separated from the homeland in the course of history, like Transylvania where Szabó worked in the decades after its reunion with Hungary.¹⁰ As our articles by Ilona Kovács and Nóra Deák show, the Széchényi Library has continued to be diligent in the documentation of Hungarica publications and manuscripts.

Hungary's territorial fluctuation brought special concerns for the country's archivists as well. While the National Library focused on publications and persons, the National Archives managed the records of public administration on the national territory. After the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, the National Archives brought to Budapest the records of the Court Chancery, with which the Habsburg authorities had managed Hungary from Vienna, and the records of the Gubernium from Transylvania with which they had run that province as a separate crown land. The Treaty of Trianon after World War I brought an end to Greater Hungary, but it lived on in the continued operation of the central archives in Budapest.¹¹ By agreement with the Hungarian government, Hungarian archivists were also placed in the central Vienna archives in order to facilitate Hungarian research there. Then in the communist era the National Archives launched a massive effort to identify and then microfilm Hungarica records in the archives of Hungary's successor states. Documentation trips began in 1952, and by 1992 microfilm had

been created in 326 foreign archives.¹² My impression is that this film was rarely consulted by researchers, who could (with more or less difficulty) consult the originals in the neighboring countries' archives. They were rather an expensive insurance policy against deteriorating terms of access and preservation. The National Archives of Hungary preserves three reports about archival Hungarica in the US, but these reports were never published or followed up by microfilming of the originals.¹³

The efforts of the National Library and Archives for the documentation and preservation of Hungarica have focused overwhelmingly on the successor states rather than America. The minority existence of Hungarians in neighboring countries is often in the public eye, a patriotic *cause célèbre*, and their putative repression, and the need to resist assimilation, is axiomatic. Just as most archival microfilming takes place in the neighboring countries, most of the support for minority librarians and the digitization of minority publications in recent years was directed at Romania, Slovakia, and the successor states of Yugoslavia. The presentations at the most recent World Congresses of Hungarian Librarians made this abundantly clear. A large percentage of attendees came to Budapest from the neighboring countries and spoke about Hungarian library services and collections and, this year, their impressive achievements in digitization.¹⁴ The dynamic of ethnic assimilation for Hungarian Americans is viewed differently.

The option to repatriate, and not just document, the Hungarian American collections, became more palatable as the Hungarian regime softened. In 1972 Edmond Vasváry deeded his collection to the Somogyi Library in his Hungarian home town, Szeged, and the collection was

delivered there after his death five years later. The *Vasváry Collection Newsletter*, published in Szeged since 1989, has focused on Hungarian American studies and collections.

The change of political regime shortly thereafter has increased the readiness of Hungarian Americans to donate their collections to a Hungarian repository. Many went to Szeged, most notably the collection of Hungarian American newspapers of Steven Bela Vardy. But, as Béla Nóvé notes, they have gone to much larger repositories as well. The collection activity now extends over more than two decades, and has intensified. Hungarian and Fulbright grants have supported the work of Hungarians and assisted short-staffed Hungarian American organizations in cataloging and archival processing.

Hungarian culture abroad has received unprecedented attention from the conservative governments of Viktor Orbán in 1998-2002 and since 2010. The “Status Law” passed in 2001 sought to aid Hungarians abroad by providing them with a special identify document that would enable them to work in Hungary three months each year, and a law passed in 2012 defined a Hungarikum as an object identified by the Hungarium Committee for which Hungarians are known worldwide, that considered characteristically Hungarian.

The establishment of the Ithaka-program [Ithaka Program] in 2001, during Orbán’s first government, intensified the increased interest in the acquisition of diaspora collections. The program’s stated goal is the provision of shipping and insurance costs for “the repatriation of papers and collections belonging to Hungarian art and scholarship that are of national political importance and their placement in public collections in Hungary.” 43 grant proposals were received and 33 grants were awarded. The collections brought home through the program were quite varied: for example the papers of poet Jenő Zsida went to the Petőfi Literary Museum, the

American István Kölesey's zoological collection to the Natural Science Museum, and an American émigré's internal home decoration to the Szentendre Open Air Museum. The program was expanded in 2012 to include funding for grantees' travel to a foreign country to personally assess a collection's value.¹⁵

The assessment of collections is also the goal of a new scholarship program announced in 2013 by the Balassi Institute, an organization with the special mission of connecting diaspora Hungarians to the home country. The Kőrösi Csoma Sándor program awarded scholarships to 47 young people, who were sent to the US and Canada to "familiarize themselves with the everyday life of the Hungarian diaspora and assist it." The Kőrösi Csoma fellows are especially interested in smaller collections found in Hungarian organizations, and seek to compile rough inventories of them in association with not only names and conventional addresses but also GPS coordinates.¹⁶

Hungarian support for the processing and maintenance of diaspora institutions' collections, and the identification of collections for repatriation, are now running in tandem. The principal targets for acquisition have been private individuals' collections. These are collections that might earlier have gone, and may still go, to repositories in the diaspora country. These efforts reveal surprising pessimism concerning the viability of Hungarian ethnic organizations and identity. It is too early to judge whether this pessimism is justified.

¹ Steven Bela Vardy, *The Hungarian-Americans* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), 168-9, and Vardy, "Hungarian Studies at American and Canadian Universities," *Canadian-American Review of Hungarian Studies* 2, no. 2 (1973), 91-121.

² Ilona Kovács, *Az amerikai közkönyvtárak magyar gyűjteményeinek szerepe az asszimiláció és az identitás megőrzésének kettős folyamatában, 1890-1940* [The role of Hungarian collections of American public libraries on identity, assimilation, and retention of dual process, 1890-1940]. (Budapest: Országos Széchényi Könyvtár, 1997).

³ Kenneth E. Nyirady, *The History of the Feleky Collection and its Acquisition by the Library of Congress* (Washington, DC: European Division, Library of Congress, 1995),
<http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015034923154;q1=History%20of%20the%20Feleky%20Collection%20and%20its%20Acquisition%20by%20the%20Library%20of%20Congress>.

⁴ Ilona Kovács, ed., *The Hungarian Legacy in America: The History of the American Hungarian Foundation, the First Fifty Years, 1955-* (New Brunswick, NJ: American Hungarian Foundation, 2007). A description of the collection is online: “Vasváry Collection = Vasváry-gyűtemény,”
http://www.sk-szeged.hu/statikus_html/vasvary/english.html.

⁵ The typology that follows draws upon my presentation to the Annual Meeting of the Society of Hungarian Archivists in Esztergom, Hungary on June 17, 2013: “Az Egyesült Államokban őrzött magyar vonatkozású elsődleges források” [Primary Sources for Hungarian Studies preserved in the United States]. Two notable studies of Hungarian book collections in the US are László Kovács, “Significant Hungarica Collections in American Research Collections in American Research Libraries,” *Hungarian Studies* 7, no. 1-2 (1991-2), 139-47; and Ilona Kovács, “The American Hungarian Library Collections as Types of Ethnic Libraries,” *Hungarian Heritage* 11, no. 1-2 (2010), 87-96.

⁶ See the website of the Hungarian Heritage Museum and Library, maintained by the Cleveland Hungarian Historical Society at <http://www.jcu.edu/language/hunghemu/>. A more detailed description of its holdings than may be found on this site is contained in the Debrecen dissertation by Endre Szentkirályi, *Hungarians in Cleveland 1951-2011*, available online from Debrecen University's site Doktori értekezések nyilvános vitája [Doctoral dissertations in open debate], <http://www.deidi.unideb.hu/Doktved/doktved.html>. See also Maria Friedrich, "The History of the Hungarian Heritage Museum in Cleveland, Ohio," *Vasváry Collection Newsletter* 34, no. 2 (2005), http://www.sk-szeged.hu/statikus_html/vasvary/newsletter/05dec/cleveland.html.

⁷ András Csillag, "The Bethlen Collection: Manuscript Collection, Archives of the American Hungarian Foundation," *Vasváry Collection Newsletter* 24, no. 2 (2000), 1-4; independent reports by three individuals in 2013.

⁸ See the Center for Research Libraries' newspaper catalog, <http://catalog.crl.edu/search~S3/>.

⁹ Kenneth Nyirady, "The Hungarian Collections at the Library of Congress" (Washington, DC: European Reading Room, Library of Congress, n.d.), <http://www.loc.gov/rr/european/coll/hung.html>.

¹⁰ Károly Szabó and Árpád Hellebranth, *Régi magyar könyvtár* [Old Hungarian library] (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Könyvkiadó Hivatala, 1879-98), 3 vols. in 4. The second volume expanded coverage to publications in Hungary in languages other than Hungarian, and the third to those of Hungarian authors publishing abroad.

¹¹ James P. Niessen, “Records of Empire, Monarchy, or Nation? The Archival Heritage of the Habsburgs in East Central Europe,” *Ab Imperio*, 2007, no. 3, 265- 90,
<http://hdl.rutgers.edu/1782.2/rucore30015600001.Article.15128>.

¹² István Tarsoly Kollega, “Levéltári hungarika kutatás” [Hungarica archival research], *Levéltári szemle* 42, no. 2 (1992), 4052; Zoltán Visket and Katalin Zentai, “A hungarikakutatás és a Magyar Országos Levéltárban őrzött hungarikajelentés-gyűjtemény,” [Hungarica research and the Hungarica collection preserved in the Hungarian National Archives], *Levéltári szemle* 55, no. 4 (2005), 41-57.

¹³ Visket and Zentai, *Hungarikakutatás*, 50.

¹⁴ Although not an ethnic Hungarian, I was one of the few attendees from the US at the congresses held in 2000, 2004, and 2013. This year’s congress was the seventh since the series began in 1980.

¹⁵ István Kenyeres, “Az Ithaka-program jelene és jövője,” [Future of the Ithaka Program], presentation to the Annual Meeting of the Society of Hungarian Archivists in Esztergom, Hungary on June 17, 2013. Kenyeres is Director of the Budapest Municipal Archives and Chair of Közgyűjtemények Kollégium [Public Collections Board] of Hungary’s Nemzeti Kulturális Alap [National Cultural Foundation].

¹⁶ Zsuzsanna Répás, State Secretary for National Policy, at the conference on the cultural heritage of Hungarians abroad held at the Balassi Institute, May 29, 2013. MTI (Hungarian Press Agency) report; personal communication of István Hegedűs, Kőrösi Csoma fellow in New Brunswick, NJ in summer 2013.