

“A CURIOUS MARRIAGE”

MIKSZÁTH AND THE RÉVAI PUBLISHING HOUSE



The exhibition held in our library's Manuscriptorium Exhibition Area between 3 July and 25 September 2010 was to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Kálmán Mikszáth's death and the 150th anniversary of Mór János Révai's birth.

These two outstanding public and cultural figures from the turn of the century were vastly influential in the development of literature and book publishing. The fame of Mikszáth as a writer is well-known, being considered not only as one of the greatest prose writers of his time, but maintaining this reputation throughout succeeding generations. He was Theodore Roosevelt's favourite author, and many contemporary prose writers – for example Peter Esterhazy – looked upon him as their master. He was the innovator of prose at the turn of the century, and he can be thanked for implementing live speech as a legitimate literary language, to replace the rhetorical language previously used. His novels and short stories have been translated into most languages of the world, and his oeuvre is massive. Perhaps Mór János Révai, the publishing businessman, is less well known, although he not only published the works of many of our writers, but was often there at the birth of a piece, encouraging and supporting the author. Mór János Révai was one of the most important publishers for Mikszáth and Jókai, and the main mentor of their jubilees. Besides publishing the works of literary figures, we also owe to Révai the publications of several encyclopaedic works, amongst others the *Révai Lexicon*, the *Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in writing and picture*, and the *Corpus Juris Hungarici*. Révai's career and his ancestors would be fitting for one of Mikszáth's novels: from the family of a poor bookbinder then “guild-sized” book trader to selling books first in Eperjes then in Pest; and within a few decades becoming a fully-fledged capitalist enterprise under the leadership and prosperity of its intellectual engine and majority owner, Mór János Révai – who chose not to fulfil the dreams of his father, Samuel Rosenberg-Révai, of becoming an expert of literature. He achieved all of this whilst remaining focused on the interests of Hungarian book culture and science popularisation supporting his writers both financially and artistically.

The exhibition spread to nine display cabinets, and whilst it concentrated on the working relations of Mór János Révai and Kálmán Mikszáth, it could not ignore the

main events of the writer's career or the development of the Révai Publishing House. The exhibition first presented the biographical documents of Mikszáth's life prior to beginning his career as a writer: both past and present day pictures of the house in which he was born, of his childhood localities, of his schools; the handwritten letter to János Mikszáth describing his financial difficulties at the beginning of his career; the wooing lines to Ilona Mauks and the documents of their twice-consecrated marriage all get a place in the introduction to this double-portrait exhibition.

Alongside the tapestry dividing the exhibition in two, visitors were able to discover the parallel life histories of Révai and Mikszáth via displays documenting their working relations from 1881 onwards. On the tapestry you could see the



The Manuscriptorium exhibition area

bookcase given to Mikszáth in 1910 by the Révai Publishing House, to celebrate his 40th anniversary as a writer and “as a token and symbol” of their work together. This bookcase can today be seen in its original place at the manor house in Horpács.

The history of their relationship was preceded by – and sprouted from – the development of the bookbinding company established by Samuel Rosenberg-Révai in Eperjes, the Rosenberg-Révai family's book trading business in Egyetem (University) Street and the resultant Révai Publishing House founded in 1869, the histories of which could be traced through the documents, contracts, correspondence and personal documents in the Manuscript Collection, and also through the three business registration certificate copies obtained from the Capital Archives. Mór János Révai became the head of the publishing company,



Part of the exhibition

first informally in 1879, then formally in 1885, and his personal documents – including his university certificates from Hungary and Leipzig and his later passport – drew the intellectual portrait of a well-educated, internationally experienced, and well-connected businessman.

The 1880s were the years that led Mór Révai to commit fully to the book trade: the young man, only in his mid-twenties, won Jókai and Mikszáth over to the *Regényvilág* (Novel world) and *Magyar Ifjúság* (Hungarian Youth) papers, and later he also published their works in volumes. From his oft-quoted memoirs that give a glimpse of his life and publishing history, from his *Írók, könyvek, kiadók* (*Writers, books, publishers*) articulation of ‘ars poetica’, and from the exhibited letters and contracts, it is clear that he took great care not only of the quality of the content but also of the presentation of the volumes, by employing the best graphic designers and bookbinders. His main goals were to ensure quality book publishing, and to educate readers to be sophisticated.

The working relations of Kálmán Mikszáth and Mór Révai were incredibly productive, but were not conflict free. Mór Révai – who from the eighties was the main publisher of Mór Jókai – also wanted to purchase the exclusive publishing rights to the works of Mikszáth. The exhibited contracts clearly illustrate that the Révai Publishing House paid the highest fee of the era to Mikszáth, and published his work in exceptionally beautiful volumes. The operators of the larger journals – Wodianer, Singer and Wolfner, Legrady Publishers, and later the Franklin Society, who also employed Mikszáth as a publicist, providing him with steady income – had an advantage over perhaps his only conceptual publisher Révai, who by the turn of the century did not possess a journal. However, Mór Révai systematically bought from the writer and rival publishers the rights for multiple editions and contributions. Hence, in 1910 he was able to publish the writer’s entire oeuvre to celebrate the author’s 40th anniversary as a writer – with the exception of 5 volumes which the Franklin Society did not sell, and which led to a court case.

In addition to their working relations, our exhibition also reflected on the scenes of their friendship and private meetings: the card games at Hotel István and in the Casino, the public readings, the grand social dinners which the publisher organised on more than one occasion out of respect for the writer. The two most important events in the collaboration of Mikszáth and Révai were the creation of the Jókai biography and the writer’s jubilee. Révai asked the writer to prepare the biography with the significant

assistance of the publisher, who in the office of his new book house collected the letters containing information on Jókai’s life, processed them with his staff, and provided Mikszáth with the results in order to further his writing. The documents of this correspondence, the design of the book house, and also the past and present photographs of the country house in Horpács – which was bought out of the royalties for the biography – can be viewed in a separate glass case. The other important station of the “curious marriage” is the 40th jubilee of the writer and the documents of the special edition of his works, which are the last steps in the history of their relationship. The meeting minutes of the celebration committee led by Albert Apponyi and Zsolt Beöthy; the subscription template; the distribution proposal for agents; the invitation to the series of jubilee celebrations; and the special edition series published by Révai closed this double portrait, emphasising the fact that their working relations became a national cause and a monumental publishing enterprise. This also signified the end of the oeuvre, since Mikszáth died within a few days of the celebrations.

Finally we remembered the charity, social, and representative events of the Révai Publishing House and the events of the years after Mikszáth’s death: the invites to various clubs, author’s nights and charity gatherings, and also the documents of the lexicon publication closed the Manuscript Collection’s exhibition held to celebrate the anniversaries of Mikszáth and Révai.

Among the many valuable items, two could be regarded as particularly significant: one of the manuscripts written for the competing publishers; and the type-set copy, including the corrections of both the author and the printer, of Mikszáth’s writings that appeared in the *Pesti Hírlap* between 1885 and 1891. The philological speciality of the exhibition was an as yet unpublished letter: a letter of condolence from Mikszáth to Mór Révai in 1908, in which he applauded the human and creative stature of his deceased father, Samuel Révai. The exhibition was organised by Gábor Szita and the writer of this article.

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