

# REVISION, RESTORATION AND DIGITISATION OF THE PHOTOS IN THE BABITS BEQUEST



The revision of photos, palliums and albums in the Babits bequest kept in the Manuscript Collection (Fond III and Fond 172) was started in February 2009, together with the restoration and digitisation of the negatives and visual documents.

Many authors have discussed how the Babits bequest reached the NSZL and details of its history, the first of whom was naturally Dezső Keresztury, the initiator and the actual manager of the Babits relics transfer to our library. We know from his interviews that negotiations between himself and the poet's widow, Sophie Török started in the early 1950s. As a result, in 1952 the cultural ministry purchased the manuscripts, and soon afterwards the rich photo collection and audio recordings as well. It needs to be noted that Sophie Török had been very consciously gathering documents of Mihály Babits's life (occasionally even bills, his horoscope and the ground plan of his homes), and she took up photography with the idea of a memorial exhibition. She tried to document virtually all the outstanding moments of the poet-writer-literary organizer's life, starting from snapshots of constructing his house in Esztergom to outings in the countryside, receiving the San Remo award and the moment of his death. In addition, there are occasional photos taken by famous studios (e.g. Dénes Rónai, Károly Zelesky and Aladár Székely). The collection is impressive not only in content but also in size. In total, glass and celluloid negatives, paper enlargements and pictures kept in albums number nearly four thousand.

For the sake of stock protection, the most urgent task was to rescue negatives. The first step was that restorer Judit Papp did the restoration of two boxes of glass and celluloid nitrate negatives, framed slides and film rolls in individual packages, marked III/2332. This box contained 94 glass negatives, 331 celluloid-nitrate-containing negatives, 7 framed slides and 4 snapshots of rolls, thus involving the restoration of 436 pictures. After dusting the material, it was cleaned

using organic solvents and placed into acid-free paper packets with four ears. The marks of the 436 known and numbered negatives were entered on the packets. Most of these negatives had been familiar to us, and their positive variants had featured in the Babits Photo Collection published in 1983. However, marked as Fond III/2332/54 and Fond III/2332/55, in two boxes of miscellaneous material mixed with other objects, various card games and children's games, 405 glass negatives, 281 celluloid-nitrate negatives, 28 snapshots of rolls, 61 framed and 13 unframed slides and one glass slide were found. Thus a total of 798 unmarked negatives were processed and restored. With the help of the Babits photo albums, Judit Papp established that the two boxes contained the so far unidentified original negatives of photos Sophie Török had taken between 1920 and 1941.



The material before restoration

The negatives were badly contaminated and the soft carrier negatives exuded a strong acrid stench. Judit Papp came to the conclusion that quite a few of them may contain celluloid nitrate and celluloid acetate. As celluloid nitrate is susceptible to self-ignition at a relatively low temperature, its identification was vitally important. Subsequent tests proved that the hypothe-

sis was right: the processed and unprocessed film negatives contained celluloid nitrate, a chemically continuously disintegrating substance, as a result of which the negative may be deformed, decoloured, lose its resilience and turn brittle. At a later stage of degradation, visual information may be completely lost. Separating nitrate-containing negatives from other items in the collection was therefore an important and highly urgent task, as irreversible processes of degradation could have started in both. In order to preserve them, special container boxes were purchased for glass negatives and soft carrier negatives, where the material was placed after digitisation. Based on the digital copies of negatives and with the help of the occasional paper enlargements, Zsuzsanna Rózsafalvi from the Manuscript Collection carried out the cataloguing of pictures and the processing of positives.

In the former processing of the Babits fond, photo positives were arranged into thematic groups and placed into palliums. At the same time, such larger units were established that take stock of his portraits, family pictures, circle of friends, various scenes of his life (his homes in Budapest, Szekszárd and Esztergom), moments of his public appearance and even the events of his larynx surgery. Assisted by our colleague Gábor Szita, in the first stage of the project, the materials were selected, as the pictures had been in different parts of the bequest. After the revision of photos, they had to be classified as former processors of the material had labeled only the thematic groups rather than each item. This time the content analysis of photos had to be done as well, which included more than identifying the people they represent. We had to establish the time and place of the photo, and if it had a negative in our collection or perhaps another positive as well, the two marks had to be connected, references were made, and marks, if any, given in the Photo Collection publishing some of the Babits photos were also noted. From the point of content, the most remarkable section of the material, namely photo enlargements of Mihály Babits, Sophie Török, the family and friends in general, were found in the Fond III/2252 to 2278 range, but some were found in other parts of the bequest as well, for exam-

ple occasionally even attached to letters. In the content analysis, the already mentioned Photo Collection and memoirs of his contemporaries and his wife were of assistance. Cataloguing was followed by restoration and dusting, and finally placing in protective foils and special containers. This is how they were given to our Colleague Gábor Merczel, who made excellent quality 1200 dpi digital copies of the photos. In total, 2329 photos in 47 palliums and 7 albums were processed. Processing is expected to be completed by the end of 2009, as our colleague Gábor Szita found nearly 950 unknown pictures in the Lymbus section of the Babits bequest, mostly related to Sophie Török and their

adopted daughter, Ildikó Babits. This material has never been processed because former analysts did not find it relevant from the point of Babits himself, therefore sent it to the Lymbus, the library's dead stock unavailable even to researchers. At present, restoration and cataloguing is underway and will probably yield results that researchers might find significant. It is obvious that the material is identical with what we have in albums and palliums, often being simply variants of those. Nevertheless, this is dominantly new, untapped material.

The Manuscript Collection's project to preserve the Babits photo bequest is to be completed in the course of 2009. As a result, nega-

tives and positives will be safely kept, and after digitization a more practicable and better explored collection will certainly be easier and faster to copy. In the publication plans for 2010, our library has included printing a new Babits photo album.

Besides the colleagues involved in processing and restoration, special collections director János Káldos, heads of department Ferenc Földesi, Marianne Érdi and Katalin Csillag are to be thanked for assisting the shared work of Gábor Merczel, Judit Papp and Zsuzsanna Rózsafalvi. We also owe our special thanks to Ádám Ackermann, who did the photographing of albums that could not be scanned.

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Ildikó Babits, Sophie Török and Mihály Babits  
 in their Reviczky Street flat  
 in one of the now restored photos