PAPP VIKTOR
National Széchényi Library

CHALLENGES OF ONLINE PUBLISHING.
DIGITAL PRESERVATION OF HISTORICAL PHOTOGRAPHS

In Hungary, many public collections, such as libraries, museums, archives, and university archives, also have collections of photographs. And in recent years, the system of photo collections provided by private entrepreneurs has been very successful, but they operate and provide services on completely different principles than public collections, which are subject to legal requirements. The National Széchényi Library (Budapest), which is the national library in Hungary, has been preserving photographs from the early days of photography, from the 1850s and 1860s onwards. However, the photo collection within the library, officially called the Historical Photograph and Interview Collection, was only established in 2008. From this date of foundation, many things follow. First and foremost, the photographs and photo albums within the library are not confined to the Photographic Collection, a significant number of them are in the Manuscript Collection or the Theatre History Collection, for example. In any case, the Photographic Collection can boast a large number of document types that can only be found and researched in this collection. The Photographic Collection includes socio-photographs and abstract photographs by contemporary artists, tens of thousands of glass negatives on architectural subjects, slide films from the second half of the 20th century, and of course photographs from the nineteenth century [Sárközy, 2022, 600-601]. All in all, the Photographic Collection contains nearly 600,000 miscellaneous photographs.

In this paper we will discuss these photographs from the nineteenth century, and more specifically the work of processing of photographs and photo albums, and the difficulties of the online publishing processing. The online publishing service for the collection was launched in 2020 and is called *Fotótér* (Photo Space).[12] This database-like site was launched with the publication of two huge collections. The first collection contains photographs taken during the First World War, with a total of 7,000 items. The second collection contains nearly 4,000 glass negatives taken by Transylvanian photographer Dénes Szabó. In 2024, the *Fotótér* was expanded with new units, first nineteenth century photo albums and then solo portraits. The albums include more than 1,300 photographs and more than 1,000 portraits, both collections are being continuously expanded as we advance with the processing work.

In the following, we would like to demonstrate what the processing of a specific photograph in our collection looks like. To illustrate this, we have chosen a photograph of the funeral of Dr. Elemér Bányai. Elemér Bányai was a lieutenant-general and journalist from an Armenian family, his funeral took place in September 1915 – along with the funerals of other military officers –, the photograph was taken by János Müllner, the most famous Hungarian press photographer of the era [Demeter–Stemlerné Balogh, 2016]. For the moment, we should overlook the question of how this photograph came to be in the library, as this does not really determine the work of processing. The date of origin of the photograph shall be at least approximately established in advance, at least if it is not known. The date of origin and the content of the photograph will determine the collection unit to which it will be assigned, and will be given a unique identifier, i.e. a catalogue number. The assignment of catalogue number is based on the size of the photograph. Digitisation will then take place to produce a digital master file, after digitisation, the photograph is metadata-tagged using an internal database called the Knowledge Base. It is very important to mention that this database was developed at our request.

---

[12] The website in question can be found at the following address, URL: https://fototer.oszk.hu/.
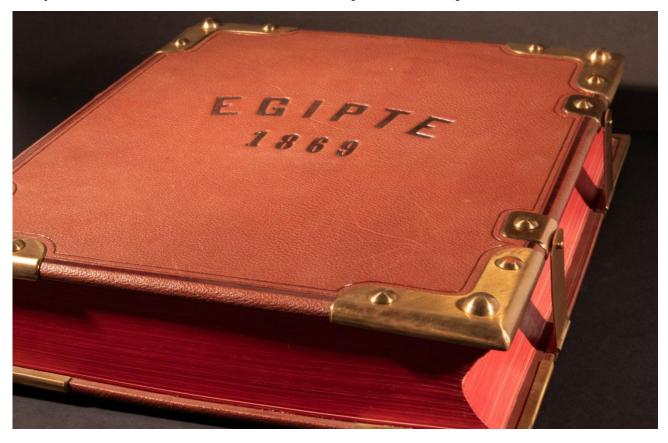
The funeral of Dr. Elemér Bányai. National Széchényi Library, FVB 1786

In connection with the Knowledge Base the main point is that there are a number of fields in an item that we could complete according to our knowledge of the photo. The most important parameter for a photo is the content, i.e. who or what we can see in the photo. Also important are the identity of the photographer, the name of the studio, the place and time when the photograph was taken. These are clearly the most important metadata, but this is often not an easy task as we often do not have the necessary information. This phase is part of the research process, which involves identifying the person in the photograph and determining the most accurate date when the photograph was taken. The research process involves searching various databases, catalogues, online content services of other collections, and lists of names. But the style and quality of the image, the way the people in the picture are dressed, can also be revealing in this respect [Stemlerné Balogh, 2009, 58–65]. It is also very helpful to have a photograph of the artist's prints or stamps on the back of the photograph, as this can help us to identify the time period when the studio was in operation and the specific photograph was taken. The most interesting research work is of course reported, both for educational and scientific purposes. Once the photographs have been processed, they will be made available online. It is very relevant to note that the process does not end after the online publication, as visitors to the site may contact us, make comments and observations, ask for corrections to inaccurate information, help us to identify the person and place depicted.

In our paper we will discuss specifically about historical photo albums, that is, compilations dating from the mid- nineteenth century. The Historical Photograph and Interview Collection of the National Széchényi Library contains a number of photo albums that preserve photographs from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. These historical photo albums are often linked to a particular geographical area, family, public institution or official event or occasion. Most of the photographs in the albums were taken by professional photographers, but by the end of the century there were also some specifically amateur photographic compilations. In the following paragraphs we discuss albums that we have already processed and made available online. The first publication relates to a bequest to a Hungarian aristocrat called Baron Ferenc Révay (1835–1914).

Ferenc Révay is hardly known in Hungarian history, and his story is mostly remembered for a highly unusual probate, since at his death he left his aristocratic palace and his fortune of several million „korona" [crowns] not to his sisters' family members, but to his butler, who had been serving him for many years.[13] The Révay family of Turóc County in Hungary had extensive estates and obtained noble titles as early as the sixteenth century. In 1861, he was still actively involved in the meetings of the Hungarian House of Magnates, but in 1865 he no longer wished to be involved in politics and public life, and according to sources he did not attend any meetings. According to family legend, from a young age he was distinguished by his eccentric personality, attracted by books, foreign languages and oriental culture rather than social life. He had every opportunity to do so, as the Révay family had one of the largest and most colourful private collections, the library of the Mosóc Castle (today Mošovce, Slovakia) containing thousands of Oriental travelogues and historical works on Egypt and the Holy Land. The nonconformist landowner and art collector explored the Eastern Mediterranean in the 1860s and 1870s. At the dawn of modern tourism, this was by no means an unusual move, especially given that wealthy aristocratic gentry were already taking part in European and Mediterranean cruises to gain experience in the early nineteenth century [Szegedy-Maszak, 1987, 126-127; Harlan, 2009, 421-453]. The opportunity was therefore available to Ferenc Révay, as the sole beneficiary of his father's inheritance, who had died in 1858, there were no financial constraints on such a journey. It is not known exactly in which year he first visited Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean. Photograph albums compiled in 1869 attest that he must have been in the region for several months by this time, and that he was already well acquainted with Cairo in the early 1870s. The Hungarian Orientalist scholar Ignác Goldziher set out on his journey to the East at the end of 1873, arriving in Cairo on 10 December 1873, via Damascus and Jerusalem, and meeting Ferenc Révay, whom he referred to as a friend in his memoirs [Patai, 1987, 150].

Egipte 1869 **photo album from the bequest of Ferenc Révay. National Széchényi Library, FAlbum 1228**

The discovery of many cultures and peoples encouraged him to carry tangible memories back to his castle. Ferenc Révay probably selected the photographs of these far-flung landscapes one by one during

---

[13] Báró Révay Ferenc komornyikjára hagyott 12 milliót [Baron Ferenc Révay left 12 million to his butler], *Az Est* [The Evening], 13 January 1915, 3–4.

his travels, and the eleven photo albums were compiled in Vienna and Pest-Buda by renowned bookbinders. The photographs in the album were taken by professional photographers, mostly emigrants from Western Europe who had settled in the Eastern Mediterranean or had travelled through the region. So, we have to stress that these excellent photographs were not taken by Ferenc Révay. Another group of photographers were born locally, but they too acquired the art of photography through the intermediary of European artists. Breaking free from the Orientalist vision therefore seemed far from an easy task at the time. We cannot comment here on the Orientalist vision, but it is worth noting that one of the most famous photographers of the period was a local native, and his photographs show a different artistic approach. Pascal Sébah (1823-1886),[14] an Armenian-Syrian photographer born in Istanbul, is one of the photographers whose work is often cited as being markedly different from that of European photographers [Behdad, 2016, 5; Woodward, 2003, 363].

Ferenc Révay could choose from the photographs that were available in the window of the studio he visited, on its display tables. At the same time, looking at the photographs in the albums, it is easy to identify the subjects and settings that most interested him. For example, one of his compilations on Egypt is rich in street scenes and cityscapes, with numerous shots of local people, mainly street or shop vendors, traders, transporters and shepherds. The photographs of people fall into at least two categories. On the one hand, one can observe settings where the subjects have been assembled into a group portrait, representing the costume of a particular region, or perhaps the characteristics of a local craft or activity. On other occasions, the human characters are used only as props to create the narrative of the photograph; in these shots, the inhabitants are meant to show the human scale. The appearance of people walking and leaning against ancient buildings and monuments conveys to the viewer the monumental, grandiose structures that are depicted in the photographs.

[14] Pascal Sébah was born in Istanbul in 1823 to a Syrian father and an Armenian Catholic mother. At the time, many non-Muslim families used Western, French names. This fact immediately indicates to us the direct influence of European culture. Together with his brother Cosmi Sébah, they opened their first studio, P.Sébah Photographe, on 18 May 1857 in the most European quarter of Constantinople, in the Pera district. In the early 1860s, they opened a new studio at 232 Grande Rue de Pera. The brothers also had a studio in Cairo from 1873, the same year that Pascal Sébah's pictures were exhibited in the Ottoman Pavilion at the Vienna World Exhibition.

Group photo from the Egypt photo album. National Széchényi Library, FTD 508

After a brief description of the birth of the Baron Révay' albums, it is now necessary to return to the main topic of the paper, making photographs and photo albums accessible to the visitors. Processing a photo album is very similar to processing a single photo. But there is one obvious difference, and that is the indication that the processed photos are part of a photo album, which is indicated by the *Content relation* function. This creates a connection between the photos that acts as a kind of keyword, which, when it is clicked, will display all the photos in our hit list that belong to that particular album.

The first question when publishing photos from a photo album online is obviously whether or not to visually represent the belonging. We have concluded that we should think with the visitors in mind, so the question is: what will a visitor be interested in when they come to the site? If they are just browsing the web, will they be attracted by a photo or by the cover of a photo album? If they are specifically looking for something, will they be looking for information associated with a photograph on the site, or are they thinking of a photo album? Probably the former will be more common, so the focus will be on specific photographs. The choice we have made has been confirmed by a number of previous user feedbacks, just as many public collections publish photos according to the same principle as shown in the *Photo Space* interface.

The fact that visitors will encounter a specific photograph, no matter which sub-page or menu item they navigate to, makes it even more necessary that the description of the photograph is accurate and that the date, place and photographer are not missing from the metadata. As we mentioned, the introduction of the *Content relation* function in the online service means that visitors to the site will be shown a list of results, a list where all the photos in the album will be visible. The layout and cover of the photo album is not visible, but the list-like structure already helps researchers to find their way around the site and find their way around the photos and photo albums.

The *Content relation* function is available for all photos that are in a photo album. But it is not just about simply linking photos and photo albums. For a specific photo, you can find a lot of information about the photo album in the *Comment* function.

The first piece of information is where the photo is placed in the album, but it also contains information such as the original title of the album, who made it, how many pages it contains, how many photographs it contains, the type of binding, and the decoration. Moreover, if the contributor or owner of the photo album is known, links to studies and blog posts about the album and the person are also included. This section therefore provides a wealth of useful information about the photo album for those interested. If we choose the scroll option at the bottom of the page, we will find that the database offers us the next photos in the series for viewing.

As a final point we would also like to draw attention to a temporary solution. If we select the *Historical photo albums* sub-page,[15] we will find the description text on the left, which will also contain the names of the photo albums already published. By clicking on the names of the photo albums, the results page will show the photographs in the album, as this is also linked to the *Content relation* function. However, this solution can only be temporary, as once the number of published photo albums increases, the descriptive text would no longer be transparent and it would not be possible to place 50–60 content links within the text. It is worth pointing out that the *Content relation* function is not only functional for photo albums. It is also used in the case of a panoramic photograph, where the segments are made up of individual photographs.[16]

---

[15] The *Historical photo albums* sub-page can be reached under the following address, URL: https://fototer.oszk.hu/torteneti-fenykepalbumok/.

[16] See the following example of the *Content relation* function for panoramic photographs, URL: https://fototer.oszk.hu/kereso/#kapcsolat=Konstantin%C3%A1poly%20panor%C3%A1mak%C3%A9pe.

A further example of the usefulness of *Content relation* function.
Panorama of Rome. National Széchényi Library, FTD 312-313

To conclude, in February 2024, the Historical Photograph and Interview Collection of the National Széchényi Library launched Baron Ferenc Révay photo albums' online service at a press conference. The statistics available show how many people have visited the site. Unfortunately, the most important question, what were the preferences of the visitors, is not answered by the statistics, and obviously a different kind of analysis and research could reveal this. What is noteworthy, however, is that the home page was visited proportionally more than usual, and the second most visited page was, by definition, the *Historical photo albums* sub-page.

It is also worth briefly mentioning the most viewed photos. One was the photo of the Topkapi Palace from Galata Quarter, a 10-segment panoramic photograph in part.[17] The second most viewed photo was the photo of the Karacaahmet cemetery. The Karacaahmet cemetery is on the Anatolian side of Istanbul. In connection with this photograph, it is worth noting that, contrary to previous assumptions, this picture was not taken by Pascal Sébah, as the original photograph was taken by James Robertson in 1853. Robertson had this photograph numbered 26, but in Sébah's series it carried number 5. This coincidence is proof of what photography historians had previously assumed, that in 1867 Pascal Sébah had indeed bought Robertson's studio, and with it the photographer's negatives [Öztuncay, 2006, 149]. Since Sébah's studio burnt down completely in 1881, destroying all the negatives, this may explain why no negatives survived after Robertson. Sébah therefore added his own name and a new serial number to the photograph, and Ferenc Révay presumably had no knowledge of how photographers traded their work during the period [Hannoosh, 2016, 23]. In light of this, it was really necessary to publish these photographs online, as this makes it easy to compare the photographs preserved in different collections, thus helping to identify the authors of the photographs. The subject of the two photos mentioned and the number of visitors to the site show that the photos were viewed by a large number of people from abroad. This means that we must not only meet the needs of Hungarian readers and visitors, but also take into account the needs of international users, for example, the search engine could be used to find the name of a place, institution or building in all known forms. In summary, the *Synonym* function should be implemented for all keywords.

In our paper we intended to shed light on how the Historical Photograph Collection of the National Széchényi Library was built up, and how the online database called *Fotótér* operates. In conclusion, when implementing an online database service, the searching and browsing preferences of users should be the first and second consideration. It was also instructive to find that the processing work cannot be closed down, as visitor comments are constantly coming in, and there is a constant need to update and improve the database. Clearly, the aim must be to ensure that as many people as possible have access to these cultural treasures, and that they can do so from home, from anywhere in the world.

---

[17] The photograph in question can be found here, URL: https://fototer.oszk.hu/torteneti-fenykepalbumok/a-topkapi-palota-galata-negyed-felol/.

ԱՄՓՈՓՈՒՄ

Հունգարիայի ազգային գրադարանի պատմական լուսանկարների հավաքածուները արդեն մի քանի տարի հրապարակվում են առցանց, սակայն այս գործընթացը մի շարք մասնագիտական մարտահրավերներ է առաջացնում փորձագետների համար: XIX դարի լուսանկարների ալբոմների դեպքում պետք է ուշադրություն դարձնել ալբոմների պահպանմանը, քանի որ տեղեկությունը կարող է անհետանալ առցանց հրապարակման ժամանակ, եթե հրատարակչությունը հաշվի չառնի հետազոտողների պահանջները և տարբեր տեսակի ալբյուրները: Հոդվածում ներկայացվում են հետազոտողների պահանջները թվային հրատարակչական ծառայություն ստեղծելիս և բազմաթիվ լուսանկարչական ալբոմների առցանց հրապարակման հետ կապված մարտահրավերները: Հոդվածն ընդգծում է օգտատերերի պահանջների կարևորությունը լուսանկարների թվային հրապարակման գործում:

REFERENCES

1. Behdad, Ali. Camera Orientalis. Reflections on Photography of the Middle East, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2016, 224 p.
2. Demeter, Zsuzsanna; Stemlerné Balogh, Ilona Müllner János (1870-1925). A háborús Budapest fotóriportere, [János Müllner (1870-1925). Photojournalist of wartime Budapest], Budapest, 2016.
3. Hannoosh, Michèle Practices of Photography: Circulation and Mobility in the Nineteenth-Century Mediterranean. // History of Photography. 2016. №1. p. 3-27. [Electronic Resource] URL: http://surl.li/pivzqo; 27.11.2024.
4. Harlan, Deborah Travel, Pictures, and a Victorian Gentleman in Greece // Hesperia, 2009. №3. p. 421-453. [Electronic Resource] URL: http://surl.li/fxrmuk; 27.11.2024.
5. Öztuncay, Bahattin the Photographers of Constantinople. Pioneers, Studios and Artists from 19th Century Istanbul, Istanbul, Aygaz, 2006, 735 p.
6. Patai, Raphael Ignaz Goldziher and his Oriental Diary. A Translation and Psychological Portrait, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1987, 160 p.
7. Sárközy, Réka Fényképtárak a nagyvilágban. Áttekintés a nemzeti könyvtárak fényképgyűjteményeiről [Photo collections around the world: an overview of national library photo collections] // Könyvtári Figyelő, 2022, №4, p. 593-606. [Electronic Resource] URL: http://surl.li/xrmokv; 27.11.2024.
8. Stemlerné Balogh, Ilona Történelem és fotográfia, [History and photography], Budapest, 2009, [Electronic Resource] URL: http://surl.li/cpqnyk; 27.11.2024
9. Szegedy-Maszak, Andrew True Illusions: Early Photographs of Athens. // The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal. 1987, №1, pp. 126-138.
10. Woodward, Michelle L. Between orientalist clichés and images of modernization. Photographic practice in the late Ottoman era. // History of Photography, 2003, №4, pp. 363-374. [Electronic Resource] URL: http://surl.li/xcpcbs; 27.11.2024.