Citation style


First published: Hungarian Historical Review, 2019, 4

This article may be downloaded and/or used within the private copying exemption. Any further use without permission of the rights owner shall be subject to legal licences (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).

Edina Zvara, an expert with almost unmatched knowledge of the holdings of the Esterházy library in Kismarton, the history of libraries, culture, and the sciences in Hungary in the Enlightenment in general, and the (early) modern library collections in the Carpathian Basin, has undertaken another ambitious enterprise to offer an overview and summary of the career of a prominent figure of the Hungarian Enlightenment. Zvara has created a narrative of the life and work of Demeter Görög (1760–1833), a figure whose contributions to literature and book culture in Hungary merit comparison with the contributions of Miklós Révai (1750–1807) and Ferenc Kazinczy (1759–1831). The biographical portrait she has provided of Görög, who is only rarely mentioned in the secondary literature, is based primarily on accounts of contemporaries and a methodologically consistent analysis of the items from Görög’s library found in Kismarton. With this focus on the career of a single prominent figure, Zvara has created a very colorful cultural history tableau, which offers us a portrait of an age and of cultural and scientific life in Hungary in the dynamic period at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth.

The first half of the book offers a nuanced picture of Görög’s life and personality. Zvara uses an array of carefully chosen citations from the writings of contemporaries and also several primary sources (some of which are new in the secondary literature), and of course she draws on the existing scholarship to present the different stages of Görög’s life (beginning with his birth in Hajdúdorog) and the various things he accomplished, as a patron of the arts and sciences, in each of these stages. Zvara offers a sketch of Görög’s life which touches on his very focused, deliberate, and thorough studies, his humility with regards to the sciences, and his admirable work as someone who labored to cultivate and further the arts and sciences. Coupled with his engaging, diplomatic personality, Görög seems almost to have been predestined to achieve the goals he set for himself. At the prompting of his patron András Bacsinszky (1732–1809), a Greek Catholic bishop in the city of Munkács (today Mukachevo, Ukraine), the young Görög became a part of the Kollonich family early on, where for many years (1787–1795) he was László’s tutor, and in the course of his travels through Europe, he became his devoted companion. In 1795, when the Hungarian Jacobin movement was suppressed, Görög was again given a flattering and
prestigious opportunity. He became the tutor of Antal Pál (1786–1866), the son of Miklós Esterházy II (1765–1833), in Kismarton. After teaching for seven years, he was given an even more prestigious position. In 1802, he was given the office of head imperial educator in the Habsburg court in Vienna. First, he oversaw and guided the education of Archduke Joseph, and then he played a similar role in the rearing of heir to the throne Ferdinand and, later, Archduke Franz Karl, a role in which he remained until 1824. He was able, while moving in these circles in Vienna, to establish relationships with influential individuals, of which he was able to make good use for the rest of his life. He found talented patrons who provided support for his various organs of the press and also for poor but talented poets, and who also helped him coordinate (both financially and politically) the various initiatives he launched in support of culture and his homeland. He was thus able, together with some of his colleagues, to publish A Hadi és Más Nevezetes Történetek [War stories and other remarkable tales] from 1789 until 1791 and then its continuation, the Viennese Magyar Hírmondó [Hungarian Bulletin], from 1792 until 1803. He was able to have high-quality engravings made of the county maps used in Atlas Hungaricus and to plan other maps of the country and the world. This network also provided him vital assistance in the composition of an ampelographic work entitled Azon sokféle szőlőfajoknak lajstroma [A catalogue of the many kinds of grapes], which was published in Vienna in 1829, and he was able to collect varieties of grapes from all over the world and cultivate them on his estate in Grinzing.

In every era of history, the polymath as a figure would have been an impossibility without the support of repositories of knowledge. Demeter Görög had a library of several thousand books at his disposal, a significant share of which Zvara has managed to identify by using an inventory concerning additions from 1820 and the discoveries she made through her research to construct the holdings. The most detailed chapter of the book offers an analysis of the library holdings that Zvara was able to identify and a discussion of the importance of these works from the perspective of cultural history and the history of the sciences. We are given a good overview of Görög’s library, including its books and manuscripts. In connection with the books, Zvara also offers an interesting examination of thematic focuses, in the course of which she discusses the reconstructed book catalogue included in the appendix, several items from which she mentions in the main section of the book, thus making the dry bibliographical information more interesting to the reader by putting it
in context. The first section comes to an end with an afterword, the sources cited and secondary literature, and a list of images.

The second half of the book consists of the documents listed in the appendix. Among the sources, which will be of great use to scholars interested in pursuing further research on the subject, one finds, for instance, Görög’s letter of nobility, his last will and testament, his death certificate, poems that were dedicated to him, an array of prose works (by authors such as Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, Dániel Berzsenyi, and the aforementioned Miklós Révai), contractual texts concerning his responsibilities as a tutor, and various letters and communications written to or by him. This is followed by a list of the items removed from the reconstructed book list of the “scholarly patriot,” the items which do not figure in the list but which Zvara has managed to identify, and other writings connected to printed matter which was published under Görög’s editorship. The detailed indexes (two kinds of person and place indexes, an index of bibliographical information, and index of book owners) make the book complete.

Edina Zvara’s book will be of particular interest to readers who seek further insight into the processes and mechanisms through which the arts and sciences were made to flourish in the Hungarian Enlightenment. A monograph which focuses with such admirable thoroughness on the career and life of a single individual, after all, offers far more than a mere discussion of his life’s work. It offers the reader a typical “biography” of the whole era. The engaging presentation of the complex and intertwining network of relationships which evolved among patrons of the arts and sciences gives us insights into the intricate cultural-political labyrinth of a moment in history when interest in culture and the sciences and, in particular, in Hungarian culture and the sciences in Hungary burgeoned. Zvara merits particular praise for having painted a tableau of Görög’s intellectual horizon and his pedagogical, journalistic, cartographical, viticultural, and other scientific and scholarly pursuits by using the items from this prominent polymath’s arsenal of knowledge (i.e. the individual works in his library) as the fundamental points of reference.

Attila Verók
Eszterházy Károly University