
KALÁSZATOK / CATCHES

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PRAYER BOOK, EARTHLY AND HEAVENLY LOVE

Dénes Dienes

Sárospataki Református Hittudományi Egyetem

“O Lord God, my heavenly Father! I humbly beseech Thee, grant that Thy Word, which hath now been proclaimed unto me, may have increase within me, since Thou hast sent it forth for this very purpose, that it should not return unto Thee void. Cause that those holy Words may be the power of God unto the salvation of my soul. Do Thou Thyself guide my heart unto the accomplishing of that good unto which Thou hast now stirred me. Clothe me with strength to follow after a holy life; establish me in true doctrine, that it may be the rule and measure of my life. Pour also into my heart obedience and love toward my teachers, that I may receive them with all honor as Thy messengers, even as those who watch over my soul. Bring forth, O Lord, that golden time wherein true doctrine shall reign upon this Earth, that we may all be prophets of God, taught of God. Amen.”

The domestic Puritanism that emerged in Hungary in the seventeenth century and fostered personal piety, drawing also upon impulses from pietism, remained present in the history of Hungarian Protestantism over a remarkably long period.¹ It continued to exert its influence in popular piety even after theology had come to be shaped by rationalism, and as a result the Protestant intelligentsia in Hungary, pursuing its own distinctive path toward deism, sought the possibilities of a “reasonable faith.”² This long-term

¹ On the theological background and practical piety: WALLMANN, Johannes: *A pietizmus*, translated by Szabó, Csaba, Kálvin János Kiadó, Budapest, 2000. DIENES, Dénes: „Melyeket én az én Uram Jézus Krisztusomtól tanultam...” A református kegyesség jellemző vonásai a 18. században Magyarországon, SRTA, Sárospatak, 2000.

² *It is necessary that our faith be reasonable; but it is also necessary that our reason be religious.* Ferenc Kazinczy quotes Pál Sipos, professor at Sárospatak, in a letter addressed to Sipos himself, dated November 22, 1809. In: *The Complete Works of Ferenc Kazinczy. Electronic critical edition*, Debrecen University Press, 2016–2022. (DOI: 10.5484/Kazinczy_Ferenc_muvei)

continuity was significantly reinforced by a century and a half of persecution, which both strengthened fidelity to confessional commitments and cultivated the inner demands and outward opportunities of personal devotion. The destruction of the institutional forms of Protestant free religious practice proved counterproductive to the efforts at Catholicization, for it encouraged the creation of spaces for devotional practice without a minister, particularly in the form of domestic devotions, and intensified the demand for private devotional exercises.³

Despite the pressures of recatholicization, the efforts of Protestant churches in the field of education proved successful, as literacy—or at least the ability to read—reached increasingly broader segments of peasant communities in certain regions of the country. This was characteristic of congregations within the Cistibiscan Reformed Church District that possessed the right of so-called public religious practice. Many purchased Bibles, and even more acquired prayer books or devotionals.⁴ Within peasant culture, the very concept of a book was, for a long time, associated almost exclusively with these works. It was for this reason that the mother of “Petike,” in Mihály Vörösmarty’s poem, could tell her sorrowful little son: “Here, this Bible is for you, don’t be sore!” In earlier centuries, when people in this milieu engaged in reading, they turned to the Bible, a prayer book, or a hymnal, besides the almanac.

Borbála Kováts did the same from her childhood onward. She was in possession of the 1804 edition of *Liliomok völgye* [The Valley of Lilies]. This work originally written by Johann Gerhard and titled *Meditationes Sacrae*, had been translated and published under this title by the Transylvanian nobleman József Inczédy. Its popularity is demonstrated by the fact that it went through seven editions within half a century, the 1804 edition being the seventh in sequence.⁵

We are able to situate Borbála Kováts geographically only within very broad limits. Since her book long languished in the duplicate collection, it is not known when or from where it came to Sárospatak; it appears certain only that it originated from one of the congregations of the Cistibiscan

³ SZIGETI, Jenő: A házi istentisztelet puritán gyökerei, in PILIPKÓ, Erzsébet (ed.): *Népi vallásosság a Kárpát-medencében 8.*, Laczkó Dezső Múzeum, Veszprém, 2013, 286–297. MOLNÁR, Ambrus: A hajdúhadházi Szent Emberek és Szent Asszonyok Társasága, in TÜSKÉS, Gábor (ed.): „Mert ezt Isten hagyta...” *Tanulmányok a népi vallásosság köréből*, Magvető, Budapest 1986, 418–443.

⁴ DIENES, Dénes: op. cit., 2000, chapter “„Óh én édes könyvem”, Tanúságtevő tulajdonosi bejegyzések.” FEKETE, Csaba: Imádságtörténeti mozzanatok. Buzgó imádságok és áhitatos könyörgések, in SZELESTEI N., László (ed.): *Lelkiségtörténeti számvetés, Pázmány Irodalmi Műhely. Lelkiségtörténeti tanulmányok*, Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem Bölcsészettudományi Kar, Piliscsaba, 2008.

⁵ IMRE, Mihály: Johann Gerhard 18. századi hazai recepciójának néhány jellemzője, *Studia Litteraria* 2013 3-4., 391.

Reformed Church District.⁶ In any case, there was a girls' school in the parish where she lived in the late eighteenth century, and Borbála learned not only to read but also to write. She may have received the prayer book while still a schoolgirl, for she recorded her first ownership inscription on the *recto* of the blank page at the end of the volume in faltering childish letters: *Kováts borbála*. She must have been diligent, for she made steady progress in writing, and she must have engaged in writing frequently thereafter, as her handwriting shows continuous development. Later, when she resolved to reaffirm her ownership of the book, she did so in a practiced hand, casting her declaration into verse.

Kováts Borbála, who possesseth this book,
She hath purchased it for the comfort of her soul:
That thereby her heart might find consolation,
Until she should enter into the Kingdom of her Redeemer.
Until she should attain that pure blessedness,
Where the Lord Christ Himself reigneth.
That the shed Blood of Jesus
Might be the restful recompense of her weariness.

There can be no doubt that Borbála Kováts was raised in the spirit of that piety which is also reflected in *Liliomok völgye*. The condition of her book likewise clearly demonstrates that its owner handled its pages regularly—indeed, as the saying goes, she “read it to tatters.” In the course of this use, the prayer book became almost her companion, with which she shared her secrets. For the third time, she recorded her attachment to the volume, both at the beginning and at the end of the book, employing a formula customary in the period.⁷

Kováts Borbála, who possesseth this book,
Her name therein she writeth as witness true.
If it should stray, O my beloved friend,
Restore it to my hand, for it is mine own rightful good.

With this beloved book, as with a friend who keepeth secrets, she might entrust the guarded and hidden things of her heart.

Lamentation, love, sorrow, and pain—
My heart grieveth for thee forever, my angel.

⁶ Today the volume is preserved in the Great Library of Sárospatak. IV. a. 826.

⁷ This was a common form not only in books but also on other objects of personal use. P. SZALAY, Emőke: *Magyar népi kerámia a Déri Múzeumban I.*, Debrecen, 2002. On the books: SCHELHAMMER, Zsófia: *Barátaink, a könyvátkok, Szeged várostörténeti és kulturális folyóirat*, 2021. 10. 25.

Bitter wounding, yet comfort also, O great Heaven,
There yet abideth in my heart hope concerning thee.

The following note conveys somewhat the same mood:

To live in this world is pure delight
For one in whose eyes Heaven itself may smile.

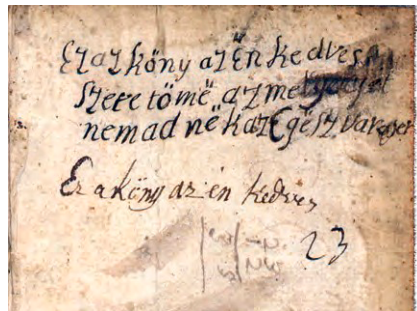
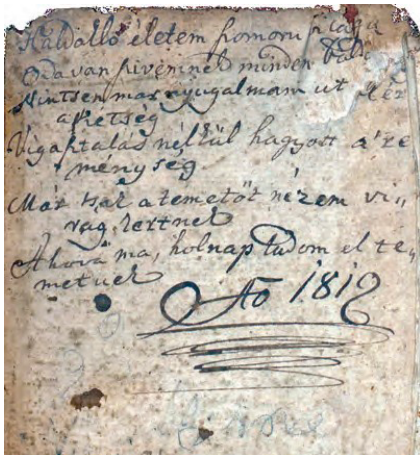
However, the continuation turns into bitter hopelessness:

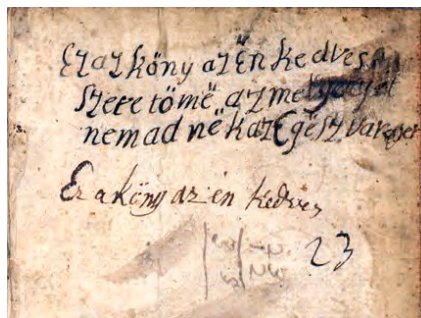
There is no remedy for love,
No happiness for the wretched,
No hope for the dying—
For all these, the grave alone may be their end.

And the final entry, to which she also affixed a date, deepens this bitter hopelessness still further.

The sorrowful world of my dying life—
All the happiness of my heart is gone,
I have no rest now; doubt hath overtaken me,
Hope hath left me without consolation,
Now I behold the grave alone as a garden of flowers,
Where today or tomorrow I know I shall be laid to rest.
Anno 1812.

As a devoted reader who embellished her letters and showed clear signs of a love of writing, Borbála Kováts most certainly encountered other reading material besides her prayer book. She may have heard love folk songs, from





which she could have learned lyrical elements and subjective turns of phrase.

It is possible that, inspired by these, she herself attempted to compose verse. At the same time, we cannot exclude the possibility that her lines were inspired by personal experience—perhaps by unfulfilled love—and that she

shared her sorrow with her beloved prayer book.

In formal terms, her poems may also have been influenced by *Liliomok völgye*, which contains ten engravings closely connected to the themes of the meditations.⁸ Beneath each engraving, a four-line verse summarizes the essence of a given chapter. In terms of stylistic features, alongside folk songs, these too may have served as models for Borbála Kováts.

In my view, it can be excluded that Borbála Kováts's entries should be interpreted within the framework of bridal or nuptial mysticism. As evidence, let us compare them with the ones in the book of Anna Tóth, a copy of *Szentekek hegedűje* [The Fiddle of the Saints], published in Kolozsvár in 1762.⁹

This hymnal by Benjámín Szőnyi came into her possession in 1766, as is evident from the ownership inscription: “Tóth Anna kedves könyve, 1766. 12 Martij, empt(us) marj. 3.” (Anna Tóth's dear book, 1766.12 Martii, bought for 3 Máriás.)¹⁰ It is of particular interest that she employed a Latinized form in recording the purchase. Is it possible that the possessory inscription is not in her own hand? However, on the inner side of the rear binding board, an entry may be read that is most certainly in Tóth Anna's hand. The handwriting suggests that of a child: “This boo (sic!) is my dear beloved's, which I would not give for the whole city.” (!) It is likewise possible that the ownership inscription is of later date, when Anna already held the pen with a steady hand, and it is likely that she had by then learned certain Latin formulae. In that case, it may be that the young girl encountered the bridal mysticism of Reformed pietism already during her elementary schooling. In her book, which shows signs of frequent use, the second stanza of the first hymn in the chapter entitled “Advent Hymns” begins thus:

⁸ BENKŐ, Tímea: Megigazulás – megszentelődés – új életben járás. A marosvécsi református templom mennyezetének ikonográfiai programja, *Studia Doctorum Theologiae Protestantis* 3, 2012, 143–157.

⁹ Sárospatak, Nagykönyvtár, S. 970.

¹⁰ Three Máriás corresponded to 1 forint and 2 dénár. IVÁNYOSI-SZABÓ, Tibor: A „kongó” nevű pénz forgalma Kecskeméten, *Történelmi szemle*, 1981, 288.

Behold, the Bridegroom cometh;
My soul, go thou forth to meet Him,
Seek thy rest as one poor and needy,
Within His bosom rich.

The final stanza of the “Hymn of a Maiden” is even more explicit:

My future estate,
My entering into marriage,
I commit wholly unto Thy Majesty.
O Jesus, my spiritual Bridegroom,
Thee above all do I seek,
With the five virgins I stand ready.

It may be stated with confidence that Anna Tóth’s “dear beloved,” in the sense of bridal mysticism, was Jesus Christ. Beyond this testimony, this pious young woman also left to posterity an embroidery pattern, which she preserved—perhaps not by chance—in her “dear book,” and which she most certainly made with her own hand. It is not impossible that she embroidered it upon the kerchief that she gave as a gift to her earthly betrothed.

