

## Interview with Judith Szilvássy

By Gaëlle Béquet

*Gaëlle Béquet: Could you tell something about your personal background?*

*Judith Szilvássy:* I started my university studies in librarianship in 1948, and received my degree in bibliographic control in 1953 at the Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. My father was a medical doctor, he was part of the Hungarian civil elite. He was the chief executive of a private sanatoria in Budapest during the last years of the Second World War. He was arrested in 1945 by the State Protection Authority shortly after the Soviet Army arrived in Budapest. We did not hear about his whereabouts for a long time afterwards. He was released from prison only in 1948. From that time on, I was considered as a class-alien since I did not belong to the working class. Between 1951 and 1957, I was working at the Library of the Technical University of Budapest. In 1956, as a consequence of the suppression of the Hungarian revolution, there were some purges in the administration. The director of the Library was fired and fourteen library staff members (among them myself) decided to leave as a protest against the clean-up. In 1958, I received a job offer from the National Széchényi Library. I accepted it and I started as the librarian in charge of foreign publications at the Acquisitions Department. The command of three foreign languages (English, French and German) was a good help to fulfill the position. Later I became head of department of the Hungarian Union Catalogue of Foreign Periodicals. In parallel, I have always been involved in international cultural projects. In the

eighties I was included in the Unesco roster as a professional consultant, and in 1983, I was offered to lead a project in Laos. Between 1983 and 1988, I visited Laos five times, and I stayed approximately four months each time. My mission was to establish a national scientific and technical information and documentation centre in the capital, Vientiane. 1987 was an exceptional year, when following the death of Marie Rosenbaum, founding director of the ISDS International Centre, I was invited to take over her position at the ISDS International Centre. Back at the National Széchényi Library in 1988, I took up my job and I became director of the International and Public Relations Department where I stayed until 1991. In 1990, Hungary became a member of the Council of Europe. I was offered a job position to create and manage the Council of Europe Information and Documentation Centre in Budapest. I worked there from 1991 to 1998.

*Gaëlle Béquet: What were your links with ISSN before you came to office at the ISDS International Centre?*

*Judith Szilvássy:* Actually, there were three phases. The first phase started in 1972. That year Unesco organized a General Assembly on UNISIST in Paris, where for the first time the creation of ISDS as a worldwide system was brought up. The same year the IFLA Conference took place in Budapest where Marie Rosenbaum gave a talk about the future of serials identification and ISDS. I got acquainted with her being her interpreter in Budapest. In Fall 1972, I received a grant to study the Union Catalogue of

Foreign Serials at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris during one month. This catalogue was used as a model for the printed form of the Hungarian Union Catalogue of periodicals. In 1972, I also made a trip to Moscow. It turned out that a parallel serial registration system had been set up in the Soviet Union and it was called MARS. It was meant to become an international automated registry. The Russians invited the librarians of the communist block to attend a presentation on MARS. The Hungarian delegation consisted of three persons including myself. In the course of discussion, we insisted that MARS had to be linked to ISDS, the only global international system. I remember vividly till today the way Soviets would organize meetings: the minutes were ready before the corresponding meetings took place, and they were distributed upon arrival at the airport. If you wanted to make a comment later on, a note was added to the minutes. In the years that followed this was the practice we adopted to convey the Hungarian point of view. The second phase took place in 1975–1976. In 1975, the Director of the National Széchényi Library asked me whether I was interested in international bibliographic activities. At that time, the ISBD(S) standard was to be revised. The condition of participation in the IFLA meeting in Paris was the submission of a paper on this topic. My paper was accepted, and at the IFLA meeting Dorothy Anderson (UBCIM), chairman of the Paris meeting, offered me to chair the ISBD(S) Working Group. Dorothy supported me greatly, and she told me once that the paper I had submitted was among the best presentations she had received. Although I accepted this offer, I had doubts on my possibilities to fulfill the task because of financial or political reasons in my country. Therefore, Dorothy Anderson

wrote a letter to the Director of the Hungarian national library asking him to support my work. The Director's reaction was absolutely positive, nonetheless the higher authorities declared that they would never grant any allowance for my travels. I was able to attend international meetings from that time on only thanks to invitations from external partners. The ISBD(S) was eventually published in 1988 after reviewing a great amount of comments. In fact, I received 400 pages of remarks! It should be noted that the ISSN was included as a mandatory data element in the bibliographic description of serials. In 1976, on the occasion of the first ISDS General Assembly, Löhner, the representative for Unesco suggested that I should become vice-chairman of the newly created ISDS Governing Board Bureau. I worked for the Governing Board until 1992 as its president, immediate past president and honorary president. The third phase began in 1986 when there was the first Directors' Meeting ever to take place in the communist countries, i.e. in Budapest, Hungary. Many participants from all parts of Europe attended. We were able to make the first on-line connection between the ISDS international database in Paris and the Hungarian serial database in Budapest.

*Gaëlle Béquet: How long did you serve at the ISDS International Centre?*

*Judith Szilvási:* After the unforeseen death of Marie Rosenbaum in December 1986, the Governing Board Bureau invited me to take over the administration of the ISDS International Centre as of January 1987, for one year. The idea was to find the right person to fulfill both the requirements of professional experience and that of the balance in geographical coverage needed for the management of the

worldwide network. I accepted the offer on condition that the Director of the Hungarian national library would support me, and obtain the agreement of the responsible Hungarian authorities. Finally, after receiving the necessary permissions, I took up my office as Director of the ISDS International Centre on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 1987 – and gave up her post at the International Center in December 1987. My successor, Christine Deschamps started to work as of January 1988. It should be noted that when she left in December of the same year, I was offered the position as Director for a second time. I refused, as it was clear that it could have been only a new transitional period. According to the Statutes of the International Centre, there are two requirements for the position of a Director: French citizenship and being a French public servant.

*Gaëlle Béquet: Why did you apply for this position at the ISDS? What were your missions?*

*Judith Szilvásy:* In fact, I never applied for any position at ISDS, such an idea was unimaginable at that time behind the Iron Curtain.

*Gaëlle Béquet: And what were your missions at ISDS as administrator?*

*Judith Szilvásy:* I had two main missions: to enlarge and strengthen the network, and to ensure good professional relations between ISDS (Paris) and MARSII (Moscow). To fulfill mission 1: I had to prompt countries to create ISDS centres. The first step for a country wishing to enter the ISDS network was to accede to the Statutes – the second step was to pay the contribution. I traveled a lot and I visited potential partners in order to convince them on the use of the ISDS system and the ISSN

number. I organized workshops for centres needing guidance. I went to Brazil, Austria, Switzerland and to Thailand where the only operating regional centre, the South East Asian ISDS Centre was based. It encompassed five SEA countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. There was also the issue of modernisation of the computer system for the ISDS database. As a result of discussions with Slawek Rozenfeld, who was in charge of IT issues at the ISDS International Centre, a more efficient operating system was adopted enabling online working relations with centres. On the theoretical level, there was a need for harmonising bibliographic practices (standards such as ISBD(S), AACR and MARC) used within the network and in the ISDS Register records. Concerning mission 2, in 1972 a parallel registration system was established in Moscow called MARSII (mentioned above) – in its full form: International Automated Registration System/Centre of Scientific and Technical Information and Documentation. This MARSII centre was declared Regional Centre of ISDS in 1973 with the mandate to represent CMEA (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, Comecon) countries within the ISDS network. The representation included managing national blocks of ISSN within the region, submit all national records to Paris, produce magnetic tapes etc. As a consequence, these countries had to refer to the Regional Centre in Moscow, and could not have direct contacts with the Paris-based ISDS International Centre. In the course of years it became clear that the fulfillment of the obligations of the regional centre failed. With the exception of two test tapes [of bibliographic records], none of the other tasks were realized. My mission was to foster the independence of the CMEA countries/centres so that they could send

their own records directly to Paris and they could manage their own ISSN blocks. On the theoretical level, regarding standardization, the main concern was to avoid the application of additional coding systems and data elements using Cyrillic script instead of Latin in national ISDS records. To sum up, in spite of all difficulties, problems and fears, my mission proved to be successful. In April 1990, Hungary discontinued cooperation with MARSİ, which came into force as of the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 1990. We were the first national centre to do so, Poland followed next.

*Gaëlle Béquet: After you left your position at the ISDS International Centre in 1987, were you still involved with ISSN matters or with standards or any other international library issues?*

*Judith Szilvássy:* I have never left the ISSN and the International Centre. My soul, my liking, my thoughts are still with the ISSN! After that experience, I carried on my activities in various fields of the profession. I was a member of the IFLA Standing Committee for Serials and I took part in the editorial board of the journal *The Serial Librarian*. As regards standardization, having been the chair of the ISBD(S) Working Group, I took part in the elaboration of the revised edition of ISBD(S) which was eventually published in 1988 (see above). In 2001, I was asked to review the draft of ISBD(CR) standard, as well. We wrote 36 pages of comments in cooperation with Elizabeth Gazdag from ISSN Hungary. I was also active at the national level: I compiled, translated and reviewed several national standards in Hungarian. I published two books: *The Basic Serials Management Handbook* under the auspices of IFLA in 1996 – and the *Handbook*

*of Library Management of Serials and Other Continuing Resources* published by the Library Institute of the National Széchényi Library, Budapest, in 2006. As of 1983 up to 1988 I have been working for Unesco, and managed a project in Vientiane, Laos, as its project director. There was a need to build and organise a national centre for scientific and technical information. There was some training involved but also very practical issues to address. For example, I had to order special typewriters with Lao characters actually from Italy, the only source available at that time! In 1988 the centre eventually opened and the Lao television had a special program about the event. At the end of this list of activities, it should be noted that in 1991 I was asked by Unesco to travel to South Korea, Seoul, where I had to organise a one week long ISDS Workshop – having been its keynote speaker.

*Gaëlle Béquet: How was ISSN use impacted by the collapse of the Soviet Union? How did publishers and libraries react?*

*Judith Szilvássy:* In June 1990, there was the last MARSİ workshop in Budapest, and only four countries were represented (Bulgaria, Cuba, Hungary and the Soviet Union). The Regional Centre by this time was already inactive. According to our knowledge, most of the block-countries did not avail themselves of the possibilities of direct contacts with Paris. The case of Hungary was a bit different. As of 1973, we started to send work-sheets in parallel to Paris and to Moscow. We were the first to build a direct contact with Paris. In the course of years, we switched to modern carriers for data recording: magnetic tapes, floppy disks, files sent as e-mail attachments, as far as the online editing via client-server connection. The collapse of the

Soviet Union did not influence the use of ISSN in Hungary: publishers, libraries, postal services and all parties interested considered the ISSN an important promoting tool. The same attitude is still prevailing and reasonable working relations help us in cooperation.

*Gaëlle Béquet: What happened at the Hungarian national centre? How has it evolved?*

*Judith Szilvássy:* I left the ISSN Hungarian centre by the end of 1991, when I took my position as Director at the Council of Europe Information and Documentation Centre in Budapest. When I was about to leave, I introduced my successor, Elisabeth Gazdag, to the international environment: the ISDS community got acquainted with her in relation to the testing of OSIRIS at the 16<sup>th</sup> ISDS Directors Meeting in Lisbon, in 1990 – and a year later in Paris, when I said goodbye to my long standing colleagues at the 17<sup>th</sup> Directors Meeting. We have been taking part in testing tasks from the very beginning. In parallel with the Irish centre we checked the

functions of OSIRIS (Online Serials Information Registration and Inquiry System) in 1990-1991, and the Hungarian national centre tested the ISSN-OSIRIS LAN version in 1994-1995, then joined the WinOSIRIS Working Group in 2001. We maintained continuous contact with the International Centre Computer Department, we were reporting on the test results to the International Centre and at the Directors Meetings. We also contributed to the OSIRIS User Manual. When the possibility opened, ISSN Hungary volunteered for the first Virtua training session at the ISSN IC, Paris, in July 2004, and the ISSN centre switched to the client which is in use to date (with a few version updates). The work on standardisation has also been continued: the Director of the centre joined various working groups and editorial committees. I am fortunate to have such a successor. She even organised a second Directors Meeting in Budapest, the 22<sup>nd</sup> ISSN Directors Meeting in 1997. On the whole, I am very proud of the Hungarian ISSN centre.

*March, 2015*

## **Closing Remark by Judith Szilvássy**

Allow me to add some closing remarks to the interview. The first 14 years of the ISDS were indisputably linked to the legendary personality of Marie Rosenbaum. The brand marks of her activity were the ability in high level diplomacy, high quality work and persistence to the end. It was her task and privilege to lay the foundation of ISDS – over the 14 years elapsing between 1972, the IFLA General Conference in Budapest (Hungary) and October 1986, the ISDS Directors Meeting and Governing Board Bureau Meeting organised by the Hungarian ISDS National Centre in Budapest. This was the last time I saw Marie, with whom we had become close friends throughout the years.

This is the point, where I have to share with you, dear colleagues, a secret of the two of us, hidden in my memory up to the present. That afternoon, sitting peacefully on a sunny hotel-terrace looking to the Danube, she started to speak about her cardiac problems – a concern she had never mentioned before. Marie told me that she would like me to replace her at the ISDS if anything happened to her. I certainly dismissed even the thought of a bad end in case of an operation, and encouraged her as much as possible. I also told her that the solution she would have preferred was unrealizable under the given political situation of our countries.

But fate decided in a different way... I was fortunate to have been offered the opportunity to serve for ISDS, which I tried to do to the best of my knowledge and with a strong commitment towards developing the consolidation period. This was my task and my mission for the fulfillment of which I enjoyed a continuously active background. I am still grateful to the many friends, colleagues and decision makers for their goodwill, encouragement and support. Let me cite in first place Monsieur Pierre Trincal on the part of the French Government, Wolfgang Löhner, representative of Unesco, all the chairmen and members of the actual Governing Boards and Bureaus, such as Mary Price, Albert Mullis and Ross Bourne. My best thanks go to the dedicated staff of the ISDS International Centre and the cooperative Directors of the National/Regional Centres.

Finally, I express my high appreciation to Mme Gaëlle Béquet for her interest in the events of those past years and for the initiation of a personal talk on a forgotten topic. I owe her many thanks not only for the interview but also for her kind invitation to the boat-party in memory of the ISSN Network's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. To my great regret, my present health condition does not allow me to celebrate together.

April 2015, Budapest, Hungary