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Retrospective conversion of the card catalogues of books in the National Széchényi Library

In March 2003 the National Széchényi Library elaborated a feasibility study evaluating all considerations and outlining optimal possible solutions, supplemented with rules. Titled "Proposal for the retrospective conversion of the book catalogues of the National Széchényi Library" on the basis of which the Ministry of Information Technology and Communication undertook to finance the launching of this great task in the frame of projects covered by the National Digital Archives. A contract was signed between the ministry and the national library in December 2003. Under the terms of the contract, the NSZL is to "begin retrospective conversion of its card catalogue of books, digitally recording the data of about 400,000 cards from the collection of unit cards, arranged according shelf numbers. According to the description of the task, system plan and budget conditions set out in Annex 1 to the contract".

Method of the conversion

After the tendering process the winner Medea Services Kft. scanned the cards and began the data keying at large, divided screens or at work stations with two monitors. On the left side or the upper part of the screen they see the image of the catalogue card, while on the right side or the lower part of the screen is the datasheet to be filled in. They interpreted and qualified the data elements on the card and entered them on the datasheet in conformity with the rules. Two persons entered the same data for each card, a special program was used to compare the records created and any discrepancies found were corrected. In the case of uncertainty (the content of the card was difficult to interpret, a character of line was illegible) a comment was added to the record and the corrections were made by the national library's working group.

On the basis of the rules, in the first stage of conversion the recorders recognised the authority data formats, the data elements belonging in the data groups of the description, the transliterated texts from non-Latin alphabets, and they were able to record these uniformly in HUNMARC format using the ANSEL character set. Because of the short deadline the data recording had to be done extremely quickly (approx. 150 cards per day and per person), but at the same time this was not merely mechanical work since the data and symbols on the old catalogue cards had to be interpreted according to the rules of modern cataloguing. This means that retrospective conversion actually involves "intellectual conversion".

All the preparatory work has been done. The internal working group is continuously creating authority records in AMICUS (the national library's integrated library system) at a steadily increasing pace following the training period. The scanning has been done. The Medea Kft. was working at a rapid pace on the data entry. We have got the records in batches of 100,000; we first loaded them into a test database and checked their quality, they were then transferred to the live database and can be searched in the OPAC of the NSZL.

What can be expected and what cannot?

> The data of 400,000 cards are added to the online catalogues, the new records can be downloaded in HUNMARC format, and the authority records became available.

It is important to know that the items that have entered into the OPAC through retro-conversion are not records from the national bibliography, they contain merely the data on the card catalogues.

At the same time it should be stressed that we expect the conversion to improve the quality of the national library's services in the following ways:

- remote users can now gain information on the part of the holdings involved through the online catalogue accessible on the web,
- the records are entered not only in the library's OPAC but also in the MOKKA (Hungarian Shared Cataloguing System),
- access to the converted part of the holdings is easier, quicker and more efficient,
- on-the-spot supply is improving as well as the time required to meet requests for interlibrary loans,
- the number of access points is increasing,
- the internal library work processes are improving.