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The Culture of the  
Aristocracy in the  
Habsburg Monarchy,  
1750–1820

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## Contents

Acknowledgements	7
Gábor VADERNA: The Culture of the Aristocracy: A Central European Perspective	11
Ivana HORBEC: The Croatian-Slavonian Aristocracy in the Local Politics During the Eighteenth Century	24
Suzana COHA – Nikola VUKOBRATVIĆ: “Banus, our only hope”: Some Remarks on the National Aspirations of Representatives of Croatian Politics and Culture in the Late Eighteenth Century	43
Zsolt KÖKÉNYESI: Zwischen Hof und Land. Die ungarischen Mitglieder des Sternkreuzordens im Zeitalter des Wandels (1766–1792)	55
Eva KOWALSKÁ: Der Anteil der Familien Zay und Calisius an der Entwicklung der religiösen und kulturellen Infrastruktur der ungarischen Lutheraner	86
Olga KHAVANOVA: „There are many Hungarians at the College...”: The Vienna Theresianum and the Hungarian Aristocracy	101
Teodora SHEK BRNARDIĆ: Aristocrats As Enlightened Fathers: The Paternal Authority of the Bohemian Count Franz Joseph Kinsky (1739–1805) and the Croatian Count Ivan VIII Nepomuk Drašković (1740–1787)	118
Gábor VADERNA: Communicating Virtues: Poetry as Social Practice in the Culture of Aristocracy	142
Annamária BIRÓ: Aufbau der Infrastruktur der Wissenschaften in Siebenbürgen gegen Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts: Die beiden Telekis	159
Piroska BALOGH: Knowledge in Transit – Between Aristocrats and Scholars: Remarks on Count László Festetics’s Education	173
Dezső GURKA: Ungarische Magnaten in der Societät für die gesammte Mineralogie zu Jena	188
György KURUCZ: „In the Interest of the Homeland and His Lordship’s Domains”: The Study Tours of the Professors of Hungary’s First College of Farming in Western Europe, 1820-25	202

Lilla KRÁSZ: Kultur(en) des Sammelns: Medizinische Bücher einer ungarischen Adelsbibliothek	216
Béla HEGEDÜS: Heinrich Gottfried von Bretschneiders Roman Georg Wallers Leben und Sitten, wahrhaft – oder doch wahrscheinlich – beschrieben, von ihm selbst (1793): Intellektuell sein im Königreich Ungarn des 18. Jahrhunderts	244
Andrea SEIDLER: „Wenn ich gute Opern hören will, gehe ich nach Esterháza“. Ein Schloss im Fokus von Beschreibungen des späten 18. Jahrhunderts	257
Réka LENGYEL: Masonic Ethics, Stoicism, Cultural Patriotism: Insights into the Intellectual Life of Count György Festetics	276
Rumen István CSÖRSZ: Miklós Jankovich und die <i>Sammlung der Nationallieder</i>	291
Ágnes DÓBÉK: The Baronial Patrons of Miklós Révai	305
Gábor MÉSZÁROS: Societies of Scholars and Patronage in Late Eighteenth Century Hungary: Ferenc Széchényi as Patron of Ádám Pálóczi Horváth	313
Ivo CERMAN: Johann Rudolph Chotek and Veltrusy: The Patriotic Landscape Garden	324
Olga GRANASZTÓI: The Indifferent Rich? Ferenc Kazinczy's Failed Attempt to Found a Literary Society with Prince Lajos Battyhány II as its President	334
István SZABÓ: The Impact of Ecological Patterns and Progress in Natural History on the Festetics Family's Land Use and Landscape Gardening	344
Borbála D. MOHAY: The Social and Political Functions of Count Ferenc Széchényi's Garden of Cenk	362
Victoria FREDE: Garden Diplomacy of the Sentimental Era: Joseph II's Visit to St. Petersburg in 1780	376
Index	397

## The Indifferent Rich? Ferenc Kazinczy's Failed Attempt to Found a Literary Society with Prince Lajos Batthyány II as its President\*

In January 1791 Ferenc Kazinczy – the descendent of Protestant gentry from north-eastern Hungary, as well as a fledgling writer and ambitious organizer of literary life – sent a long letter from Košice, where he lived at the time, to prince Lajos II Batthyány-Strattmann, the scion of one of Hungary's richest and most influential aristocratic families. The purpose of Kazinczy's letter to the Prince – written with much élan and no less presumptuousness – was to ask him to accept the presidency of a literary society he was about to found.<sup>1</sup>

The 32-year-old Kazinczy was still earning his living as an inspector of education, but thanks to his translations of two Sentimental works (Salomon Gessner's *Idylls* in 1788, and Albrecht Christoph Kayser's epistolary novel, *Adolfs gesammelte Briefe* in 1789), he had already become a widely acclaimed writer. Finally, but no less importantly, he had been a Freemason since 1784, and was a member of the Virtuous Cosmopolitan lodge in Miskolc (eastern Hungary).

Lajos Batthyány, who was six years Kazinczy's senior, had already created his life's masterwork by then. It was around these years that he finished reconstructing the castle in the center of his family estate at

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1 This important letter is all the more relevant as its original is being kept in the Balaton Museum of Keszthely. It was first published only in 1960. Ferenc Kazinczy to Lajos Batthyány-Strattmann, 7 January 1791, in: Ferenc Kazinczy: *Levelezése* [Correspondence], ed. by János Váczy, István Harsányi, Jenő Berlász, Margit Busa, Klára Cs. Gárdonyi, Géza Fülöp, László Orbán and István Soós, Vol. I–XXV, Budapest–Debrecen 1890–2013 (henceforward: *KazLev*), XXIII, pp. 28–34.

Körmeind in western Hungary, and completely rebuilding the park that surrounded it. A final moment of symbolic value in this large-scale park project was the inauguration of a memorial stone in honor of the then still living Swiss writer, Salomon Gessner, in 1786. The other scene of Batthyány's life at the time was Vienna. Also a Freemason, he was a member of the most famous lodge of the Habsburg Empire, *Zur wahren Eintracht*. As an amateur poet, he was publishing poems in German in the *Wiener Musenalmanach*. It is perhaps worth noting that during the same period he wrote his letter to Batthyány, Kazinczy was also preparing an Almanach for publication, which he fashioned after the *Musenalmanach* and titled *Heliconi virágok* [*Flowers of Helicon*]. It was published in August 1791.

Kazinczy's letter to Batthyány was written amid the political turmoil and eventful public life of 1790–91, developments which affected both men. On the political level, we should mention the secret plot following Joseph II's death. Among the participants, we find several Freemasons who formed the core of the radical, reformist nobility in the Diet, and who wanted to tear Hungary away from the Habsburg Empire and take back the country's constitutional sovereignty.<sup>2</sup> Although the experiment failed, it had serious consequences not only for Leopold II's short-lived reign but also for the whole of the 1790s. Neither Kazinczy nor Batthyány were involved in the plot, but through their social connections, especially their Masonic networks, they were close to some of the plotters, whether they were aware of it or not, especially as the secret movement brought together Protestants and Catholics, members of the landed gentry and the aristocracy.

One of the consequences of the sudden boom in political and social life was a meeting called *Litterarius Consessus*, which was held at the house of Ferenc Széchenyi in the autumn of 1790, during the Diet at which Kazinczy was also present. The meeting was attended by poets and aristocrats representing a wide range of movements, with the aim of preparing the foundation of a scientific society.<sup>3</sup> Most of the participants came from the radical circles of the reformist nobility, as well as those Masonic lodges that provided the backbone of secret political plots.<sup>4</sup>

2 Cf. Sándor Lipót főherceg nádor iratai, 1790–1795 [Archives of archduke Palatine Alexander Leopold], ed. Elemér Mályusz, Budapest 1926, pp. 5–6.

3 Ferenc Kazinczy to György Aranka, 2 November 1790, in: Kazlev, II, pp. 120, 563. Cf. Katalin Hász-Fehér: A keszthelyi Helikon ünnepség a XIX. század elején [Helikon Festivities of Keszthely in the Early Nineteenth Century], in: Zsuzsa Kalla (ed.): Az irodalom ünnepei. Kultusz-történeti tanulmányok, Budapest 2000, pp. 173–188, especially pp. 179–181.

4 József Podmaniczky, József Vay, László Orczy, János Spissich were some of those present. KazLev, II, p. 563.

Nothing indicates that Batthyány attended this meeting, although he was in Buda at the time and had close ties with Ferenc Széchenyi. As we can see from his exchange of letters with Kazinczy, he was well aware that a scientific society was in the works. Both Kazinczy and Batthyány were in Buda during the autumn of 1790, and even though they did not meet personally, Kazinczy sent a copy of his Gessner translations of 1788 to the Prince. Contact was thus established, but Kazinczy was surprised, even touched, when Batthyány sent him a letter of acknowledgement. The prince praised Kazinczy with eloquent words for having proven with his translation of Gessner and his remake of the Kayser novel that the Hungarian language was capable of expressing a wide range of refined sentiments. On the other hand – and this was even more important to Kazinczy – Batthyány predicted that if Kazinczy had persevered in his efforts to refine the language and if others had competed with him, Hungarian would become so perfect that it would want in nothing else.<sup>5</sup> Batthyány's enthusiasm was genuine and his last sentence is testimony to it: "I wish I had had the opportunity to prove my special appreciation."<sup>6</sup>

Kazinczy mentioned Batthyány's response the very same day in a letter he wrote to his friend, Márton György Kovachich. This letter is characterized by the same poignant style and acrimonious criticism vis-à-vis the high nobility that he would use freely and abundantly a few months later in his letter to Batthyány. He writes to Kovachich, "I have received a very cordial letter from a prince in matters concerning Hungarian literature – I wish Their Excellences had sprinkled some gold over their words of praise at last!"<sup>7</sup> In other words, Kazinczy wrote his bold letter in the hope that the prince would make his enthusiastic offer good. Unfortunately, he went a little too far and met with a somewhat chilly reception, partly because of his provocative tone, but perhaps also because of the blatant naivety manifest in his vision for the future Academy. This vision seems today utterly absurd, or, in literary historian József Szauder's words, thoroughly morbid.<sup>8</sup> Batthyány's reply was a response partly to Kazinczy's arrogance in blaming the high nobility for not putting up enough money to support Hungarian culture, and partly to the detailed model of society. Even though the amateur Batthyány probably sympathized with

5 Lajos Batthyány Strattman to Ferenc Kazinczy, 18 October 1790, in: *KazLev*, II, p. 113.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Ferenc Kazinczy to Márton György Kovachich, 31 October 1790, in: *KazLev*, II, p. 116.

8 József Szauder: A kassai "érzelmek iskolája" ["Sentimental Education" of Košice], in: *Irodalomtörténet* 47.3–4 (1959), p. 401.

the Arcadian tradition it was based on, he was far too rational – at least his curt and dry reply suggests so – to believe that a workable scholarly body could be embodied by such an out-of-touch, rococoesque organization of bucolic poets.

The introductory part of the lengthy letter of request shows certain similarities with the editorial note to *Orpheus*, a review dreamt up and edited by Kazinczy, whose first issue had appeared a year earlier.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, it is evocative of the role model of the Orphic poet-priest and its close affinity to Freemasonry. Kazinczy speaks in the role of the chosen and enlightened poet. His vehement style is targeted at Batthyány, the initiated Freemason, who possesses the higher knowledge needed to raise Hungarian literature and thus the country. In his introduction to *Orpheus*, Kazinczy states that the main mission of his review is to protect and promote rational thinking in the face of blind apologetics. In his letter to Batthyány the same concept comes up as the “rational spirit” in a broader sense and corresponds roughly to the French Enlightenment. This letter is the only instance where Kazinczy elaborates on the origin story of how the spirit of the French Enlightenment took root in Vienna, thanks to the efforts of the most powerful and influential Austrian Freemasons.<sup>10</sup> The names mentioned by Kazinczy, all highlighted in capital letters, meant a lot, especially to Batthyány. We find Emperor Francis I on top of the list as the person who initiated the process of the Enlightenment. Although his wife, Maria Theresa denied public status to the order, she could not prevent it from operating covertly. In Kazinczy’s narrative, the second deity of Vienna is Chancellor Wenzel Kaunitz (also a Freemason) who, together with Emperor Francis, “ordered that there be light”. Then Gerard van Swieten, lighting the torch of sound reason, separates light from darkness. Here the origin story takes a leap in time: we arrive in the reign of Joseph II when van Swieten’s son, Gottfried takes the torch, and ultimately Ignatius Born and his friend and fellow mason in the lodge, Joseph von Sonnenfels, finishes the grand work. In other words, it was the *Zur Wahren Eintracht* lodge and its intellectual milieu that crowned the process.<sup>11</sup>

Lajos Batthyány was accepted into Born’s lodge in 1783 and soon became one of its administrators. During his six-week visit to Vienna in

9 Attila Debreczeni (ed.): *Első folyóirataink: Orpheus* [Early Hungarian Periodicals: Orpheus], Debrecen 2001, p. 9.

10 KazLev, XXIII, p. 29.

11 *Ibid.*



1786, Kazinczy himself attended one of the meetings of *Zur Wahren Eintracht* and met the most prominent Austrian poets of the period, Joseph Franz Ratschky, Johann Baptist von Alxinger and Gottlieb Leon, who were also members of the lodge. Kazinczy did not personally meet Batthyány on that occasion, but it seems the prince's intellectual horizon and aspects of his erudition were not unknown to him, thanks to his connections.<sup>12</sup>

This is testified to by a list of names that follows the evocation of Born and Sonnenfels's achievements. Kazinczy gives fifteen names of artists living in Vienna who completed, as it were, what the above-mentioned luminaries had started. They all represent light. It is an interesting feature of the list that instead of scientists or writers, it comprises the names of ten artists (painters, sculptors and etchers), two poets, whom he personally met while in Vienna, and two women, both of them literary enthusiasts, namely Gabriella von Baumberg, a poet in her own right and from 1804 the wife of Hungarian poet János Batsányi, and Caroline Greiner, later to be known as a woman writer by the pen-name Caroline Pichler. It was perhaps not a coincidence that many of those listed were then themselves members of *Zur Wahren Eintracht*.

Why is it them who represent the Enlightenment spirit in Vienna? Could there have been a connection between Kazinczy's list and the fact that he might have known of Batthyány's commitment to art, especially fine arts and poetry? We can safely assume that Kazinczy tailor-made the list to suit Batthyány's preferences, in order to kindle his interest, intuitively guessing they had shared tastes in art.

Kazinczy was not mistaken. This is testified to not only by Batthyány's large-scale constructions and commissions to artists but by Kazinczy himself, in a letter he wrote much later, in 1807 – after Batthyány's death – to Wolfgang Cserey. He gives the following portrait of the late prince:

Nature endowed him with many talents, and education with a lot of culture; all the embellishments in his house and garden were the inventions of the Prince himself. Once he shoved down the artist from the scaffold who was painting the ceiling because he mistakenly drew an oval figure on the vault, the vaultage being square, and he himself drew what the other had botched, and with unimaginable ease.<sup>13</sup>

12 Ferenc Kazinczy: Pályám emlékezete [Memoires] ed. by László Orbán, Debrecen 2009, pp. 62 495, 767.

13 Ferenc Kazinczy to Farkas Cserey, 2 February 1807, in: *KazLev*, IV, p. 475.

Returning to the draft of the foundation of the Arcadian society, Kazinczy's conception is worth summing up. He made it clear right away that the draft was modelled on the *Academia degli Arcadi in Rome*, of which he had direct information.<sup>14</sup> This was probably due to Johann Chrysostome Hannulik, whose poems written in Latin were first published in the early 1780s.<sup>15</sup> Kazinczy held him in great esteem and in all probability knew him as well. Following the success of his collections of poems, the Arcadian society in Rome accepted Hannulik as a regular member in 1782 under the pastoral name Seralbus Erimanticus. Based on the Roman model, the plan was to admit members under pastoral names into these literary societies to be called *Magyar Liget Pásztorai* [*Shepherds of the Hungarian Parklands*] or *Magyar Arcasok* [*Hungarian Arcases*]. Kazinczy wanted to offer the position of chief shepherd, that is, president, to Lajos Batthyány, with himself assuming the position of chief notary. He divided the country, including Transylvania, into five districts and envisioned appointing a leader to each. True to the Arcadian tradition, he would call them vice-shepherds. It is no coincidence that he mentions the chiefs of two districts, those of Transdanubia and Transylvania, by name. The vice-shepherd of Transdanubia would have been the Freemason Count János Spissich, the sub-lord of Zala county, who was also an important figure of the oppositionist, reformist nobility, while its notary would have been another Freemason from Zala, the writer Ádám Pálóczi Horváth. Kazinczy divided members, that is, shepherds, into three groups. At this point, we can hardly assume he followed the Roman model exclusively. Rather we can detect here the inspiration of Gessner: the first order of shepherds was the grasslands, the actual writers. The second order was that of the "defenders", that is, aristocratic patrons. Lastly, the "admirers" or "revelers" would be women of the audience. Names would not follow the Italian model: here the Arcadian Greek names of persons and places would be replaced by "Hunnish, Avar and ancient Hungarian names" in the case of men, while women would be given names of nymphs or Greco-Roman females. Writers would get their respective surnames from waters, patrons from mountains, and the feminine public from grasses. Kazinczy would thus become Aladár Bózsvai, after the small river called Bózsva in Zemplén county.

Next, we get a detailed description of the society's rules of procedure, the process of accepting members, the activities envisioned, and the

14 KazLev, XXIII, p. 30.

15 László Varga: Hannulik János, a XVIII. század Horatiusa. [János Hannulik, the Horace of the eighteenth century], Debrecen 1938, p. 11.

functions that Batthyány, as president, would have to fulfil. Kazinczy took pains to elaborate his ideas down to the minutest detail, which in all probability had their antecedents. On the other hand, the draft, which obviously drew heavily on Masonic inspirations, had some completely novel elements as well. They show that Kazinczy developed his conception from several models and that the idea of the Academy, envisioned as the main institution of the literary public, very much preoccupied him. What he wanted to avoid at all costs was the exclusiveness and secretiveness so characteristic of Freemasonry. As an antidote to secrecy, he suggested meetings should be made public in order to avert police suspicion and avoid the image of a secret and subversive society. He also suggested inviting priests to avert the suspicion of the clergy. But the most important and most unusual element of the draft was opening meetings to women, who represented the most enthusiastic and most sensitive recipients of literature. In 1786-87 the foundation of the so-called "Order of the Rose" in Banská Bystrica and Košice as a side-branch of Freemasonry, was an important antecedent to this.<sup>16</sup> The so-called "local Roses" were established after measures were taken against Masonic lodges. During those years Kazinczy lived in Košice where he found himself in the midst of a social life animated by local ladies of distinguished families. They were not only attracted to modern sensibility but understood this new kind of literature as well. The Order of the Rose as an organization dedicated to the cult of friendship and generosity, expressly brought ladies to the fore. We can therefore assume that the milieu of the local Roses marked by literary affinity, sensibility and Arcadian spirit, was instrumental in shaping Kazinczy's emotional outlook that produced the extravagant draft he sent to Batthyány.

If we want to identify the influences that were formative for Lajos Batthyány's thinking, we have to have a look at manifestations of his patronage of the arts and reconstruct the range of his erudition in light of the historical sources (as scarce as they may be). We find that his outlook was shaped by a Gessnerian sensibility, classicism and the French Enlightenment. Kazinczy intuitively sensed this complexity in Batthyány's intellectual horizon and recognized in him a kindred spirit endowed with a quasi-religious reverence for the arts.

For brevity's sake we cannot analyze Batthyány's intellectual setup in detail. But for purposes of illustration, we need at least to examine Bat-

16 Szauder: A kassai "érmek iskolája" (see fn. 8), p. 400.

thyány's lifework, the castle park at Körmend, to see how it reveals his intellectual preferences mentioned above. In the 1780s Batthyány created a complex and large-scale space and landscape composition of carefully selected buildings and sculptures by the Rába river, which truly reflected his admiration for all three artistic and intellectual trends mentioned above.<sup>17</sup> His close affinity to Antiquity and the neo-classicistic ideal of art are expressed in statues carved by the Viennese sculptor Johann Martin Fischer. They represent lovers of Antiquity and are all part of an elaborate thematic concept (and are also listed in Kazinczy's letter): Vertumnus and Pomona, Zephyrus and Flora, Amor and Psyche. In another part of the garden Batthyány erected statues to Mercury, Jupiter and Cybele, and in yet another a column to Cicero and Homer. He had temples built to Pan and Flora and had a bath constructed to the nymphs. Diametrically opposed to this, the garden is home to another concept inspired by the philosophy of the Enlightenment, manifest in the Philosophers' walk, the Allée of Silence, and temples to Society and Necessity. Some elements of the composition combine several sources of inspiration, for instance the Temple of Nature can be linked to the Sentimental shepherd's hut and the life of seclusion, but also to the program of the Enlightenment. And as mentioned before, the last symbol in the garden at Körmend that Lajos Batthyány himself commissioned was the memorial stone in honor of Gessner in 1786, which was an expression of his devotion to poetry and the Gessnerian depiction of nature, combining an ideal-ideal landscape with the real.

Batthyány admired not only the arts but also the scientific achievements of his age as well. A manifestation of the latter is a cabinet of models worth several thousand forints in the Castle of Körmend, where he kept his models and mock-ups of useful inventions, machines, buildings and bridges in huge custom-made crates. Visitors were able to locate the objects of their interest with the help of an inventory made for this purpose.<sup>18</sup> We could also mention a letter written by Batthyány in 1777 – a real curiosity – in response to a request by the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel, a Swiss publisher specializing in forbidden books. It reveals his

17 Tibor Koppány: A körmendi kastélypark építéstörténete [The building history of the castle garden of Körmend], in: Vasi Szemle 33.3 (1979), pp. 367–396.

18 Mihály Kunits: Topographische Beschreibung des Königreichs Ungarn und seiner, einverleibten Provinzen, In Bezug auf die Landes- und Volkskultur, Oeconomie, Industrie, Künste, Handlung, Manufacturen und Gewerbe. Durch eigene Forschungen und praktische Untersuchungen auf Reisen bearbeitet, und mit Rückblicken auf die Vorzeit nach dem gegenwärtigen Zustande dargestellt, Vol. I, Pest 1824, p. 45.

commitment to the Enlightenment, his acerbic views on the Church and his close ties to the enlightened Italian aristocracy.<sup>19</sup>

It seems there really was a common set of ideas based on which Kazinczy and Batthyány could have – in theory – jointly overseen a new literary society: the ideal of the sensitive man in need of refined society was indeed a common ideal, but the way they envisioned its realization was vastly different. First and foremost, because Kazinczy's concept was founded on a subjective state of existence, which József Szauder characterises as “the ardent longing of the Sentimental writer absorbed in literature for a sensitive public, a salon, or female friends receptive of these sentiments”, so that he can satisfy these longings.<sup>20</sup> Secondly, because Kazinczy dismisses the program of the group assembled in Széchényi's house in a far too patronizing manner, implying that it would amount to nothing anyway. And lastly, because his tone is full of pride as he chastises the high nobility – whom he calls “the indifferent rich” – for hardly opening their purses, except at the card table. To make matters worse, having contrasted the grandeur of writers with the pettiness of the aristocracy, he has the face to pontificate that if each were to offer a thousand forints to support Hungarian literature, they could secure eternal life for themselves. Kazinczy definitely went too far with this kind of condescending tone, as evidenced by Lajos Batthyány's curt, dry and slightly ironic reply. Batthyány's letter, dated 12 February 1791 has somehow been overlooked by literary historiography, probably because it came to light much earlier than Kazinczy's original letter, in response to which it was written.<sup>21</sup> Amidst ample phrases of polite refusal, Batthyány informs Kazinczy in a lengthy and complicated sentence that he found his communication far too exaggerated. The sarcastic overtones of the sentence are evident: “You [i.e. Kazinczy] have achieved so much merit in literary life that there is not a single amateur of the liberal arts who would not profess to be indebted to you for the works shining with your talent.” The iciness of the last sentence cuts off all further possibility of cooperation: “Since an Academy is being founded under state direction and supervision for the very same purpose, I should

19 Olga Granasztói: Adalékok a francia könyv európai terjesztési hálózatának feltárásához I. A Société Typographique de Neuchâtel bécsi kapcsolatai 1772–1785 [New data of the spreading network of the French book in Europe. The Viennese contacts of the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel], in: Magyar Könyvszemle 127.4 (2011), pp. 467–482. Cf. Robert Darnton: *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Prerevolutionary France*, New York 1995.

20 Szauder: A kassai “érzelmek iskolája” (see fn. 8), p. 398.

21 Lajos Batthyány-Strattmann to Ferenc Kazinczy, 14 February 1791, in: *KazLev*, II, pp. 160–161.

think the initiative you have presented has to be suspended for a while, until it becomes clear whether the plans begun so far will materialize or not.”

The creation of the Academy was held very dear by Batthyány, and nothing illustrates this better than the fact that thirty years after he wrote these lines, his son, Fülöp Batthyány, donated 50,000 forints – the second largest sum after István Széchenyi (Ferenc’s son) – to its foundation.