Lőrincz-Oláh, N. (2026). Digitization of Mária Szentpál's manuscript legacy.
Tánc és Nevelés. Dance and Education, 7(2), 113–120. https://doi.org/10.46819/TN.7.2.113-120

DIGITIZATION OF MÁRIA SZENTPÁL'S MANUSCRIPT LEGACY

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Abstract

As a dance researcher and dance annotator, Mária Szentpál contributed to the development of dance research with numerous Hungarian and international publications. No summary of her work has been published to date, and dance research is still indebted to the evaluation of her oeuvre. In my research, I examine Szentpál's activities related to folk dance collections and the notation, analysis, and publication of folk dances. The research is based primarily on 26 boxes of manuscripts and another 20 boxes of printed publications found in Szentpál's estate. The author intends to deposit the materials found in the manuscript boxes in a dance archive, assigning them with inventory numbers and processing them to make Szentpál's legacy more accessible to dance researchers. Following a brief overview of Szentpál's activities, the article provides a description of the processing and digitization process.

Keywords: digitization, legacy, dance research

1 INTRODUCTION

As a dance researcher and dance notator, Mária Szentpál made a significant contribution to the development of dance research through numerous national and international publications. A short biography of her can be found in Dienes's (2008) article (p. 193). To date, however, no comprehensive overview of her work has been published, and dance scholarship still lacks a thorough evaluation of her oeuvre. In my doctoral research, I examine Szentpál's activities related to the collection of Hungarian folk dances, as well as their notation, analysis, and publication.

The research is primarily based on Szentpál's estate, which consists of 26 boxes of manuscripts and an additional 20 boxes of printed publications that are currently in my possession and are currently being processed. Additional source materials related to the estate can be found in the Traditional Dance Archives of the Research Center for the Humanities Institute for Musicology, the Dance Archive of the Hungarian Theater Museum and Institute, and the Folklore Documentation Center of the Hungarian Heritage House. In my future dissertation, by analyzing these sources and their

* The first version of the Hungarian-language manuscript was received on 1 August 2026.

context, I aim to present in detail Mária Szentpál's areas of research and their scholarly significance, as well as their connections to contemporary folk dance research and the folk dance movement.

Szentpál's estate, together with approximately 60 publications written by Szentpál, contains notations of traditional folk dances, folk dance publications, choreographies, and writings related to Laban kinetography. Before presenting the process of cataloguing and processing the manuscript collection, I briefly outline Szentpál's main areas of research.

2 THE WORK OF MÁRIA SZENTPÁL

2.1 Folk Dance Collection

The Traditional Dance Archives of the Research Center for the Humanities Institute for Musicology also contains five of Szentpál's manuscripts (Akt 22, 24, 25, 26, 27), including early collections of Hungarian folk dances from the 1940s. The manuscripts reveal that Szentpál and Miklós Rábai, the former director of the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble, collected Hungarian folk dances from, among other places, Dévaványa (Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok County, Upper Tisza area), Körösladány (Békés County, Szeghalmi area), Orosháza (Békés County, Orosházi area) Csorvás (Békés County, Orosházi area), Tótkomlós (Békés County, Orosházi area), Mezőberény (Békés County, Békési area), Széphalom (Zemplén County, Sátoraljaújhelyi area), Köröstarcsa (Békés County, Békési area), and Méhkerék (Bihar County, Nagyszalontai area) (Rábai & Szentpál, 1949a-d, Szentpál 1949). *Figure 1* shows the details of the collection.

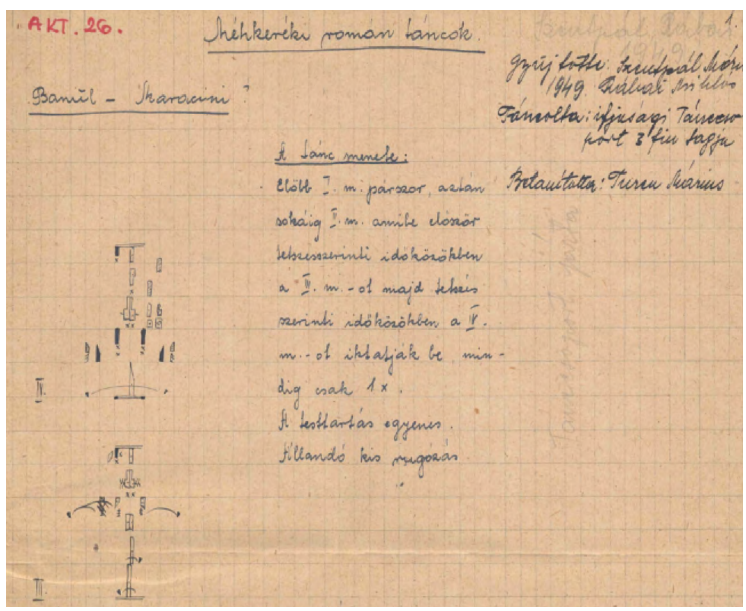


Figure 1 Details from the manuscript of Méhkeréki collection (Rábai & Szentpál, 1949d, p. 2)

The manuscripts contain folk dance motifs notated using the Laban kinetography system. Their examination will bring previously unexplored folkloric sources to the attention of Hungarian dance research. These early collections have not yet been investigated within the field of dance scholarship.

2.2 Publication of Folk Dances

Although Mária Szentpál did not actively participate in the filming of folk dances, her work as a notator and publisher helped popularize the traditional dance repertoire in the 1950s, a period when moving-image recordings of folk dances were not yet widely available. Traditional Hungarian folk dances were presented in a number of publications, including *Ecseri táncok* (1950) (*Figure 2*); *Völgységi táncok* (1951) (*Figure 3*); *Felsőtárkányi táncok: Részletek a Felsőtárkányi Népi Együttes műsorából: Felsőtárkányi bál* (1954c); *Pusztafalutól Karcsáig*: *Abaújmegyei táncok és dalok* (1953); and *Szatmári táncok* (1954b) (*Figure 4*). Mária Szentpál was responsible for the textual descriptions and editorial work for these volumes. In the introduction of *Völgységi táncok* (1951), as in the other volumes, the authors explain several objectives of the publication: the book "(…) makes material available to the reading public and the folk dance movement(…)" (p. 3); "(…)by making the findings of scholarly folk dance research available to the public, we primarily aim to provide material for our folk dance ensembles(…)" (p. 3); and "(…) we have published the original dances in their authentic forms in order to provide our dance group leaders with source material for their choreographic adaptations" (p. 3). Similar ideas can also be found in the other publications presenting folk dance materials.



Figure 2 Book cover of Ecseri táncok (Szilágyiné Szentpál, 1950)

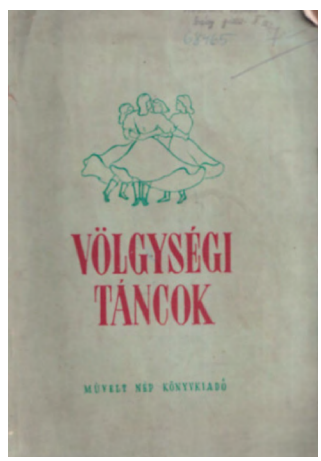


Figure 3 Book cover of Völgységi táncok (Szentpál, 1951).



Figure 4 Book cover of Szatmári táncok (Szilágyiné Szentpál, 1954b).

In addition to presenting the collected material, the previously mentioned volumes also set out the goal of encouraging "(…)as many dance groups and dance group leaders as possible to attempt to adapt the published source material (or material they may have collected themselves)" (Szilágyiné Szentpál, 1950, p. 4).

2.3 Publication of Folk Dance Choreographies

In connection with folk dance performances, Szentpál also contributed to the publication of stage choreographies. These were published in the *Együtteseink Műsorából* (1962–1978) (*Figure 5*) and *Néptáncosok Kiskönyvtára* (1953–1967) (*Figure 6*) book series.

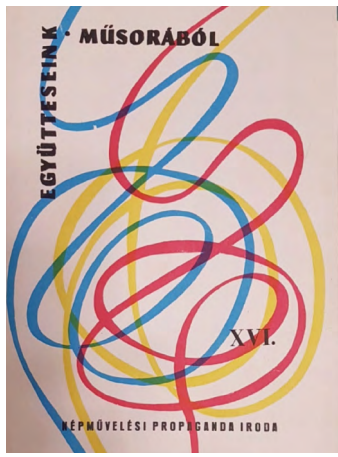


Figure 5 The cover of Volume XVI of the book series *Együtteseink műsorából* (1962–1978)

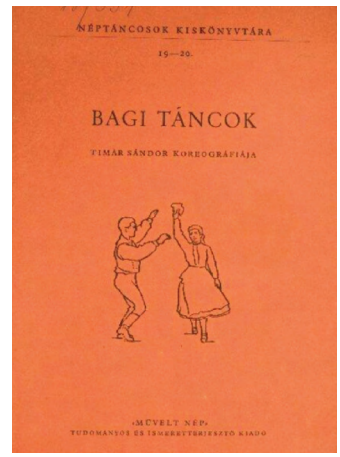


Figure 6 The cover of Volumes 19–20 of the *Néptáncosok kiskönyvtára* (1953–1967) book series

Szentpál also worked at the Népművelési Intézet, the predecessor of what is now the Hungarian Heritage House, and was therefore involved in the archival notation of choreographies created by the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble. The archive of the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble contains both dance notations and film materials documenting the ensemble's early choreographies. As part of my research, I aim to demonstrate how Rábai and Szentpál's folk dance collection activities in the 1940s were connected to the work of the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble under Rábai's direction, and how Rábai incorporated dances documented during ethnographic fieldwork into the ensemble's repertoire.

2.4 Folk Dance Analysis

From the 1950s onward, Mária Szentpál, alongside György Martin and Ernő Pesovár (1960), also addressed theoretical questions concerning folk dance analysis in Hungarian dance research and formulated proposals concerning movement analysis and formal-structural analysis. The insights provided by his publications in this field, along with the distinctive features of his analytical method, remain an unexplored chapter in dance studies to this day. In her published study titled "Some Problems in the Analysis of Hungarian Folk Dance," (1981) she conducted a formal analysis of the *legényes* dance performed by three male dancers. In my work, in addition to addressing issues of collection and publication, I would like

to present the distinctive features of her analytical method and her principles of motif research. For the purpose of researching the theory of folk dance analysis, examining Szentpál's analytical publications and exploring his approach constitute foundational research.

2.5 Development of the Laban Kinetography System

Szentpál was a member of the *International Council of Kinetography Laban*, an international organization for dance notation, and maintained close contacts with its leaders and with the developers of the Laban kinetography system. She participated in international conferences and contributed to the development of Laban kinetography. Among her manuscripts, I have found extensive international correspondence related to these activities, including correspondence concerning developments in the Laban kinetography system. Szentpál's research into movement analysis and notation is also of considerable significance for the documentation and publication of folk dances. (We can trace the development of Laban kinetography in Hungary in Mária Szentpál's volumes titled *Táncjelírás* – Szentpál, 1969, 1973, 1976; Szilágyiné Szentpál, 1954a, 1955–1956.)

In my doctoral research, I aim to explore Mária Szentpál's activities related to folk dance as described above, to summarize and evaluate her findings in this regard, and to situate them within the scholarly context of the period. Her work on kinetography served as a precursor to her more narrowly focused research in folklore, while her subsequent publications on stage adaptations represent a continuation of this work. I would also like to briefly review her activities in these areas in my future dissertation.

3 DIGITIZATION

Before processing the estate, I asked Péter Molnár, the director of the Folklore Documentation Center at the Hungarian Heritage House, for help with the archiving process. Péter explained that metal and plastic items must be removed from the boxes to preserve the condition of the materials. He also showed me what kind of acid-free boxes I should purchase and suggested ways of storing special items, such as photographs.

Following his instructions, I prepared the documents as follows: I removed metal clips and plastic folders in order to prevent further deterioration. Documents that belong together have been wrapped in acid-free paper to indicate that they were originally kept together by Szentpál (*Figure 7*). Since I had fastened the related pages together with additional sheets of paper, it often happened that the documents from a single box would no longer fit into the same container from which I had taken them (see *Figure 8*). For this reason, I also purchased a few acid-free cardboard boxes in which the manuscripts can be safely stored over the long term. My goal is for these documents to be catalogued, assigned inventory numbers, and preliminarily processed before being incorporated into a dance archive, where they will become accessible to future dance research.

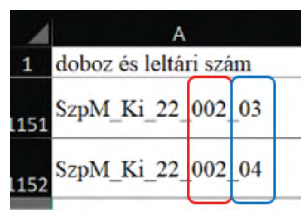


Figure 7 Documents folded into acid-free paper



Figure 8 Organized documents

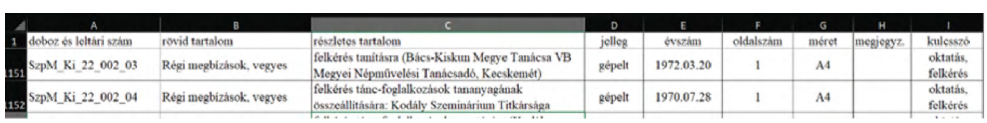
In the beginning of the archival storage process, I began assigning inventory numbers to the documents. An example of this coding system is shown in *Figure 9*.



	A
1	doboz és leltári szám
1151	SzpM_Ki_22_002_03
1152	SzpM_Ki_22_002_04

Figure 9 Excel spreadsheet excerpt

The "SzpM" code identifies archival material from the estate of Mária Szentpál. „Ki" indicates that the box contains manuscripts. The first number indicates the box in which the document can be found. The current example shows box number 22. The matching numbers (circled in red) indicate that Szentpál kept these documents together in some way, for example, by bundling them or storing them in a single folder. Within the folders, additional papers are often pinned together, which I denote with additional sub-numbers (circled in blue in *Figure 9*). The characteristics of the coded documents are recorded in an Excel spreadsheet (*Figure 10*).



	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
1	doboz és leltári szám	rövid tartalom	részletes tartalom	jelleg	évszám	oldalszám	méret	megjegyz.	kulcsszó
151	SzpM_Ki_22_002_03	Régi megbízások, vegyes	felkérés tanításra (Bács-Kiskun Megye Tanácsa VB Megyei Népművelési Tanácsadó, Kecskemét)	gépelt	1972.03.20	1	A4		oktatás, felkérés
152	SzpM_Ki_22_002_04	Régi megbízások, vegyes	felkérés tánc-foglalkozások tananyagának összeállítására: Kodály Szeminárium Titkársága	gépelt	1970.07.28	1	A4		oktatás, felkérés

Figure 10 Excel spreadsheet excerpt.

Next to the code, I provide a brief summary (in Hungarian "rövid tartalom") and a slightly more detailed description of the document's content ("részletes tartalom"). The "jelleg" (type) column indicates whether the document is a manuscript or a typewritten document, as well as whether it contains dance notations. If a date appears anywhere in the document, I also record it in the spreadsheet ("évszám"). Additionally, I record the number of pages in each document ("oldalszám") and its dimensions ("méret"). In the rightmost column ("kulcsszó"), I began tagging the documents with keywords to facilitate the subsequent grouping documents with related content. After recording the inventory numbers and data, I scan each page of the documents to preserve them in digital form.

I began scanning the contents of the boxes in the summer of 2026. In addition to processing the material, one of my goals is to create a digital copy of every page. In the summer of 2026, I consulted with Tamás Halász, the head of the Dance Archive of the Hungarian Theater Museum and Institute, regarding the future of Mária Szentpál's estate and informed him about my goals. I chose this institution as the future storage location as the estate of Olga Szentpál, Mária Szentpál's mother, as well as the materials of the Szentpál School led by Olga, is already available for research there. I considered it important that Mária Szentpál's estate be added to their collection alongside these existing materials. Fortunately, Tamás and his team confirmed that they would accept the materials once I had completed their processing. They also offered to assist with scanning the handwritten dance scores—which are larger than A4—using their institute's specialized scanner for large-format documents.

I hope that by organizing and analyzing these materials, we will be able to summarize and evaluate Mária Szentpál's scholarly work.

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