



# From the Garage to the Auditorium

Kornel Herjeczki, of Harmat ([www.harmat.hu](http://www.harmat.hu)) in Budapest, Hungary, shares his personal experiences in Christian publishing.

**W**e were going to bed when someone knocked on the window. My father, a pastor, found two men standing at the door. They whispered, disappeared, and then my father came back, excited. "They brought Bibles," he said. With its lights turned off, a van came into our yard. We unloaded hundreds of Bibles and Christian books into our garage.

This happened 35 years ago in a small village in Hungary. While Bibles were officially available at that time, they were expensive, big and black—not

very attractive to young people or the unchurched. The smuggled Bibles were free, small, printed on very thin paper. The secrecy was understandable. A pastor my father knew was imprisoned for distributing smuggled Bibles. As for Christian books, each traditional denomination had its own publishing house. But the titles they published were severely censored. Imagine books where passion, commitment and truth were nearly eliminated, and all that remained was dull theology. (As I write now, I find it interesting that it is not only Communism that can create dull titles...)

## *Beginnings*

Nearly two decades later, God led a few people to the conviction that change was coming to Soviet-occupied Eastern Europe. Gerry Davey, Marsh Moyle and others who called themselves International Literature Associates were deliberately seeking people, on this side of the Iron Curtain, who could lead evangelical, interdenominational, self-supporting publishing houses that would produce quality titles. Some thought they were dreaming. But in 1989 the Berlin Wall collapsed suddenly, like the wall at Jericho.

We were all surprised at how fast Communism fell. No one was against our starting a Christian publishing house, so by 1990 Harmat (dew) was officially formed.

### *The first misconception*

For many years, we'd felt that the most interesting books came from abroad. Even so, quite often we had the feeling that those titles were not what we needed in Hungary. Or, we found the covers a bit alien. So, when Harmat began, with the intellectual involvement of Hungarian Christian students associated with the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, we thought, "The important thing is to publish a book." At last we would have a title that we ourselves had chosen!

We published our first titles. This was good, but our friends said: "That is not enough. You have to sell them."

But how? Book publishing back in Communist times was highly subsidized by the government. There was no market economy. The average print run was about 40,000 units (20 times more than it is now). Books were very inexpensive. Wholesaling and retailing of books had been done by three state-controlled companies—but they could not cope with the post-Communist influx of hundreds of thousands of new titles. Saddled with huge inventories of unmarketable books, and facing competition from private distributors and street vendors, the state companies went bankrupt by 1992. Hungary's book distribution network was in ruins. Where previously there were bookstores in every village, quickly two-thirds of the country's bookstores shut down.

If secular book distribution was in ruins, Christian book distribution, as such, did not exist. What could we do? It all looked hopeless and impossible. We wanted to return to the euphoria that we could publish more books—without paying attention to the size of the warehouse we needed to store our unsold books.

By God's grace, our friends strongly encouraged us to take on the painful

and seemingly impossible work of developing our own distribution network. It was a phenomenal experience—in the midst of commercial chaos.

### *Perils of pricing*

We had to learn that income is not equal to profit. We believed Christian books must be free or at least very inexpensive. But we received advice: If we wanted to be self-supporting, we needed realistic book prices. This was even more important as various tax laws took effect in post-Communist times. In 1993 a value added tax of six percent was levied on books. It increased to ten percent in 1994 and to twelve percent in 1995, but was lowered to five percent a decade later. Also, production and paper costs rose considerably in that period.

After we understood this, we had to argue with our Christian brothers and sisters in Hungary, who for many years resisted our efforts to raise book prices. Our Christian friends from the West helped us to see that our situation was not unique, that it was transitional and that we should look further ahead. The devil likes to destroy whatever is good by confusing the minds of people and blinding them to the facts. Our friends educated us to see both the know-how, practical side of this battle as well as its spiritual side.

### *Widening our focus*

For Harmat, the 1990s were characterized by a special type of difficulty: our inner limitations. A third limitation, besides distribution and pricing, was that we thought our titles should only serve the interests of the small group of Hungarian Christian students who began our publishing house. We knew the needs of these people, as we were part of them. Under the Communist regime, confessing Christian students were hardly admitted to the universities, so Christian intellectuals were an endangered species in Hungary.

But when we published a book that reached people outside of that starting circle, we were amazed at the feedback we received. This profoundly changed

our view of the sorts of titles Harmat would publish.

Our Western Christian friends encouraged us right from the beginning to concentrate on what unites Christians and to leave denominational issues to others. Most Hungarian authors were known as Presbyterians, Lutherans, Baptists or Charismatics. Many were not

## FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Antunes wrote that crises provide opportunities for growth. What benefits are there in your current situation? Make a list.
2. Many problems mentioned in this issue relate to finances. What development plans do you have for your financial staff?
3. Some publishers suffered due to a lack of editorial focus and poor choices regarding translations. How should you evaluate your editorial efforts? Would Jesus publish your books?
4. To deal with inadequate distribution systems, one publisher created a distribution company; two others changed the focus of their sales staff. What markets are presently underserved by your company?
5. Certeza and Kanok Bannasan indicated that the credit terms they offered to bookstores created liabilities for them. How often do you revise your policies in this area?
6. These two publishers had to drastically reduce staff to survive. What policies do you have in place to ensure good separations?
7. What Bible verses have helped you in difficult times? How can you use them to encourage and motivate your staff?
8. Andersen and Herjeczki wrote about the influence of mentors in their publishing careers. How have others mentored you? How might you mentor someone else?
9. Andersen mentioned a demon of typesetting errors. Have you seen evidence of spiritual warfare in the crises you face?
10. What testimonies can you share about God's faithfulness to you in Christian publishing? Make a plan to encourage five people this week.

—Kim Pettit

open to working with a small publisher of an “undefined denominational stand.” But God arranged personal contacts with these authors in amazing ways and now we have books by authors from all of the major denominations.

### *What would Jesus publish?*

In 1998, Harmat became a member of the Hungarian Publishers’ and Booksellers’ Association, which is the oldest such association in Europe. I was very surprised that among the 150 members there were very few Christian publishers. I had to admit that Christian publishers, including Harmat, hardly have any influence on our culture at large.

Hungary’s population is 10 million, but due to historical reasons there are at least three million Hungarian-speaking people living in the surrounding countries. But in our nominally Christian country, evangelical believers are only about five percent of that total.

Returning to my office after attending that first meeting of the Association, I thought, “What if Jesus walked into Harmat and asked for a catalogue? He would read through it carefully and ask, “Do you have something for those who do not know Me yet?” And I would say, “Well, Lord, we are a Christian publishing house!” And He would say, “Yes, I know. That’s why I ask.”

The Great Commission does not say, “Therefore go and make disciples of all who already know me.” Rather, it says, “Go and make disciples of all

nations...” (Matthew 28:19).

We had to refocus after ten years of existence. We deliberately began looking for themes or authors that could build bridges and reach Christians and non-Christians alike. We recognized that to penetrate the secular market we must have suitable titles, develop national authors, and deal with popular themes.

### *Competition and partnerships*

God helped us to reach the new millennium, but the past six years brought some real challenges.

In the past, when we had a good reading experience, that was nearly enough of a basis to start translating the book. This way of doing business could not continue. The number of publishers in Hungary multiplied exponentially. We were not alone! Of course we knew we were not the only Christian publisher in Hungary, but it was easy to forget about the others.

Instead of publishing a book simply because we enjoyed it, we had to see how many similar titles are on the market from other publishers; whether we should translate a book or initiate an original work instead; if it is a translation, who is the original publisher, how much to pay for royalties, etc.

This forced us to take another look at our brothers and sisters in Christian publishing. It helped us to test our motives. We are probably all involved in the publishing arena because we sensed a calling from God. If so, we cannot be

enemies. This meant we had to rearticulate the unique identity of Harmat, our publishing house, as compared to the others in our market.

When I considered the differences, I also had to consider what we had in common. Christian publishers could take advantage of the special benefit that our main readers come together Sunday by Sunday in church. Reaching evangelicals on a nation-wide spectrum seemed impossible for many years, but we had to dream. This reminds me of “Dare to Soar!”—an International Christian Publishing Institute organized by Cook a few years ago. What would be soaring in our situation?

On the 25th of March this year, in a high school auditorium, we organized a conference for church distributors from all Protestant denominations, and 250 registered. We were amazed! We had a full day of training and book tables from 22 Christian publishers. And guess who sponsored the conference? A secular organization! We had applied for a grant to promote reading nationwide. This meeting was really like soaring from a garage to an auditorium.

### *Dare to dream*

We do not know what comes next, but as I think back I see how much we have learned. I realize how differently I have understood things over the past 15 years of our existence—and how God helped us to overcome our limitations. ❖

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