Dr. Lajos Tehel (1769-1816), the first curator of our museum

by G. PAPP, Budapest


Abstract – A short biography of dr. LAJOS TEHEL, the first curator of the Cabinet of Natural History and Technology, is given, completed with details of his activities in the museum and with new data on the early history of the Collection.

LAJOS TEHEL, the first curator of the Cabinet of Natural History and Technology (Camera Naturae et Artis Productorum) of the Hungarian National Museum died 175 years ago, on 19 November, 1816.

LAJOS TEHEL was born in Nagyszombat (now Trnava in Slovakia) on 26 March, 1769 as a son of an ironsmith. Having finished his lower and secondary classes in his home town TEHEL moved to Pozsony (now Bratislava in Slovakia) and became engaged in commerce. Soon afterwards he went to Vienna to continue his studies, and took his first degree as a doctor of philosophy.

Having returned to Hungary TEHEL immatriculated at the Medical Faculty of the University of Pest, and got his second degree on 17 December, 1793. Before his curatorship he had been working for more than ten years as the municipal physician of Óbuda (now a district of Budapest).

TEHEL came to the museum in 1810, that is at the very beginning of its history. The Hungarian National Museum was created two years before by the Act of Parliament 1808: VIII. on the basis of the National Library, which existed from 1802.

According to the "Protocolum Patriophilorum", the first inventory of this institution, minerals were donated to the collection already as early as 1803 by Countess SZÉCHÉNYI-FESTETICS, but regular donations began to be sent only after the plans of the National Museum became public in 1807. A lot of natural objects (mainly minerals) arrived, therefore the natural history collections got a separate room in 1809 in the central building of the Royal Hungarian University, where the National Museum was temporarily accommodated. FERDINÁND MILLER, the director of the Museum urged the appointment of a curator for the natural history collections. Not only this appointment was delayed because of the Napoleonic war, but the whole museum was removed to Nagyvárad (now Oradea in Rumania). The arrangement of the mineralogical collection was begun by TEHEL after the museum had returned to Pest (March, 1810). In his activity TEHEL followed the system of A.G. WERNER (MILLER 1818).

On 22 October, 1810 Palatine JOSEPH (the official patron of the Museum) visited the newly arranged collection in the company of Archduke ANTHONY, the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order. The satisfaction of the noble visitors gave an opportunity to the director for the recommendation of TEHEL. Palatine JOSEPH appointed him to the curator of the Cabinet of Natural History and Technology on 18 November, 1810 with an annual salary of 1200 forints.
At that time the financial basis of the museum was the Museum Fund. This fund accumulated in 1808/9 from the contribution of all the Hungarian counties, fixed in a few percents of the 1808 war tax. For the expenses only the interest of the fund were allowed to spend on. Therefore the budget was very restricted and individual donations were also drawn on even to the salary of the museum staff. For the salary of the curator of the "Camera Naturae et Artis Productorum" and his helper in 1810/11 three noblemen and the county of Bihar donated a fund of 29,000 forints altogether with an interest of 1740 Ft. Unfortunately the value of this fund and of the whole Museum Fund fell to one fifth after the devaluation of the forint in 1811. This serious blow restricted the activities of the museum considerably.

The main task of the curator was to arrange the continuously arriving donations. In this period of the natural history collections the majority of the material received was mineral or fossil. The first botanical objects (disregarding the four dried flowers sent by Julianna Széchényi-Festetics in 1803) were Transylvanian plants in a herbarium, consisting of three volumes, bought in 1809. In 1811 Palatine Joseph donated a collection of Hungarian trees curved to simulate the form of books. The first objects of the zoological collection (donated in 1807/8), were a one-eyed piglet with a horn on its forehead, preserved in spirits, a heron, and an egg of a raven. This strange ensemble illustrates the fact, that in these first years the natural history collection had also a character of a curiosity chamber. The first zoological collection of scholarly character, bought in 1812, contained butterflies and beetles. The technological collection got its first items in 1808.

Considering the enrichment of the collections, in 1812 the Palatine permitted the appointment of an assistant for Tehel, János Kutschera-Kutscherfeld. After his death (1814), József Jónás, the eminent mineralogist helped Tehel in the work.

In 1813 the present site of the National Museum was purchased and in November among others the Collection of Natural History and Technology was transported from the University into the old building standing on this site. The collection got 12 newly furnished rooms on the ground floor. (Tehel's official quarters were nearby in the house).

According to a contemporary report, published in the newspaper "Vereinigte Ofner Pester Zeitung", the topographical mineral, rock and coal collection of Hungary occupied the first large room. Another room housed the fossils, mainly diluvial mammal bones (Ossiotheca), whereas three rooms were devoted to systematical mineralogy. The botanical collection (herbarium and dendrarium of Hungary) was stored in one room. The zoological exhibits were arranged in four rooms. The models of buildings and machines in one room and in another one the manufactured products of Hungary represented the technological collection.

In the arranging of the collection, in addition to his assistant, Tehel was supported by two voluntary helpers. One of them, Pál Jány soon became a paid employee, keeper of the zoological collection, the other, Ferenc Foith was appointed to the keeper of the botanical collection only in 1817.

Tehel had not got much time from fate to spend in the museum. On 5 November, 1816 he had a stroke of apoplexy, and a fortnight later died at the age 47. His twenty-year-long marriage with Terézia Rombach was childless.

Tehel was regarded by his contemporaries as a mineralogist. Even though he was a member of the Mineralogische Societät (Mineralogical Society) in Jena, Saxony, he
was never a mineralogist in the present-day sense. He has not published mineralogical or other papers disregarding his letter to Thavsky on the Lénárto meteorite, published by Jacquin in 1814, and the only sign of Tehel's scientific activity can be found in his obituaries mentioning his studies on the Hungarian mineral coals. An indirect proof of Tehel's experiments on Hungarian coals is a contemporary report in the scientific journal "Tudományos Gyűjtemény" about the illumination of the museum building by coal-gas. This experiment — the first in Pest-Buda — was performed by Tehel on 5-6 June, 1816. Miller, the director of the museum, wrote in his official letters slightlying of Tehel's scientific knowledge and diligence, but Miller's prejudice is obvious. There was strained relation between them because of several clashes of authority (Kollányi 1905).

Actually, Tehel was a naturalist and an amateur collector. In the summer of 1810, i.e. before his museum career, he donated to the National Museum a lot of Roman coins found in Óbuda. There are also notes referring his collecting trips in the country undertaken by him later as the curator of the collection. Tehel performed the first installation of the natural history collection (1810) and its rearrangement after the removal (1813/14). In 1815 he prepared a plan for the installation of the collection on an enlarged area, entitled "Systema iuxta quod Objecta Historiae Naturalis Ordinanda erunt". The footnotes of this plan (his only work which survived) indicates his knowledge of contemporary scientific literature.

These mosaic fragments may outline the portrait of the first curator of our museum. Having done the frequently thankless work of the pioneers, Tehel left little personal heritage. He was one of the almost unknown naturalists who prepared the ground for the development of the museology of natural history in Hungary.

References

Protocolum patriophilorum etc. – Manuscript, Hungarian National Library, Fol. Lat. 71.
Tudományos Gyűjtemény 1817, pp. 117, 123-124.
Vereinigte Oster Pester Zeitung 1814, Nos. 88, 89., pp. 1004-1005, 1014.

Author's address: Dr. Gábor Papp
Department of Mineralogy and Petrology
Hungarian Natural History Museum
H-1088 Budapest, Múzeum körút 14-16
Hungary

Annls hist.-nat. Mus. nat. hung., 84, 1992