

The 125-year history of the Mátra Museum

M. FÖLDESSY & L. FÜKÖH

*Mátra Museum of the Hungarian Natural History Museum,
H-3200 Gyöngyös, Kossuth Lajos utca 40, Hungary.
E-mails: zoologia@freemail.hu, levente.fukoh@gmail.com*

Abstract – A brief review of the history of the 125 year-old Mátra Museum (Gyöngyös, Hungary) is presented. Besides changes in the physical structure, collection growth and scientific research, results of paradigm shift in information dissemination performed in the past decades are detailed. With 9 figures.

Keywords – Gyöngyös, history, Hungary, Mátra, museum, natural history

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

1887–1917

In the period following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 the Hungarian National Museum was the model for the foundation of city museums all around the country. Many societies and individuals were involved in collecting relics, works of art or natural assets representing the cultural, historic and natural heritage.

According to well-analysed historical records (MISÓCZKI 1977, FÜKÖH 2002) the first initiations of a country museum took place in the town of Gyöngyös in 1867. The town expected Ferenc Pulszky, a member of parliament representing the city from 1872, also the then director of the Hungarian National Museum to help the collecting work. Intensive collecting activity resulted in the opening of the Mátra Museum on 15 May 1887 (Fig. 1). The new museum was named after the Mátra Mountains, at foothills of which the town Gyöngyös is situated.

The museum was supervised by a five-member board. Geographic scope of the collections covered the area of the whole country. There were 191 objects displayed in the central exhibition hall. Curatorial work was carried out by one museologist and eight volunteers. To discuss scientific issues quarterly workshops were organised. The museum got also involved in secondary education. Details on acquisition and on the composition of collection material were included in a catalogue published in 1903.

According to the Gyöngyös development plan adopted in 1910 the erection of a new, separate museum building was envisaged. Unfortunately, on 21 May 1917, the bulk of the collection material along with registration books and exhibition brochures were lost when two-third of the city was destroyed by a fire.

1920–1945

On 15 March 1923, a committee composed of teachers, doctors and lawyers was formed with the intention to establish a separate museum. The Regional Museum of Gyöngyös was founded in 1931. On 18 July 1936, town authorities purchased a mansion formerly owned by the Orczys, a noble family from Hungary, to host the museum and historical archives. However, this plan failed because of the war events. Although the collections made it through the war, they could not escape the people who stole valuable objects like precious metals, and destroyed everything they regarded worthless.

1951–1996

In 1951 renewed efforts were made to organise the museum. On 2 May the Museum Organizing Committee (Fig. 2) was set up, and on 1 September the Mátra Museum, housed in the building of a former grammar school, was formed with two exhibition halls, where the remaining collection objects were displayed.

In 1955 the government commissioned the director of the Heves-Eger Museum, Ferenc Bakó to provide professional support to the museum being formed in Gyöngyös (BAKÓ 1997).

As an ethnographer, Bakó, instead of the former purely natural history profile, promoted the concept of the so-called “universal museum” with collections representing archaeology, local history, ethnography, fine arts as well as natural



Fig. 1. Imprint of the first stamp of the Mátra Museum (1887)

sciences. Thus the museum was transformed into a kind of regional museum. To enhance organisational tasks Gyula Nagy, later executive director, was entrusted with coordinating museum restructuring. The winter of 1955–56 saw the commencement of the transformation of the mansion for museum purposes.

Along with Pál Jakucs, a noted botanist at the Hungarian Natural History Museum (HNHM), many experts were concerned with writing the exhibition script.

The museum was granted the operation permit, and the exhibition opened on 21 July 1957 (Fig. 3). Results of scientific work were published regularly in *Múzeumi Füzetek* (*Museum Papers*) issued in 11 volumes until 1971. In 1964, Gyula Nagy was appointed as director general of the museum. He, in accordance with his former efforts, wanted museum collections to focus on scientific research in the field of natural sciences. To perform the wider range of duties more employees were hired, among them József Jablonkai lepidopterist, who, as a former architect, designed the vertical extension to the building of the Department of Zoology, HNHM with the 4th floor added.



Fig. 2. The Museum Organising Committee with István Kovács (third from right), museologist of the Hungarian Natural History Museum, who supervised the transformation of the Orczy Mansion to museum purposes (1952)



Fig. 3. The Natural History Exhibition opened as a part of the first permanent exhibition in 1957



Fig. 4. Mammoth skeleton discovered in the settlement of Mátraderecske first on display (1970). The skeleton was assembled under the supervision of Dénes Jánossy, museologist of the Hungarian Natural History Museum

In 1970 a new permanent exhibition opened (Fig. 4). By that time, three full-time museologists were employed. The periodical *Múzeumi Füzetek* covering various fields gave way to the journal *Folia Historico-naturalia Musei Matraensis* devoted solely to natural sciences, with 37 volumes published up to 2012.

In 1976 the museum launched a project that aimed to study the natural history of the mountains in the northeastern region of Hungary (North Hungarian Mountains). Research was carried out over a period of ten years. As a result, the museum saw a remarkable growth of 13 thousand items. Scientific results were published in 52 papers.

In 1979 József Berényi, with no experience in museological work, became the director general. During his tenure museum events culminated in such noteworthy exhibitions as the “*Centuries in Gyöngyös*”, the “*Man and Nature*” or exhibition of the oeuvre of the painter Lipót Herman, all of them organised in honour of the 650th anniversary of the town.

However, the museum was faced in time with the lack of storage space. Town authorities therefore decided to transfer a wing of the Berényi-Haller Mansion to the museum.

In 1985 malacologist Levente Fűkőh succeeded Berényi as director. Fűkőh brought substantial changes to museum aspects. The scientific staff was expanded with two zoologists and a botanist, and also two curators were hired. The formerly merged organisation structure was divided into departments. In the same year two supplements of *Folia Historico-naturalia Musei Matraensis* were issued, covering the unique flora and fauna of a volcanic hill called Sár-hegy (Sár Hill) near Gyöngyös. In addition, the museum became the publisher of the *Malakológiai Tájékoztató* (*Malacological Newsletter*). From then on, geologist Tibor Kecskeméti on behalf of the HNHM provided professional assistance both as a geologist and a supervisor over a twenty-year period.

The most remarkable event during the period between 1986 and 1990 was the opening of a new permanent exhibition on 18 August 1989 (Fig. 5). The exhibition was so successful that it drew more than 257,000 visitors, the highest number in its history.

In the early 1990s the museum was further expanded. Opening the live animal exhibition called Microarium the museum widened its range of services. Research on local history, the history of hunting and on ethnography was compiled in the *Mátrai Tanulmányok* (*Mátra Studies*) published in 1993.

The partial renovation of the Orczy Mansion carried out in 1995 along with the results of museological work enabled the opening of an exhibition on the history of hunting and wildlife management in May 1996.

1997–2012

As years went by the Orczy Mansion became too small for the Mátra Museum. Lack of space and the increasing needs of research work were finally resolved with the complete renovation of the premise. The ten-year renewal process started with the identification of the wooded plants of the park in 1997. The museum required not merely a reconstruction but new functions to be given to the whole site including the park, the building and a future lake. All of these were supposed to form a coherent entity.

In 2003 a bulletin on the renovation programme was issued jointly with the town for the purpose of finding financial support. The reconstruction project co-financed by the European Union was implemented between 2005 and 2009. Four exhibitions with a mammoth skeleton displayed in the central hall opened on 15 May 2007 (Fig. 6). Edit B. Gál, Árpád Dávid, Levente Fűköh, Lilla Hably, Lászlóné Pálos and Sándor Szakáll were the members of the script-writing team, while Albin Bánkuti supervised the implementation.

The museum park has been open to the public since 12 April 2009. The exhibition, the orangery and the education room hosted in the newly built Natural



Fig. 5. Minerals from the Mátra Mountains in the first hall (1989)

History Pavilion were first opened to the public on 27 October 2009. György Sipos was responsible for the construction of the diorama, and Albin Bánkuti for the coordination and the implementation of the exhibition.

The reconstruction project of the museum won the Europa Nostra award in 2009. In January 2010 Mariann Földessy, Levente Fűköh, Tibor Kovács, Levente Nagy, Béla Solti and András Varga were also awarded by the Ministry of Education and Culture for best exhibition script and for being the most visitor-friendly museum. In 2010 the museum was given the Museum of the Year award. The award ceremony took place during the Fest of Museums organised annually in Hungary.

COLLECTION WORK

The natural history collection of the Mátra Museum was based on collecting activities carried out both in the context of a research project aiming to study the natural history of the mountains in the north-eastern region of Hungary (North Hungarian Mountains), and also during field work carried out throughout the country.



Fig. 6. The mammoth skeleton in the central exhibition hall (2007)

At the beginning of the 1980's the museum purchased the valuable collections of private collectors Imre Pátkai, Jenő Radeczky and Nándor Homonnay. It was possible to purchase the country's largest egg collection from the heirs of Márton Németh.

Bequests and donations have also enriched the collections. Géza Budai's widow bequeathed trophies from Canada. András Margitai Becht donated a trophy collection of bovids originating in many continents, and József Hidasi gave Brazilian bird species to the vertebrate collection of the museum. The bird collection of Antal Gyéressy was purchased using financial support provided by a state cultural fund.

The palaeontological collection of Ferenc Legányi was transferred from the town of Eger to the Mátra Museum in 1985. With this growth the palaeontological collection became internationally renowned (Fig. 7). The museum acquired a mineral collection consisting of 300 specimens from an ore quarry at the village of Gyöngyösoroszi, which was closed in the meantime. In 1992 botanist Dénes Gothárd donated a herbarium comprising 30,000 items to the museum. Collection work was greatly facilitated by the fact that each collection had separate curators. The number of professional staff peaked at 15 including 9 museologists, 1 public service assistant, 1 part-time librarian and 4 curators. Because of collective redundancies required by the central administration the number of employees has been decreasing since then.

Between 1997 and 2001 acquisition was not made possible through the museum's low budget, but only through sponsorship and other external resources, particularly grants. The museum's mollusc collection expanded with a part of the collection of István Pintér, László Drimmer's collection of 17,000 items, Lajos Ottó's collection of marine molluscs containing 10,000 specimens and through the bequests of Andor Richnovszky and Károly Bába.

Further grants provided opportunities to purchase the private beetle (Coleoptera) collection of Attila Podlussány containing 50,000 specimens, the Sándor Tóth collection of flies (Diptera) and the Ferenc Buschmann collection of moths (Microlepidoptera). Besides, numerous tropical insect species were donated by zoologist György Hangay living in Australia.

Research associated with nature conservation became increasingly important in natural history collections. Accordingly, the museum participated in numerous studies launched in different regions of Hungary including Szigetköz, Kis-Balaton, Drávamente, Gemenc, Hanság, the Upper Tisza region, the Kiskunság National Park, the Bükk National Park, the Aggtelek National Park, and the Danube–Ipoly National Park.

Carefully planned collection of invertebrates and subsequent growth helped pave the way for the creation of new systematic collections. Representation of cer-

tain groups such as true bugs (Heteroptera), dragonflies and damselflies (Odonata), mayflies (Ephemeroptera), stoneflies (Plecoptera) and leeches (Hirudinea) increased to a great extent. Results of research on larvae of dragonflies and damselflies were published in the periodical *Odonata-Studium Larvale*.

In 2012 the natural history collections of the Mátra Museum consisted of the following parts:

- palaeontological collection (27,727 items),
- malacology collection (64,300 items),
- entomology collection (269,499 items),
- vertebrate collection (6,046 items),
- botanical collection (13,150 items).



Fig. 7. Part of the palaeontological collection (2009)

The number of scientific publications has increased parallel with the increase of collection growth. In addition to 710 articles published in 36 volumes of *Folia Historico-naturalia Musei Matraensis*, 319 articles in 30 volumes of *Malakológiai Tájékoztató* and 89 publications in 9 volumes of *Mátrai Tanulmányok*, 5 supplements of *Folia Historico-naturalia Musei Matraensis* and 1 supplement of the *Malakológiai Tájékoztató* were also published, not to mention the plenty of exhibition guides, teaching material and bulletins on the region.

DISSEMINATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND MUSEUM PAEDAGOGY

The renewed and restructured museum not only works as a so-called classical museum but also as an educational centre for protection of environment and nature conservation. It consists of three parts: the mansion, the park and the Natural History Pavilion. There is an organisation hall in the main part of the building. The ground floor and first floor wings accessible for disabled visitors house the exhibition space displaying four permanent exhibitions: a mineralogical, a palaeontological, one presenting the history of the town Gyöngyös and the fourth on the history of hunting. There are conference halls and two additional rooms for temporary exhibitions (FÖLDESSY 2011).

The mansion is surrounded by a park with an area of 5.5 acres, serving as a botanical garden used, in particular, for educational purposes. The most impressive element of the garden is the lake covering 800 square meters.

The Natural History Pavilion was designed to meet the requirements of a modern museum. This venue has 1,200 square meters to accommodate the three-storey natural history exhibition. In the centre of the exhibition (Fig. 8) stands a 15 m tall sessile oak displaying the vertical layers of the vegetation. The tree is surrounded by dioramas showing the flora and fauna of each layer. In other parts of the space mounted animals characteristic to specific habitats are displayed in show-cases. A part of the space has been designed specifically for visually impaired people. The orangery is ideal for hosting subtropical plants and live animals. Visitors can attend to museum lessons or classes on nature conservation in the animation hall (Fig. 9).

The slogan of our museum is as follows: Mátra Museum – the natural experience. In line with this catch-phrase our mission has been to create a museum that provides wide range of programmes and experiences for all ages, as well as traditional exhibitions and museum services.

The museum hosted the symposium on Hungarian natural history museology three times. The concepts of our museum paedagogy were presented in an international conference on visitor-friendly natural history exhibitions in 2010. Education programmes are also funded by the EU.



Fig. 8. Exhibition items in the Natural History Pavilion (2009)



Fig. 9. Class for children in the animation hall (2012)

Annual museum statistics reveal that public education was quite successful. The museum had ca. 60,000 visitors in 2012, and it organised 428 events. 271 hours were spent on education activities for students, while 119 guided tours were arranged.

The process of permanent renewal of the 125 year-old museum has still not been completed. Due to a government decision, the museum underwent radical restructuring in 2013. It was merged into the Hungarian Natural History Museum, renamed as the Mátra Museum of the Hungarian Natural History Museum. However, changes in structure did not result in the loss of autonomy in professional issues. Its collections are being constantly improved, and visitors are always welcome.

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