

“It’s a complete horror going on in the museum. Unbelievable. Unbearable.”

Csaba Molnár | 12 February 2021. 11:30 | Magyar Hang Plusz, ‘Science’ www.hang.hu

[the attached scan is the printed version of same content but with a different title: “*Death of a Museum*”]

A few months before the beginning of the pandemic it became clear that the government wanted to move the Hungarian Natural History Museum (HNHM) to Debrecen [a county seat with a population of 200,000, located near the eastern border of Hungary, about 200 km from Budapest]. One would think that this plan is the single greatest threat to the survival of the museum. Yet the problems are much deeper: as the reign of the current director-general is accused of dictatorial tendencies, every professional who can is fleeing.

Nowadays the museum’s Facebook page reminds a job advertisement newspaper. In a post on 7 January workers are wanted for all sorts of positions, ranging from assistant to administrator, lab-leading biologist and computer scientist. This is because recently the fluctuation of the staff is growing so high that it already impairs the normal functioning of the museum. It’s not that the director, Zsolt Bernert, fires everyone. He just creates such a toxic workplace atmosphere that most of the staff will sooner or later leave. ‘You don’t have to fire someone to make them flee jaded,’ one of our sources remembers bitterly.

‘The destruction goes on incessantly. Job applicants – even trained biologists – are sometimes assigned to the marketing department. Complete madness. Curatorial positions normally awarded to people who have obtained a scientific degree after several years of training are filled with former assistants and technicians,’ one of our respondents gives an example on the lack of specialists. ‘It is not bad in the sense that they have been in the museum for a long time, working under curatorial direction and supervision, and so they at least won’t cause damage to the collections. But of course we cannot expect professional scientific work from them.’

The seriousness of the situation is reflected by the fact that at the beginning of writing this article the sources we interviewed estimated the number of employees who left since last year as high as 55–70 (while many others resigned already in 2019), but since then four more employee’s employment has been terminated. Correspondence between former colleagues almost exclusively contain sentences like this: ‘It’s a complete horror going on in the museum. Unbelievable. Unbearable.’ Another former employee wrote to his peers: ‘There is a continuous withholding and floating of information, secrecy has become a feature. You can’t know what and why is happening in your immediate environment. Those who are smarter than you, the so-called “experts”, will decide.’

Last year, a law amendment passed through with the votes of the Fidesz [Hungary’s ruling party], deprived all Hungarian museum employees of their public servant status, nevertheless many employees from the HNHM have resigned even before. In connection with the change of their status, the directorate of the museum wanted those who decided to stay to sign a new employment contract full of humiliating conditions which, according to our sources, trampled on the rights of the workers. The main reason behind the resignation of those who left early, however, was mostly the new director-general, Zsolt Bernert.

He, according to a previous article in the Hvg [a Hungarian economic and political weekly], announced to the staff after taking office that ‘there will be no democracy here, but you will do what I say’. And it wasn’t empty talk. Not all former staff we contacted wanted to comment on this, because, ‘knowing his tendency to take revenge,’ some of them feared that the director-general would go after them and try to harm them.

The chiropractor from the Kurultáj

The anthropologist Zsolt Bernert became director-general of the Museum in 2019, with an application consisting largely of grossly blaming the previous management. Bernert does not have a PhD, but has a political support. Ecologist academician János Podani wrote about Bernert on Válasz Online [a Hungarian online medium]: ‘To the great (or not so great?) surprise, that of the two candidates, it was not the former director-general but Zsolt Bernert, an anthropologist, Kurultáj [pseudo-cultural festivities of Central Asian nomadic peoples organized annually in Hungary, having considerable connections to far-right nationalist groups, patroned by Fidesz] activist and chiropractor, who won the contract. (...) I heard from him at a meeting before his installation that he agrees with the fragmentation of the museum (...). The director-general is actually lobbying for the detachment of the Department of Anthropology from the museum and subsuming it into the Institute of Hungarian Studies [a controversial organization established by the government, involved in obscure, sometimes evidently pseudoscientific studies about the origin of the Hungarian people]’.

‘The mass resignations were driven by a combination of many factors, of which one of the most important was the attitude and behavior of the museum directorate,’ says one of our sources who worked at the museum for decades before leaving. For many, the abolition of public servant status, more precisely the way of its implementation, was the last straw. ‘We were provided with a contract most of the content of which was unacceptable. By signing it the employees would effectively renounce many existing rights against their employer. It is simply astonishing that we should have practically agreed to be legally fired at any time.’

For one of our interlocutors, after reading the new contract, ‘it became clear that this was over, this (museum) could no longer function as a workplace’ and that it was his last chance to leave in a relatively fair and easy way. Salaries were generally so low that another source called it symbolic [about monthly 500 EUR for researchers with PhD, meanwhile the Hungarian net average earnings are over 700 EUR]. Meanwhile, the possibility of taking a second job was made impossible (more precisely, linked to the predictable decision of the director-general). ‘They have practically strangled the people,’ says one former worker.

The exodus of the staff of the HNHM is unparalleled among the country’s museums. A senior manager of the museum’s directorate briefly raised that the reasons of this problem should be investigated, but of course it was not followed by actual steps which would likely have revealed the responsibility of the leadership. A resigned employee could not even take his personal belongings from his former office because the director prohibited him from entering the museum. Instead, in a reply to the former staff member’s letter of request, he accused him of poorly caring for the collection entrusted to him and even of taking home objects belonging to the museum. All of our interlocutors told perfectly congruous stories, and they were also very familiar with the grievances and conflicts they heard from others.

‘The director-general contemptuously ignores the employees.’ After having been pestered for a long time, someone asked him: ‘Are you going to fire me?’ to which the leaders replied that no, they just enjoyed the situation. The director-general’s behavior was humiliating to the extreme. When his permission was needed for proceeding in a professional affair, he simply did not respond to inquiries, making work impossible. The opportunities for scientific communication were also hampered.

This is how the country works

Several of our sources felt that the directorate regarded scientific research unimportant. Decades of museum research work had lost its significance according to the director’s ideas. The intentions of the directorate are not known even to the employees because the leaders do not communicate with the staff, not even on the most important issues that would fundamentally affect not only the existence of the workers but the mere survival of the museum.

‘It is not clear whether his behavior is directed specifically against research or whether the director releases his frustration against researchers in this way. It is also unknown why Zsolt Bernert was elected director-general, the background of the decision was not made public. He was known for his good connections to the Ministry of [Miklós] Kásler (the Ministry of Human Resources), I think that was probably the only reason behind his appointment,’ said one of our interlocutors. Mr. Bernert is connected to governmental circles through his old friend, Zoltán Tessely, MP of Fidesz and former mayor of Bicske. Many also see Tessely’s influence behind the fact that the director-general sees it best to move the Department of Anthropology to Bicske [a small town with a population of 12,000].

The word paranoia came up in conversations with all of our interlocutors when describing the director’s work. One of them assessed the atmosphere in the museum as follows: ‘There are no more debates, no circulars. Those who are close to retirement are silent because they only have a few years left, the youngsters who are still there hope for a new leadership.’

Anyone who didn’t want to or couldn’t leave is trying to be invisible. Almost no one dares to comment on Facebook entries of former colleagues criticizing the leadership. There was someone who was banned from the Facebook page of the museum just because he responded to new job postings with a crying emoji.

However, this is not surprising to anyone who experienced the museum’s atmosphere recently. ‘From the first minute of the director’s appointment people were surprised so that they just stared speechlessly,’ says another former worker who subsequently left the museum without finding another job first. He is still unemployed, but as he follows the developments he becomes more and more convinced that he has made a good decision. ‘The worst part was the uncertainty: we just didn’t know anything. You didn’t know what the directorate wanted to represent, what the direction was. We just kept hearing how bad the previous managements were. Uncertainty will sooner or later grind everyone down.’

This colleague also mentions the paranoia: the director just searched in everyone how they could harm him. ‘It was awful that his thinking was not around the museum, but only around himself personally, his power, all the time. Colleagues recognized as a threat to him in any way were cracked down on, making their work impossible. The method for this was usually to order the chosen ones to perform unworthy tasks far from their field of expertise and previous assignments. The majority left soon.’

Several of our interlocutors mentioned that fear slowly infiltrated their daily lives. ‘We got to the point where, when talking to a colleague in the corridor, I was wondering if I could honestly tell that person my opinion. Is he the director’s man or not? I am not aware of any specific case where someone was betrayed, but it was there in my mind.’

‘Already at the time of his appointment I had problems with the political support behind the director-general, a fact which he did not even try to hide. I am aware that this is just natural in Hungary, but still it was disgusting for me,’ one of our sources recalls the decision that led him to leave. ‘At the time of his appointment a few people hoped that the director would use his connections to lobby Mr. Kásler to abandon the idea of moving the museum to Debrecen, but then, of course, this did not happen. Everything got worse. Last year, when we were working in home office because of the pandemic, I realized how much better was for me not to go to the museum every morning, where I was keep thinking that there really was no way down from here, but then it always turned out that of course there was. We could never know when the directorate would make another unexpected decision which, under normal circumstances, we would find ridiculous and would never imagine that they would dare to do such a thing to people.’

Messy desks

The Hungarian Natural History Museum appeared in the news about a year ago due to its move to Debrecen, a decision made by the government despite the concerted protests of the Hungarian museologists and scientists. Although the move has been postponed due to the pandemic, there is no indication that as soon as the pandemic is over the project won't proceed according to the original plans. Our sources, however, believe that it is misleading to blame the mass leaving of workers from the museum on the move, as this is merely one of the several problems, and not necessarily the most serious one. 'It is just one of the nails in the museum's coffin' one of them concluded. The idea of moving the museum to Debrecen has arisen several times since 2013, but no one resigned because of this until 2019.

'The museum, previously surrounded by general professional esteem, was run by dedicated people with vast expertise and scientific knowledge, and who could not have been driven away even with a whip' someone said. 'No one resigned of his own motion, we were all dedicated to the cause of science, public education, and the HNHM in general. Even those who seemingly left on their own decision also did so because they could no longer tolerate the behavior of the leadership.'

'They were very creative when it came to chasing away someone. They transferred the chosen ones to another department and assigned them with a duty outside of their field of expertise, knowing exactly that they wouldn't like it. They were continuously reprimanded in their new duties, destroying their self-esteem and self-confidence,' one of the informants explains the practices told by everyone else too. 'Others were cut off from the information. Anyone could find himself in a vacuum, not being notified of anything, being ignored, as if not being there. People's pestering was also used to intimidate others: they made everyone feel that if you disobey you could easily be the next one'.

What will the future bring? Obviously there will be an institution called Hungarian Natural History Museum, but to what extent it will resemble a modern science museum except in its name, our interlocutors have no idea about it.

'I cannot imagine what the future of the HNHM will be like. Everyone who still works there and represents some kind of professionalism is also looking for a job. Some still stay because no matter how naivish it is they still feel that they are deeply devoted to science and the museum, but these people are also punished with groundless accusations and disciplinary proceedings by the director.' According to several sources, the latter remark specifically refers to one of the department leaders, who got a written discipline because 'there was a mess and dirt on the workers' desks and in the collection.'

'Professionals who have worked and been respected there for decades have suddenly been found to be unfit, doing a bad job, and deserving disciplines. It was rumored that the director-general was placed in this position in order to prepare the ground for moving to Debrecen by emptying the museum,' one of our interlocutors said. He sees a purposefulness and methodicality in the top-down destruction of the museum's various parts ranging from the remnants of the previous leadership to the scientific departments.

There was a former employee who, despite his grievances, wanted to help the scientific work of those who remained there, but the leadership made it impossible. Volunteering has been virtually banned, people working there for decades are now prohibited even from entering the building. Anyone who comes to visit the collections is not allowed to bring his coat and bag into the offices, and the curator of the collection must accompany every visitor in order to prevent stealing a pinned moth or anything.

We asked the directorate of the museum and the Ministry of Human Resources, the maintainer of the institution, about the conditions described by our sources independently but congruently. The response from the museum states that the museum's functioning is still ensured, exhibitions have been made despite the pandemic, and collection revisions have

begun. According to them, the research service is working, the work of visiting researchers, volunteers and museum staff is ensured.

‘With the termination of their public servant status several people have decided not to agree their further employment under the Labor Code,’ they wrote. ‘During the negotiations leaving staff members without exception requested higher salary as a condition, which the institution was unable to provide. Several colleagues have retired or their fixed-term employment contracts have expired. No disciplinary proceedings are pending against anyone, two staff members have received written warnings about negligent storage of collection material and high-value equipment, non-compliance with legislation and basic hygiene rules.’