

Fish breeding in Zoo Brno and aquaristics in the Brno Region

The Permanent Aquaristic Exhibition is celebrating its thirty-fifth anniversary, opened by Zoo Brno to the public in April 1969, which we noted in Zooreport articles from the previous three issues. Contributions commented on the current state of the exhibition and considerations for its future. Now, we would like to look over the history of fish breeding in Zoo Brno and in our next quarterly publication, we have decided to introduce a list of all fish kept in Zoo Brno.

The Brno Zoological Garden began keeping fish already long before its opening in 1953. The history of the zoo is closely linked to the history of Brno aquaristics – although its tradition is much older. The beginnings of aquaristics in Brno fall in the last decade of the 19th century. At that time, however, this speciality took on a different face. Initially, it was concentrated only on species from the surrounding nature and only a few people were devoted to it - only a number of secondary school natural science professors examined life in pools and ponds in the vicinity of Brno. Enthusiasts brought samples home where they bred them in containers of various sizes. Their research was engaged in aquatic micro-fauna, smaller fish and amphibians. After initially forming relationships with aquarists from neighbouring states, predominantly from Germany, Brno residents began to concentrate on fish breeding, including exotic species.

The bank clerk Karel Ullman deserves great credit for the development of Brno aquaristics. After he applied to the Dresden aquaristic association, Wasserrose, he made it possible for Brno enthusiasts to acquire fish



Photo: Evžen Alstern

The architects designed the original interior of the Permanent Aquaristic Exhibition with decent taste; the small tanks were later removed, because they did not suit the current requirements on breeding and presentation of fish



Photo: Evžen Alstern

The jewel of the exhibition, the so-called Rotunda, remains as the only part of the entire exhibition preserved to today

that had been imported into Germany from various continents and which local aquarists had already successfully multiplied. In 1907 Ullmann established the aquaristic association

Cyperus in Brno and in Czech, he printed the aquaristic magazine "The Natural Pages", which was published in 1910. Another significant Ullmann enterprise was the establishment of the

society for public aquaria in the Chateau of Lužánky park. The establishment of Cyperus encouraged further development of aquaristics in Brno. The society had 80 members even after it separated itself from German aquarists in 1910. Even though it doesn't have any deeper significance, the following curiosity cannot be overlooked: In 1911, the poet S.K. Neumann also joined the society.

After the failure of the Brno Natural Pages magazine, representatives of three main Czech aquaristic societies met in Prague; Akvarium Praha (founded in 1899); Iris Plzeň (founded in 1901) and Cyperus. They decided to publish a joint magazine, Aquarist Horizon. The Brno editor of this monthly, published from 1911-1914, was prof. MUDr. Eduard Babák.

For Ullmann's exhibition of aquaria at the Brno Trade Fair in 1924, Cyperus received a gold plaque. During this period, the society had contact with many other aquaristic societies in the Republic and it contributed to a number of exhibitions until 1937. It also developed co-operation with another aquarist society, Pterophyllum, established in 1928. The focus on organising a joint public aquarium in Brno, however, could not be successfully implemented.

Cyperus had to end its independent activity in 1951, just like all societies in this period. It became an aquaristic circle attached to the special organisation of the Brno Energy Plant. The name Cyperus was banned, but it lived on unofficially among members of the circle. As such, in 1954, it arranged a successful exhibition in the botanical garden and in December 1955, it succeeded in opening a small aquaristic sales shop at no. 1 Minoritská Street. Operating commercial activity was not easy for similar types of facilities in the nineteen fifties. Still, two other aquaristic sales shops operated in Brno belonging to former private owners, and they could only look forward to liquidation in the nationalising state economy. The Cyperus shop made money and was able to serve aquarists successfully into the future.

After the shop had existed for two years, officials determined that the activity of the circle facility exceeded the framework of the trade union. Therefore the sale shop and the circle were transferred to the Park of Culture and Rest. In 1959, Pterophyllum was dissolved and its members joined Cyperus. After another reorganization

in 1960, the circle and the sales shop were linked to Zoo Brno, where an aquaristic exhibit already existed, built with the help of Cyperus members. By affiliation of the former society, to which a continuous number of members joined, a powerful increase occurred by Brno aquarists to the zoo and the sixties can be marked as their golden age. Cyperus, with its entry into the zoo, officially returned to its original name, arranged seminars and symposia on an international level, although obtaining lecturers from "capitalist" states was possible only by investing considerable effort.

After 1956, in the aquaria and terraria pavilion in Zoo Brno, which stood in the vicinity of the current administration building and which also held a pro-

visional vivarium (see the special issue of Zooreport dated August 2003, page 4, or profi annex to Zooreport no. 2 from 2002), visitors passing through a darkened passage could observe life in clearly lit tanks. Along one side of the passage stood 13 terraria and along the other, 13 aquaria. In its day, the exhibition had an attractive effect. Guidebooks of the zoo in 1957 commented on goldfish, cultivated by Chinese and Japanese from East Asian Golden Carp, to the cute Indian Barb, cichlids and live-bearers, and finally commented that other fish species were located in the Zoo. The publication of Zoo Brno - ten years of building noted the fact that one of the tanks had stability equipment as a biotopes aquarium representing forested areas

Advertisement for the Permanent Aquaristic Exhibition from the turn of the 1960s and 1970s.

along the upper reaches of the Amazon. In dark imitative pools with withered trees, according to the publication, there were the glowing stripes of the Glowlight and Neon Tetra. The publication also introduced a status table for animals kept in Zoo Brno as of 1 January 1963. Only four fish species are noted here: Neon Tetra (*Hyphessobrycon innesi*); Glowlight Tetra (*Hemigrammus erythrozonus*); Black Tetra (*Gymnocorymbus ternetzi*); and Jack Dempsey (*Cichlasoma biocellatum*). In the provisional vivarium, the first attempt was made at salt-water aquaristics. Due to lack of experience, however, the tank with sea horses and needlefish, imported by employees of the zoo from vacations in Bulgaria, did not last long.

The aquaristic sales shop continued to increase earnings, while its capacity was not enough to cover the needs of the aquaristic community. Therefore, in 1968, Zoo Brno rented space in a neighbouring house on Minoritská Street. The expanded shop was on a top level for the time. All the aquaria were furnished with polished stainless steel frames, which were not only effective, but also practical. Under the influence of the shop's successes, ideas about building a permanent aquaristic exhibition took hold in the heads of aquarists.

The peak of success for Brno aquaristics occurred after many complex and unpleasant negotiations when in April 1969 the Permanent Aquaristic Exhibition opened, fittingly located at

Radnická 6, in the historical core of the city. The first head of the exhibition was the famous Brno aquarist, Rudolf Zukal, while the zoo was directed by Ing. Svatomír Králík. Even though this involved team work, the greatest service to the exhibition facility was provided by two men. To augment its new collection, Zoo Brno permanently relocated all its fish from Mniší hora to Radnická. The successful architectonic concept of the exhibition was subject to the strictest international criteria; in 75 tanks of atypical shape were more than 2,000 fish. The Red Bellied Piranha (*Serrasalmus nattereri*) was a hit during the opening of the exhibition. A publicity brochure of the zoo from 1969 did not reveal the number of species, but it noted that there was one salt-water aquarium in the exhibition - sea anemones were kept in this tank.

Its mission - to show people how a correctly equipped aquarium should look - was well performed by the exhibition, which had a marked inspirational impact on the public. Aquarists who placed a tank in some kitchen corner, to which electrical cords led and which was supplemented with an improvised lighting system, felt themselves to be in another world. Aquaria built into the walls were set with great care with various stones, shale plates, prepared branches and roots creatively planted. Of the many hitherto unseen species, transparent fish were captivating, for example the Indian Glass Fish (*Chanda ranga*), appearing miraculously in a tank with a dark background and with its unusual triangular outline.

In the ten years following the opening of the exhibition, Cyperus continued to arrange engaging lectures at a high professional level, to which lecturers were invited from all over Europe. The member base continued to expand. In 1985, it had 1043 contributing members and arranged regular and richly visited aquaristic markets.

In that year, Zoo Brno implemented a general reconstruction of the Permanent Aquaristic Exhibition. The electrical installation was repaired, including all mains; new distributors were installed; a new lighting system was manufactured; and the frames of some tanks were repaired. A new air-conditioning system was designed and installed, with compressors and exhaust vents. Work lasted eight months, without limited exhibition operations in the least. About two years later, employees of the exhibition welcomed the one millionth visitor.



Photo: Michal Piškula

After several attempts in the 60s and in the 80s, the Permanent Aquaristic Exhibition regularly shows sea aquariums from 1996



Facade of the sales shop on Vachova Street



Interior of the sales shop on Vachova Street



Of course, the aquarist store's assortment included aquarium plants

The guidebook for the Zoo from 1973 shows 110 fish species, the same number is also linked to 1983 and in the list for 1992 there were 103 species. In the overview of animals kept at Zoo Brno in the years 1953–1983, 254 species, subspecies and forms of fish are listed from 42 families. The Permanent Aquaristic Exhibition has always imported new species every aquarist would like to see with his/her own eyes. In the first half of the 1980s, this included, for example Elephantnose Fish (*Gnathonemus petersi*), Giant Gourami (*Osphronemus goramy*) or Spotted Scat (*Scatphagus argus*). Among the array of species first multiplied and bred in Czechoslovakia were, for example, the African Snakehead (*Channa obscura*). In the above-mentioned period, another attempt at a salt-water aquarium played itself out. Zoo employees brought back two species of Blenny and a barrel of sea water from vacation in Dalmatia. The Blenny survived in the exhibition for about two years. Salt-water aquaculture returned to the exhibition for good in 1996.

In 1987, Zoo Brno was given notice to leave the spaces in Minoritská Street. With boundless effort, a new shop was festively opened the next year on Vachova Street at no. 6. Again, the receipt curve rose. Although competition increased in this period, the shop had had enough of customers. In 1991, in the same building, Zoo Brno opened a fishing shop. The new owner, however, evicted the zoo and both shops had to cease operations in 1994. During the frequent change in directors of Zoo Brno in the first half of the nineties, co-operation with the circle became strained. The crisis reached a peak when in 1995 the then director of the zoo refused to communicate with representatives of the circle. According to its new articles, the circle therefore became independent in 1996 and after years it is again a society.

Zoo Brno has done a lot for admirers of fish: under its protective wing, the circle Cyperus found a refuge in the period resistant to societal activity of the circle Cyperus, in the centre of the city a Permanent Aquaristic Exhibition was established and an aquaristic shop was operated as well as a shop for fishers. The professional level of these activities was always excellent.

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