EIGHTY YEARS MARINE BIOLOGICAL STATION WITH AQUARIUM IN Varna

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Abstract


The aim of this article is to reveal the funds of the State Archives (SA) – Varna keeping valuable documents for the history of the first and unique Marine Biological Station with Aquarium in Bulgaria.

Goals and fundamental objectives in the ecological education and research activity at the IFR-Varna are described, some specific architectural details, symbolism in them, history of important institutional changes are presented.

Key words: Varna, aquarium, Institute, Black Sea

The funds of the State Archives (SA) in Varna store valuable documents for the history of the first and only Marine Biological Station with Aquarium (Fund 800 K – under the same name). Other important documents of the history of the Aquarium are kept in Fund 156 K „Experimental Ichthyological Station in Sozopol“, Fund 180 K „Practical Fishing School“, Fund 149 „Research Institute of Fisheries and Fishing Industry“. Pictures of the Aquarium can be found in Fund 711 K „Pictures of old Varna“ and partial acquisition (PA) 384 „Album with photos of the School of Fisheries before 9 September, 1944“, as well as in the archive of the Institute of Fisheries (IF). Three of these funds (F180 K, F 800 K and F 149) are housed in the building of the Aquarium (known under that name to the citizens and guests of Varna). The building was designed by Dabko Dabkov who had visited before a lot of stations and aquariums in Europe. It is the first in Varna, and perhaps in Bulgaria, building with reinforced concrete structure. Besides the modern technology, what remains is the respect of the ancient greatness and uniqueness of the architecture. Round details soften the rectangular facade. Jets of water burst out from the mouths of sea monsters, the main entrance is decorated with a large mussel supported by an octopus, and the composition is finalized with a seashell and a snail. This plastic decoration is put within the frames of fishing net leading the dreamier visitors to the ancient times of when this basic fishing gear has not changed. Even further – in the main temple of Apollo in Delphi, where the harmonic God loved to admire the world sitting on the same fishing net, stretched on a black rock. Below the main scene lilies are blooming, surrounded by sea dragons in full size. Lots of spheres are hanging above all resembling an alien ship. Under these peculiar capitals are carved the same beautiful lilies, but this

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time in a stone bas-relief. The massive columns are not straight and descend like a water slide forming together with the staircase a grand throne of sea god. The rear of the building is occupied by a large terrace, which is also a roof of a live exposition, allowing the natural light to penetrate inside it. Over the terrace a weathercock is proudly erected which has guided the brave explorers and fishermen who are dependent on natural elements. Over some of the windows we can see the main scene with the mussel, but with other marine inhabitants. Why is it the main motif? Beauty and its goddess, Aphrodite (Venus), are connected with the vast sea since her birth in the foam near Cyprus. Heziod, the ancient poet exhorts us in this and every diver sees evidence in the breathless seconds of his first encounter with the underwater peace.

Precisely this meeting more than 80 years is recreated by generations of employees of the Institute and Aquarium!

On 22 October, 1906 just 10 months after commencement of work, the foundation stone of the station was laid. The ceremony was attended by the entire royal family and the oldest member HRM Princess Clementine, the Minister of Education Ivan Shishmanov, Interior Minister D. Petkov, Professor Dr. G. Bonchev – Dean of the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics, the professors of zoology G. Shishkov and C. Yurinich, as well as the consular body in Varna, the Municipal Council and numerous invited citizens. In 1911, the building was already built. Then the Balkan War (1912) began and all forces and resources were diverted from it. Under the advice of Prof. Shishkov and Prof. Morov in 1913, the station was given to the Sofia University. However, the First World War assigned another fate for the building. From 1915 to 1918, it housed military troop’s first and later Thracian refugees. For the period 1918–1922, the aquarium housed the Engineering School in Varna (today Naval School „Nikola Vaptsarov“). Here is what we read in a letter of 11 April, 1921 from the Director of the School of Fisheries, Captain-Lieutenant Boyan Stanev to the Minister of Agriculture and State Property „The Aquarium is now released from the Engineering School. Today the school is moving out, however, in the Aquarium still remained: the management of the school and its storage. The storage of the school is housed in the room with pools and its guards occupy a room in the attic. I suppose toward 14–15 this month to get possession of the aquarium with the exception of the premises mentioned above...

Notwithstanding the foregoing, the committee that was appointed by order of the Minister of War for allocation of the barracks of the former 8th infantry Primorski regiment, defined five rooms of the Aquarium and gave them to the military call-up service in Varna. Thus, in the future in the Aquarium will house: the school and the military call-up service, the latter in five rooms including two in the attic and three on the middle floor."

To the School of Fisheries a villa is also provided with four decares of vineyard in the countryside „Saltanat“. On the pages of the newspaper „Borba“, Plovdiv from November 6, 1921, we read: „Varna, October 31. Yesterday a State Fishing School was opened ... It is housed in the university Aquarium furnished with heating, electricity and new school belongings. The students are orphans and children of poor professional fishermen – all with finished elementary education and at the age between 15–26. The state will provide for them. They will study fishing in the sea, how to catch different types of fish, its preservation, knitting nets, repairing boats, sailing and engine studies. Covered will be accountancy and cooperatives, fisheries in foreign countries and fishing laws. A special office is set up for furnishing the Aquarium with specially made reservoirs. For research on marine life and teaching it was appointed an expert naturalist – ichthyologist, Russian, former inspector of fisheries in Odesa. All necessary equipment and tools to study the sea are supplied. The life of the students is arranged so that most of their free time to be spent near the coast. Course of the school is 4 years.

Longtime former naval officer A. Baychev who has returned from Spain, where he was sent to study how the problems of fishing and fishing schools are solved there, was appointed for Director.

The activity of the first full-time ichthyologist – Alexander Ivanovich Nechaev starts with various studies of biodiversity in the sea and lakes near Varna. One of his first reports contains observations on Varna and Gebezhansko (today Beloslav Lake) state swamps. The first changed rapidly due to the artificial connection to
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the sea. It became salty and lost its freshwater forms, which were replaced by marine colonists. Gebedzhen-skoswamp has retained its original freshwater character.

Due to the overall reduction of water Gebedzhen-skoswamp area has decreased. Therefore, the productivity of the swamp is less than it was earlier. Small amounts of grey mullet and herring fishes entering here from Varna swamp can compensate for disadvantages, the swamp still retains quite large catch of fish and crabs”.

After the closure of the Fisheries School in Varna on 30 August, 1930 A. Nechaev moved to the Fisheries School in Sozopol which building had been constructed from 1925 to 1930 and remained in the history of that name, although the Naval School had been there for a longer time (1934–1940) than the Fisheries School3. In 1932, the Scientific Department of the Fisheries School in Sozopol became an independent office named „Experimental Ichthyological Station.“ From 1 April, 1933 the management of the School of Fisheries moved to the station with the goal: „To create Bulgarians – fishermen who do not wait on the coast for the fish to enter their nets by itself, but they, the fishermen to seek for fish in the sea; to create a school of fisheries which will train fishermen – Bulgarians and give an example of modern fishing.“

Appointment for the first director received namely A. Nechaev – the most educated ichthyologist in Bulgaria for that time. He died on 7 May 1944 in Varna, having devoted his best years to the Bulgarian science and all his life to the favorite Black Sea. As a part of the white emigration in Bulgaria, he is an example of the beneficial effect of the adopted Russian intelligentsia.

On 30 August, 1930 the Aquarium moved back to Sofia University.

As an acting curator of the station, Georgi Paspalev wrote a letter (F 800K) to the Chairman of the Economic Board at the Directorate of Electricity on 21 September 1930: „I believe, you know, Mr. Chairman, that the university opens in Varna a research institute „Zoological Station with Aquarium“. The Institute is housed in the university building „Aquarium“, built specifically for its needs and aims to: on one hand, to prepare and furnish the required laboratories in order to enable the local and foreign scientists to study the biology of flora and fauna along our coast, and on the other – through exhibiting aquariums to enlighten visually the young and the old on the basics of marine biology, and in this way to contribute to the cultural advancement of our people.“.

On 17 July 1932, His Majesty King Boris III inaugurated the Marine Biological Station. The first Director of the new institute was Georgi Paspalev, then an assistant in zoology at the University, later promoted to professor and corresponding member of BAS.

For the cultural enrichment of the town through the University’s institute we learn more in a letter from the Director Paspalev to the Director of the University Library in Sofia of 12 May, 1935 where, „...the management of the station wishes to create beside its own special library and a general scientific one composed of all editions of our university ...“.

In a letter dated Dec. 26, 1936 we understand that the steamer „Burgas“ was used for scientific purposes: „To be able to add to the aquarium live animals from the Mediterranean and the Sea of Marmara, it is necessary to install in one of our ships an electrical motor with an air pump to deliver air needed to avoid animals’ death ...“. In April and May, 1932 the trainee from the Naval School, Nikola Vaptsarov wrote his „Impressions“ of the steamer „Burgas“.

The work with students-naturalists is lightened in a letter dated Dec. 28, 1935 from the Director Paspalev to the Rector of the Sofia University: „The novelty, Mr. Rector, is that the station among other things aims to facilitate students-naturalists’ knowledge of hydrobiology and biology of the sea, giving them the opportunity to have practical sessions in relation to this matter, on the coast itself ...“.

For the origin of aquaristics in Varna we learn from another letter dated Apr. 4, 1940 and signed by two directors – Paspalev (former) and Konsulov who took over from its predecessor at the time: „In accordance with it. 1 of the Rules for the station, the latter among other things aims through aquariums with sea and fresh water to acquaint the public with aquatic life, but also to organize the provision of stuffed aquatic organisms needed for teaching in the university and schools. Recently, however, the station has found in the face of the German citizen Rudolph [Victor] Lowevenfeld an
experienced connoisseur of aquarium work, and a good taxidermist. He agrees to take on the organization of production and sale of school and home aquariums and the required animals for them, as well as preparation of products from marine and other aquatic organisms for the needs of schools, as against that wants to get 10 percent of sold aquariums, animals and products. From other letters we learn that Lowevenfeld worked for the Aquarium from October, 1938 and not long after started praises by customers as the letter of Nikola Georgiev, owner of the Zoo House, dated Sept. 15, 1939: „Dear Mr. Director, by errand of customers who have taken fish from your aquarium I am obliged to buy two liters of your Daphne, which were very good, I would also like small fish „Veil tails“.

The fund keeps also the rules of procedures of the station: Rules of Procedures of the Station with Aquarium in Varna“.

The station aims to:

a) To facilitate the study of the Black Sea in scientific and economic terms;

b) To enable students in the natural sciences to inspect visually the biology of the Black Sea;

c) To provide for the university and schools stuffed marine organisms required for training;

g) By aquariums with sea and fresh water to acquaint the public with the aquatic life;

A curator, professor of the zoological institute, who is assisted by a Deputy Assistant, manages the station. The station has the following staff: one laboratory technician, one fisherman – boatman, 1 stoker, 1 servant.

In the laboratories of the station is conducted research work on biology and hydrobiology of the Black Sea, and where possible in other directions.

Any Bulgarian or foreign citizen who is prepared to do self-dependant research can get a work place in the laboratory with a permission of the curator. The permission is granted for a specified period. The work places are given free, but against the explicit obligation on the part of the researchers, that they will give the station free 50 copies of each scientific publication produced at the station and printed wherever.

The library of the station is used by the researches through the assistant. Books are not allowed to be carried out of the station.

When a scientific work involves spending a significant amount of materials and tools, they can be given by the station if it has them, if their cost will be submitted to the fund „Aquarium for the audience.“

For personal convenience of the people working in the laboratories, only for the time of their scientific work, the station provides three attic rooms, modestly furnished. The curator when engaging a workplace gives permission for their use.

These Rules were adopted by the Council of the Physico-Mathematical Department and entered into force after being approved by the Ministry of Education with the order № 2301 of 16 July 1932.

To the Zoological Station in Varna was established fund „Aquarium“

The objectives of the fund are: To maintain public display of aquariums with live animals and plants from the Black and Aegean Seas; To obtain live objects from these seas for the aquariums; To support the creation of a maritime museum with objects that can not be kept alive in the aquariums; To arrange provision of marine objects needed for teaching in our schools; To organize public educational readings with demonstrations related to the live in the sea.

Fund resources come from the entrance fees to the aquarium and the museum, the cost of marine objects delivered to schools, donations and occasional earnings ...“

The Academic Council of the University adopted these Rules with amendments on 10 May 1933. An interesting change is that poor students are admitted free and for the others 40% discount was accepted.5

The past of the Aquarium, which sheltered a large number of professors and academicians, teach us many lessons on how to work today for the promotion and education of the citizens and guests of Varna. It frames the image of Bulgaria with the crown of marine knowledge.

The prophetic words of HM King Ferdinand I in 1906: „I see near the day when European scientists will visit this charming coast to explore one of the most interesting fauna and with it, finding all the conditions for a successful academic work, to give honor to the small but culturally grown Bulgaria“ are now reality in the European vision and the complying with the European
directives over 40 research projects of the Institute of Fisheries (80 years) with Aquarium (101 years).

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