

IN MEMORIAM
DR PÉTER BERETZK
(on the occasion of the centenary of his birth in 1894)

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The region in which we live and work is more than simply a habitat of wildlife: it is a place where biologists gather their impressions. There is no exact ecological terminology that truly expresses the beauty of the scenery and birds, or can interpret human friendship, freedom and spirit, i.e. all that can be regarded as a real value in life. What we have learnt about these values is recognized through subjective experience: etymologically speaking this is expressed by the Latin word "subiectum". LORENZ was the first to stress the mistaken view that, epistemologically, it is a failure to believe: by rejecting or denying subjective impressions, we can be objective.

There lived in Szeged a naturalist who founded a kind of "lake school": he gathered pupils and students around him and carried out his teaching and educational work in the open air there, and was an example as concerns how to pursue a naturalist's life.

This man, PÉTER BERETZK was born on 23 October, 1894 in Szeged. His father was a minister of Reformed Church. PÉTER BERETZK began his studies as a medical student in Kolozsvár, Transylvania, but the First World War put an end to his learning and as a medical volunteer he served in the field. Later, in 1918-20, he continued his studies and graduated as a gynecologist in Budapest. For a time he worked as a clinical assistant and then for 43 years was on the staff of the Hungarian Railways, finally resigning as directing senior surgeon.

PÉTER BERETZK inherited the universal desire of the old-time surgeon for a deep and overall knowledge of nature. He first came to the environs of Fehér-tó ("White Lake") in Szeged as a hunter. The lake at that time was the second largest natron lake after Fertő. As we can read in his diary, he was a great hunter, but years later he appears as an ardent bird-watcher and collector. From 1937 on, we do not find in his diary headings such as "Hunting"; instead, the contents reflect a man who recorded all details and observations. When he was a child, books by OTTÓ HERMAN had opened up for him the world of birds and later, as a hunter, he enthusiastically collected the nidatory and migratory birds at Fehér-tó. He did the preparation work himself and then sent the items in his collection to be identified by MIKLÓS VASVÁRI and JENŐ GRESCHIK in the Hungarian Ornithological Center.

After the exploration by KÁROLY LAKATOS to the world of Fehér-tó (before the turn of the century, today almost forgotten), it was PÉTER BERETZK, who revisited and described this unique avifauna. It was extremely interesting and important as a hatching area. In the remaining, small patches of ancient natron lake, avocets (*Recurvirostra avosetta*) were regular visitors for hatching. The number of mating pairs varied: regularly 20-25, but in 1946 for example about 100. Stilt birds (*Himantopus himantopus*) regularly visited this area (4-5 mating). Astonishingly large numbers of plovers (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) and terns (*Sterna albifrons*) nested there.

When a fish lake was founded there the uniformity and calmness of the ancient fauna was disturbed. New birds came which preferred undisturbed deep clear water. The variety of bird species observed widened, due to the reedy marshes, the bulrushes and the willowtrees. However, birds building their nests on the salt marshes became rarer, and the struggle between the "greens" and the husbandry collectives and lobbies has subsequently been a constant feature. PÉTER BERETZK observed that, besides the birds nesting there, the real and unsurpassed value of Fehér-tó is provided by the regular visits of rare migratory birds in certain seasons of the year. The most characteristic species of Fehér-tó are the mud-walkers: *Numenius*, *Charadrius*, *Totanus*, *Tringa*, *Limosa* and *Vanellus*. At the time of migration, tens of thousands of them appear on the smooth banks and on the muddy bottom of the dried-up lake. This tiny region gives a home to a wonderful and rich living world. The first man, to scientifically explore and describe the life of this area of sand and yellow soil of the Great Hungarian Plain was PÉTER BERETZK.

His connection with the town museum dated back to 1936. This was the year when he first placed here his collection of 123 prepared birds. In 1951, the collection, then numbering 900 pieces, was finally donated to the museum (see: CSIZMAZIA and GASKÓ: BERETZK PÉTER örökletéte. Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve 1984/85-I. (Donation by PÉTER BERETZK. Annals of Móra Ferenc Museum, 1984-85, Vol. I.)).

The museum opened its first (and to date by far the most popular and most frequently visited) exhibition under the title "The life of Fehér-tó". It is a pity that we can now only cherish its proud memory.

The name of PÉTER BERETZK is closely connected with the region he protected and explored. The citizens of Szeged, as well as people loving and esteeming nature throughout Hungary regard the names of PÉTER BERETZK and Fehér-tó as one inseparable concept.

It is interesting that this fame is due not to the number of scientific papers he published in Hungary and abroad, but to the several hundred articles printed on the pages of daily newspapers (primarily the Szeged "Délmagyarország"). ISTVÁN HOMOKI-NAGY shot his first film, "Vadvízország", here, and the great success of the film added to the recognition and popularity of the region.

Of course, at that time the "land of marshy tracts" was already slowly changing into a "land of regulated waters", of fish-lakes. Accordingly, PÉTER BERETZK and ISTVÁN GYÖRFFY (a university professor in botany) proposed to put the lake (at least partly) under protection. Law IV of 1935 made it possible for the town to declare 280 acres of the ancient alkaline marsh a protected area. In the following year, the Ministry of Agriculture sanctioned the town resolution and increased the area of protected land to 350 acres. Thus, the first Hungarian bird reserve was founded here.

The biological importance of the lake was described by PÉTER BERETZK in the following manner:

1. After Lake Fertő, this is the greatest natron lake in the country.
2. Along the River Tisza, it is nearest to the route of migratory birds.
3. The flora and fauna are extremely rich and characteristic.
4. With the development of other cultures (fishery and shrubbery), the species richness has markedly increased.
5. This allows a great variety of special biological research.

PÉTER BERETZK was an ardent photographer of nature as well. As a photographer, he was not a "hunter of trophies" (like so many of today's photographers), but did his job of gathering documents. His photos (taken with his favourite Leica camera) are of cultural and historical value: documents of changes in the life of the alkaline marshland, and of the evolution of the birdlife. He donated his enormous and valuable photo and slide collection to Móra Ferenc Museum, József Attila University in Szeged, the local Teacher's Training College, the Natural History Museum in Budapest, and the Ornithological Institute, all keep preparations made by him.

His closest friend was the ornithologist ANDRÁS KEVE. Every second month, they together walked around the lake, and registered the newcomers. ANDRÁS KEVE contributed considerably to the scientific success, and to the publication of papers by his friend. In 1945, PÉTER BERETZK became a distinguished member of the Hungarian Institute of Ornithology. He was a member of the Agra Academy of Zoology. The Nature Protection Society of Southern Finland appointed him a foreign member. In 1948, Szeged University honoured him with a professorship for his researches and results in exploring the bird life of the Hungarian alkaline marshes. He became a Candidate of Biological Sciences. In 1955, he was asked by the National Office of Nature Protection to fulfill the duties of scientific supervisor of the Fehér-tó region. In 1964, he became an extraordinary university professor. In the same year, he was

awarded the highest State Prize by the government. As a member of the Tisza-Research Team of the Hungarian Academy, he took part in expeditions, exploring the bird life along the river.

For 6 years, he was President of Szeged Section of the Hungarian Biological Society, the Honorary Life Member. For 10 years, he worked as President of the Biology Section of TIT (Association for the Advancement of Science) in Csongrád County. He initiated here the foundation of the section of Friends of Ornithology and Nature Protection (after his death, the Section took his name). He was Vice-president of the Dugonics Society.

PÉTER BERETZK corresponded widely with numerous Hungarian and foreign specialists. Hungarian and foreign ornithologists frequently enjoyed his hospitality when visiting the region. He died on 9 July, 1973 and is buried in the woodland.

His bibliography was compiled by GYŐZŐ CSONGOR on his 60th birthday; a complete bibliography of his publications was printed by BÉLA JAKAB. The total number of his various papers is 410, but some articles are to be found on forgotten pages of newspapers. According to ANDRÁS KEVE, the bibliography of his publications is somewhat irregular, since it is not common to include articles published in daily newspapers and magazines. However, these articles by PÉTER BERETZK are not only enjoyable to read, but also contain valuable scientific data on the fauna, ecology, etc. Seventy per cent (291 articles) of his publications fall into this category.

I consider that writings of this nature in a scientific-popular vein are of outstanding importance, since they contributed to the preservation of the bird-world of Fehér-tó under very difficult conditions, and this living museum with its unique avifauna continues to survive.

PÉTER BERETZK was a happy man. His work was widely known and recognized, and for a naturalist this is real happiness. As an ornithologist, his career was brilliant. He was a true-born teacher and by his example we have learnt how to love our everyday work and to perform it with belief, gladly and confidently. I am lucky to have been a disciple of PÉTER BERETZK. I can still wander along the pathways of Fehér-tó: in the small hut beside the lake, in the watch-tower of PÉTER BERETZK, I can carry on teaching new generations in his spirit. Dozens of his former students all over the country and here in Szeged, at the University, continue his research and nature protecting work, and remember the Master on the centenary of his birth.