Metamorphosis of a building.
Oral history and hidden memories of the Herman Ottó Museum (Miskolc, North-East Hungary)

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The Herman Ottó Museum is the regional museum of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county, northeastern Hungary. It was established in 1899, founded by a group of enthusiastic local civilians, the *Borsod-Miskolcz Association for Public Culture*. They were so committed to the cultural heritage of Borsod county and the town of Miskolc, that they organized the first museum collections and exhibitions in Miskolc (VERES 1999, 9–12). The brand new cultural institution was housed in the building of the Protestant Grammar School in Papszer street (**Fig. 1–2**). The foundations of this building originate from 1560, so it is one of the oldest architectures in the town, representing the very few historical monuments from the late Middle Ages (HORVÁTH 1955). In the first few years the *Borsod-Miskolcz Museum* used the building shared with the Grammar School, but later on the educational institution moved to a newly built school-building in the neighbouring street, so the museum got the whole capacity of the house for its collections and exhibition purposes (TÓTH 2020, 11–12). In the common language the museum building was simply named after the street 'Papszer'.

• **Fig. 1.** • The building of the Protestant Grammar School from the 16th century, later Borsod-Miskolcz Museum in Papszer street (Photo by Kálmán Kóris, early 1900s, MNL BAZML XIV.64)

• **Fig. 2.** • The 'Papszer' museum house with the new school-building in the background (Photo by Kálmán Kóris, 1957, HOM FN 4878)

Between 1899–1968 the *Papszer* was the only facility of the museum. Exhibitions, collection management, depositories, conference room, event hall was all in the same building. It housed the first public library of Miskolc as well (Prókai 2020, 446–448), so the institution was quite well known and popular among the citizens.

The museum survived the World War II in safety. In 1943 the three employees and some volunteers of the museum pulled down the exhibitions, and packed almost every objects into boxes and crates. Until the end of the year the whole collection was moved to the cellar, where eight premises were full-packed by crated artefacts. After this evacuation of the collections, the second critical point was the problem of custody. The real difficulties started after the first bombing of Miskolc by the Allied Powers (2 June 1944), when 206 people died and 420 were wounded. The population of the town had to move into air-raid shelters. The three colleagues of the museum organised watching over the artifacts: the director Andor Leszih (1880–1963) was on duty every day. He visited the museum building each morning to control the status of the collections. A volunteer doctor, Andor Saád (1904–1977), due to his profession had freedom of movement under curfew periods. He could help the director to visit the museum every day. The museum custodian Mihály Gáspár (1890–1970) lived in an official flat in the museum building with his family as a housing benefit. He moved to the cellar where he created a temporary flat for himself, next to the chambers hiding the collections. To make it even more safe, he built an extra brick-wall, so nobody could recognize the museum objects behind (Dobrossy 1999, 89).

Mihály Gáspár's precaution with his secret brick-wall in the cellar was not in vain. The Soviet Red Army occupied Miskolc on 3 December 1944. One of their headquarters accompanied with a temporary hospital was in the neighbouring school building. On 21 December 1944 a group of Soviet officers decided to give a festive party in honour of Stalin's birthday. The venue of the celebration was the museum, so the director and his colleagues had to prepare the library reading room for the party. The Soviet officers ordered the museum workers to leave the building with the exception of Mihály Gáspár who was allowed to stay there. Thanks to his personal bravery, nobody could find the hidden collections behind the wall in the cellar (Rémiás 2011, 498).

For nearly 70 years the museum was identified by its house, and even today, the historical monument of the 'Papszer' is equal to 'the museum' in the collective consciousness of Miskolc. After World War II, in the 1950s the old building was already slightly ruined, so a renovation was needed (**Fig. 3**). In spite of these reconstruction works, the museum building had continuing static problems, caused by the riverbed of the nearby Szinva river. The Szinva creek is relatively small, but the sudden river

• **Fig. 3.** • Renovation of the old museum building, 1957 (Photo by Árpád Lajos, HOM FN 4935)

floods can cause big problems, as it happened e. g. in 1878, when the most serious flood in Hungarian history was recorded, causing the highest number of casualties (Bodovics 2014). The canalisation of the Szinva river started in the 1960s. The works at the river bank changed the static structure and caused irrigation, and the wetted walls of the ancient museum collapsed on the fatal night of 23 August 1967 (**Fig. 4**).

The damaged part was built in 1735. The northern façade fell in the Szinva river, tearing a 9 meters deep and 10 meters wide hole in the ground in its wake. The ceiling and the joist hangers collapsed, one exhibition room and a repository were demolished. The exhibition material of the Bronze Age archaeological collection, and the major part of the local history collection was destroyed. The police arrived soon, and

• **Fig. 4.** • The damage of the museum in 1967. The collapsed northern façade after the disaster (Photo by Levente Szepsi Szűcs, 1967, HOM FN 19178)

a few days later a wooden palisade was built to cover the open wall. In spite of these efforts, the Museum was robbed and even more artefacts vanished (Dobrossy 1999, 94–96).

The 22.000 objects of the historical collection suffered the highest damage. 40% of the local history documents, 100% of the 1919 posters, 40% of the incunabula and old press materials, 80% of the ceramics were devastated. The total number was 7.000 pieces. Under the collapsed rooms, in the cellar there was a numerous archaeological collection from the excavations of the past two years. 10.000 pieces were successfully rescued from under the ruins, but most of them needed subsequent restoration (Dobrossy 1999, 95–96).

After the disaster, a proper strategy and a rescue plan was elaborated to move the remnants of the collections to safe places. The whole system of the museum changed: the previous model of a concentrated institution was replaced by a new model, a network of buildings. The city government offered five new venues for museum purposes, including two schools and the former city library. The temporary home of the museum for 8 years was the building of the former city library in *Szabadság* (today Erzsébet) *square* (**Fig. 5**). The reconstruction of the collapsed *Papszer* building was a long process, it took 7 years. The new exhibitions re-opened in 1974, and the museum had its new headquarters and new repositories in the *Szabadság square* building since 1972–1973. The renovated ancient 'Papszer' museum houses only the exhibitions and the audience public events since 1974, the collections and every other functions are located elsewhere.

The 1970s (especially the years between 1973–1979) hallmarked a period of growth concerning the Herman Ottó Museum. The historical background of this process was an administrative decision:

• **Fig. 5.** • Temporary home of the museum in the building
of the former city library, Szabadság (today Erzsébet)
square (MNL BAZML XIV.64)

the government established a new museum system in Hungary in 1962. The new model was the network of local institutions, managed by a regional museum at the county seat. In Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county the Herman Ottó Museum in Miskolc was appointed as the centre institution of the county network. A continually growing number of subunits (filial museums in the area of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county) joined the network, the highest number of subunits was 29 in 1990 (Veres 1999, 51). According to this growing process, the number of museum professionals and the size of the collections also increased radically from the early 1970s. The number of museologists was only 7 in 1973, but it developed to 38 until 1979, when the total number of employees was 77 (Veres 1999, 45).

This growing process eventually required a new solution for the museum building problems, because the two premises mentioned above (the *Papszer* and the *Szabadság square* buildings) couldn't provide enough space for the extended regional museum functions. In 1979 the county government elaborated a new construction for the utilisation of cultural premises in Miskolc. The *Szabadság square* building was handed over to the Regional Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and the county government offered a huge office building at *Felszabadítók* (today Görgey) *street 28* instead. Previously a political body functioned in this office block, it was the county headquarters office of the communist Party of Hungarian Workers (MDP, until 1956), later the Hungarian Socialist Labour Party (MSZMP, from 1956). In 1977–1978 a modern tower block was built for the Party as a headquarters' office and a congress hall.

They moved there in 1979, so the former building of the Party's central office became empty. This solution proved excellent, because the Herman Ottó Museum has its main building there even today.

The building is located in a green belt, at the southern part of Miskolc. Historically it was the outskirts area, the border of the town called *Csabai-kapu* towards the neighbouring village Hejőcsaba. In the middle of the 19th century the Roman Catholic Church purchased a plot of land in order to establish a Calvary on the southern foothills of the Avas Hill. Between 1858–1864 the
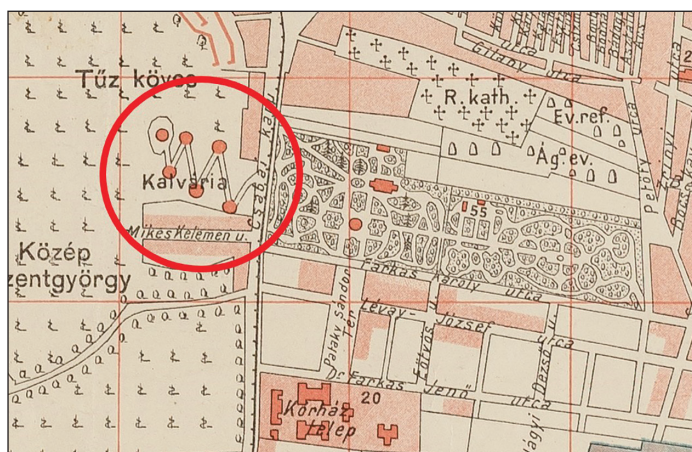
• **Fig. 6.** • The Roman Catholic Calvary and the public park Népkert
at the southern outskirts of Miskolc (Map by Béla Lippay,
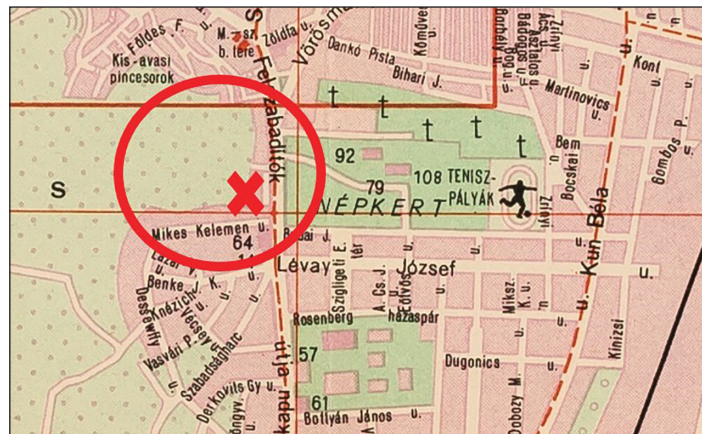1916, HOM HTD II.77.)

Calvary was built, and the area started to attract the local inhabitants for smaller excursions and Sunday activities (Dobrossy 2001, 135). The community of the town improved the environment of the Calvary, and until the 1880s the first public park of Miskolc called *Népkert* was developed here (**Fig. 6**). The *Népkert* housed a public garden, sport venues, a shooting range, a restaurant and music pavilions. In the early 1900s this park became a very popular place for public events, sport competitions, mass events, picnics, community and family freetime activities.

After World War II the change of regime radically transformed the use of urban spaces. The new state power started to remove the remnants of the traditional elements of the environment, and changed the functions of public places. The first step was done by the Soviet Red Army, when they created a military cemetery at the middle of the Calvary for Soviet and Rumanian soldiers who died in the surrounding military hospitals between 1945–1947 (**Fig. 7**). The Rumanian victims were exhumed and repatriated in 1952, but 30 individual graves and two mass-graves with the mortal remains of 900 Soviet soldiers stayed there (Dobrossy 2007, 201).

• **Fig. 7.** • Desecration of a sacred hill: the remnants of the previous Calvary with the Soviet military cemetery (Photo by Benedek Baranczó, 2020, Herman Ottó Museum)

The desecration of the Roman Catholic sacred hill continued after the communists' rise to power in 1948. The place for a newly built centre office of the communist party was appointed on the territory of the Calvary (**Fig. 8**). The 19th century church buildings, the main entrance gate, the stairways, and two stations were destroyed to prepare enough space for the future office block. The building was planned by Pál Vince (1909–1994), who was a favoured architect of the communist authorities in the 1950s. Vince de-

• **Fig. 8.** • The location of the communist party headquarters (latter museum) at the place of the former Calvary (Map of Miskolc, 1964, HOM HTD II.837)

signed many new office blocks throughout Hungary, the one in Miskolc was constructed in 1951–1952. It is a typical of the socialist realism architectural style, representing the mainstream design patterns of the mid-20th century Eastern Europe. The aim of the regime was the representation of power, so the architect followed the heritage of the first half of the 19th century. Identifying motifs of classical historicism are the grand portico with columns, the strictly symmetric façade, uniform distribution of windows, grandiose foyer (Prakfalvi–Szücs 2010, 75–76). The initiation ceremony of the building was held in 1952 (**Fig. 9**). The interior spaces were constructed for the functions of an exclusive representation of the supremacy of the political system, but at the same time they needed practical office rooms, too. The four storey

• **Fig. 9.** • The building of the communist party headquarters' office in 1953 (Photo by Pál Vince, 1953, MÉM Photo Archive)

• **Fig. 10.** • Reconstruction for museum purposes finished in 1980 (Photo by Ede Valent, 1980, HOM FN 47307)

• **Fig. 11.** • Symbolic metamorphosis of a building: inscription 'museum' instead of the red star (Photo by Géza Kulcsár, 1981, HOM FN 45047)

building had two large and one small event halls, 75 rooms for bureaus, and a restaurant with kitchen for 100 persons in the cellar. Until 1980 the Hungarian Socialist Labour Party (former MDP, later MSZMP) and the Hungarian Young Communist League (KISZ) had its headquarters in the building. In 1980 a new modern office block was given for these political bodies, and the museum moved into the empty premises. As a typical manifestation of the social realism, the office block was recognised as a listed historic building in the year 2011.

The metamorphosis of the building started in 1979, when a reconstruction and functional modification happened (**Fig. 10**). These works targeted to solve the various problems of the museum emerged in the late 1970s (Dobrossy 1999, 151–154). In 1979 the Herman Ottó Museum was initiated as a scientific research institution, so it needed new functions to fulfil the requirements of its academic purposes: working rooms, research rooms, library with public reading room. As the central institution of the county museum network, large scale of restoration capacity was necessary, with conservation workshops and restoration laboratories, and a photo studio. The number of collection items increased rapidly, there were 230.000 artefacts and documents which needed numerous repositories. The museum's most visible function is the exhibition: the new place had to be ready for hosting various permanent and temporary expositions with spacious rooms for the visitors – cash desk, lavatories, cloak-room, spaces for vernissages, education and public events (Veres 1980, 85–87).

The relocation of the institution was a long process: after the preparations in 1979, the vast majority of the collections moved in the summer of 1980 (**Fig. 11**). The first was the library and the official bureaus, followed by the archaeological collection and the restoration studios. The next were the ethnographical and historical collections, and finally the Fine Arts department. The most significant reconstruction of the new building took place in the first storey, where the great hall and some bureaus were transformed into a 600 square metres large exhibition hall (Benedek 1980, 4). It was necessary because of a new acquisition of the Fine Arts collection. In 1977 "the private collection of a well-known phy-

sician and art collector, dr. Sándor Petró (1907–1976) became part of the museum stock as a public property. The picture gallery of the museum rose in the national esteem, and got to the level of official collection" (Pirint 2004, 195). The new building offered the possibility for a new permanent exhibition based on the artworks of the Petró Collection. The exhibition *200 Years of Hungarian Painting* in the new Gallery of the Herman Ottó Museum was opened in 1980 (**Fig. 12**).

Although the reconstruction and the functional transformation of the building was as successful as possible, today it hardly can fulfil the complex requirements of a modern museum. In spite of these facts, the milestones of the recent museum history prove that the efforts of the 1980s were not in vain. The main building of the institution housed the most popular exhibition ever, the archaeological exposition of the Hungarian Conquest (**Fig. 13**).

A second reconstruction of the building took place in 2004–2005. The Gallery of the Museum had the possibility for a complex renovation, including not only a new permanent exhibition of the Fine Arts collection, but also new architectural elements like elevator, museum shop and café. A large-scale extension started in 2010, and was finished in 2013. A newly constructed wing of the building arose in front of the main entrance, a mostly subterranean structure, two storeys underneath the original cellar. The *Pannon Sea Museum* is a department for geochronological research

• **Fig. 12.** • A national pride of the state authorities – the visit of the prime minister György Lázár (1924–2014) at the new museum in 1981 (Photo by Jenő Kamarás, 1981, HOM FN 38245)

• **Fig. 13.** • The vernissage of the archaeological exhibition on the Hungarian Conquest, 1995 (MNL BAZML XIV.64)

and Earth sciences. It includes two permanent exhibitions, the *Minerals of the Carpathians* and *On Trails of Primitive Forests*. In 2018 the main hall of the Art Gallery hosted the travelling exhibition of the Seuso Treasure. The museum had 24.000 visitors during a short period of 3 weeks, which was the highest number of daily visitors ever in the history of the museum. Today a second extension is under construction, as a two-storey wing is being built and is scheduled to be opened in 2022. This part of the building will serve the extended Fine Arts collection again, with a new permanent exhibition of the Kövesi Collection (which is a deposit of the Hungarian National Bank, a breathtaking collection of more than 100 modern Hungarian paintings).

The museum's history as a former communist property inspires various versions of urban legends. It is a popular belief in Miskolc that the museum building had some kind of secret role during the 1956 revolution. In Miskolc there wasn't any attack against the communist party headquarters office. In spite of this fact, the collective memory remembers the 'siege of the communist party headquarters' that never happened. Today, this 'secret' history can be a coherent part of the museum's activities as a historical play for schoolchildren and families. In the frames of a living history project, in 2018 and 2020 a Military Traditional Association reenacted an imaginary story of the 1956 Hungarian revolution.

The emblematic building has its own story – the hidden memories of the contemporaries can be a fruitful subject of a museum's history research. In 2018 an oral history video interview was recorded with Béla Offertáler-Havasi (born in 1938). He was a politically active member of the Hungarian Socialist Labour Party, and had high positions in the communist administration as a leading office-bearer of the Young Communist League. Between 1964–1979 he worked in the building of the Communist Party headquarters. His personal memories are very valuable sources of the museum's history, according to the process of metamorphosis – how the communist party office building became a successful museum in the second half of the 20th century.

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Abbreviations

MNL BAZML	– Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén Megyei Levéltára, Miskolc / National Archives of Hungary, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County Archive, Miskolc
HOM FN	– Herman Ottó Múzeum, Fotó- és negatívtár / Herman Ottó Museum, Photo Archive
HOM HTD	– Herman Ottó Múzeum, Helytörténeti Dokumentumtár / Herman Ottó Museum, Local History Archive
MÉM	– Magyar Építészeti Múzeum és Műemlékvédelmi Dokumentációs Központ / Hungarian Museum of Architecture and Monument Protection Documentation Center