

BALTIC MUSEOLOGY SCHOOL

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The historical events in the Baltic States in the beginning of the nineties brought not just the state independence but also significant changes in all aspects of life, including museums.

Change of economic model and thus also significant decrease in state-granted financing for museum operation enabled decentralization of museum system. As a result of the changes, small museums previously functioning as branches of regional museums became in the care of parishes and were often left without professional performers of museum functions. The rapidly weakened economic situation and closing of the east boarder caused remarkable decrease in the number of visitors, while opening of the west boarder let new information flood in the country. The tense situation caused confusion in museum specialists. They realized that it was impossible to carry on work like before and thus started looking for constructive solutions.

In this situation in the mid-1990s museum people from Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia discovered existence of UNESCO Summer School of Museology (ISSOM) in Brno, Masaryk University, and a number of museum specialists used the opportunity to learn there. Getting acquainted with Zbyněk Stránský and his perception of museology literally shocked by the illumination that for museum practice exist theoretical grounds, we did not presume earlier.

Until then specific skills for museum work were acquired from experienced colleagues in the course of work. But usually they did not explain why this or that should be done exactly that way, and not otherwise. It was because we had no idea about existence of museum theory.

Acquaintance with Stránský and his theory finally allowed to discover that it is possible to receive answers to the many "why" questions and these answers can give museology.

Once the shock was ceased, we realized that all Latvian museum employees should get to know about this discovery. The first thing we did was translation of Stransky's book "Introduction to the Study of Museology". The next step was translation of "Dictionarium Museologicum" into Latvian. Along with the dictionary and the Stránský's book the Latvian language was enriched with new terms: museality, musealization, musealia...

It was time, when targeted activities to create a museology studies program on master's level in Latvia were launched. Two museum specialists interested in this idea, were sent to England to study museology at Leicester University. At that time we didn't know, that their perceptions of museology differ significantly from Stránský's beliefs. However, we had obtained our own graduate museologists, and they were supposed to lead development of the program for

studies of museology in Latvia. Finally, in 2000 the program started at Latvian Academy of Culture.

It was obvious that only few will be able to study museology on master's level. We hoped that after their graduation these persons would actively engage in the management of museum sector. However, we very much wanted, if museological thought touched as many museum people as possible.

To achieve this, we continued development of "Museological library" in Latvian. In order to create a balance between theory and practice among the books there are also ones describing the practice and answering to the questions "What?" and "How?"

We are particularly pleased with the handbook created by our own restorers "Preservation of Musealia". And even more gratifying is to see, how the small parish museums have arranged their collections according the suggestions in the book. So we see that the handbook is needed and used.

However, we felt the need to learn more about WHY museums are changing? In what direction are they going? And what should we consider when thinking about the future of our museums?

So Latvian State Authority on Museums (SAM) realised that:

- 1) museums by their very nature are in constant development,
- 2) museum accreditation has revealed insufficient professionalism of museum personnel,
- 3) there is acute need for knowledge of museology,
- 4) possibilities for acquiring this knowledge is limited.

SAM spoke to Estonian and Lithuanian colleagues in the Ministries of Culture; they agreed to start a collaboration project aimed at acquisition of theoretical knowledge by providing opportunities for a wide range of museum staff in a most cost-efficient manner. The project was called Baltic Museology School (BMS) and it was started in 2004.

The Baltic Museology School puts stress on the theory and finding answers on the question "why?" We, ourselves, do not create or develop theories, but we encourage museum employees to think and follow the thought of the world's museology. The Baltic School of Museology can more be considered as a "desert" of the professional education system or an additional bonus to the basic offer of continuing education.

Shape of the BMS:

- The core of the project is **internationally recognized speakers** (outstanding museologists or museum practitioners), who share their knowledge with **35 Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian museum workers**.
- The BMS is organised **every summer as a weekly seminar** in one of the Baltic countries.

- **Topics vary** each year, as well as **lecturers, students and venue change** from year to year. Topics are selected according to the Baltic museum topicalities.
- Whereas the lecturers come from other countries, and the Balts do not understand language of each other, the common language for the BMS is **English**.
- An important component of the project is **translation of museological articles** into Baltic languages. Thus museological knowledge may be acquired not only by BMS participants, but also by any museum employee in respective country. The School is a good way to gradually bring the world's knowledge in the Baltics and enrich the supply of museological literature in the Baltic languages: 3-4 articles on the specific issue are translated each year.

Mission of the BMS:

By linking theory with practice, to develop and strengthen museological thought in the Baltic states, in order Baltic museums to become more professional, contemporary and accessible to society.

But one could say also, that the mission of the BMS is to deliver worldwide and updated museological thoughts and ideas to the Baltic countries.

In first 6 years the general organizer of the School was State Authority on Museums of Latvia. Since 2010, when the State Authority on Museums was integrated into the Ministry of Culture, official coordinator of the Project became the Society of Promotion of Museology in the Baltics.

Main sponsors of the project are the Ministries of Culture of all three Baltic States as well as museums, who supports participation of their employees. But qualitative implementation of the project demands more investments, therefore every year we participate in the Call for Proposals to plug financing gaps. It is also necessary in order to set participation fee which is adequate to participants' ability to pay.

ICOM Europe regional organization is BMS patron.

Main benefits from the BMS

Outstanding and internationally acknowledged museologists are invited as lecturers at the Baltic Museology School, and they bring with them new knowledge, new insights and new incentives for change.

In 2004, we decided to start with the basics, with understanding about the "role of the museum in the modern world." I had heard Stephen Weil performances in Barcelona in 1995 on the theme "Museum - an institution or enterprise." It left an unforgettable impression on me, and we invited Stephen Weil to launch our project and share his views with the Baltic museum people. Miraculously, he agreed. It was a real gift, because a year later he passed away.

In 2002, we had been translated the ICOM edition – a handbook "Museum Basics". In order to

"dilute" a bit theory with practical approach, we invited one of the authors Crispin Paine to share his knowledge of museum management. At that time it was one of the topical issues in museums of our region.

The great lecturer and theoretician, Dr. Stephen E. Weil, illustrated theory with easily comprehensible and humorous examples, thus encouraging students to understand the museum operating system and museum role in people's lives. Stephen Weil offered to adjust business principles to museum, and his lectures provoked mixed reactions - from excitement to indignation. It was a time when museums for some time already were forced to put up with political and economical changes, but the mind resisted adoption of the new rules. Apparently, it was because of lack of knowledge about developments in the field of museums outside of our region.

The key dimensions that guarantee the success of museums mentioned by Steven Weil seems self-evident.

"In its simplest form, success for a museum could be defined as consisting of four key dimensions:

First, its ability to articulate a clear and significant purpose that is both (a) worthwhile, at least in the eyes of the beholder, and (b) responsive to some identifiable need of its target audience. Second, the museum's ability to assemble the resources necessary to achieve that purpose. Third, its demonstrated possession of the skills necessary to expend its resources in order to create and present public programs that achieve its articulated purpose. And fourth, its demonstrated possession of the managerial skills necessary to create and present those public programs in as efficient a manner as possible."

Just as obvious is his definition of failure: Failure is simply the lack of success. Why should it matter whether a museum is successful? From an external point-of-view, the governance and/or management of the museum that is not successful may be perceived as (or even, in an extreme case, even penalized for) behaving in a socially irresponsible manner." (A Success/failure Matrix for Museums: By Stephen E. Weil).

For us it was important to understand this simple truth, because Soviet management principle, when the main task was to figure out how to spend the money allocated from the state, was still alive in museums memories. But then the situation was upside down – museums had to think where to get the money to fulfill their duty to the taxpayers.

For the year 2005 we chose a theme about museum's public offer, including exhibitions. For visitors museums are associated primarily with exhibitions. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, many people had been able to explore the museums in the West, and they were no longer

satisfied with our museum exhibition quality. Also, traditional tours and lectures were no longer required. There was a need for a more appropriate offering. In our museums was not usual to take visitors' and non-visitors' surveys in order to find out what people expect from museums. All these topics were included in the program of 2005.

The students of 2005 admired classes conducted by Dr. Martin Schaerer. He is one of the founders of ICOM's International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM) and is known as an outstanding theoretician, a creative personality and a former director of the Alimentarium museum in Switzerland. He conducted discussions about the essence of a museum and revealed a secret of development of exhibition concept.

For many years two extreme views prevailed: 1) that the subject speaks for itself, 2) the message of the exhibition should be presented in the written form. In the Baltic States there were attempts to create "self-talking" exhibitions, where the only functioning "persons" were the objects. However, if these exhibitions did not reach the aesthetic or emotional effect, they remained quiet and silent because they failed to pass the intended story to the spectator of exhibition. In the second case, exhibition consisted of long historical references that no one read because it was not physically possible, while subjects lived separate from the texts life - mostly demonstrating themselves to the spectator.

Very significant was the acquired confidence that "the museum's objects are mute. Relics of the past cannot tell about their previous life in the real world. However, they can give pleasure, provoke memory, provide knowledge, give the impression. Museum objects are largely mythical evidences. They can highlight the most important trends and correlations, but the items are not able to explain them. Therefore, museum objects requires clarification and interpretation. And this is the main task of Museums of History: to drive visitors from details to structure, from image to reality." (Martin Schaerer "An Exhibition Revisited. Musings of a museologist in the Alimentarium")

Merethe Froiland "opened our eyes" to the fact, that people have different perceptions, so museum's offer should be varied, must be such that the everyone perceive museum's message using his or her advanced capabilities. Merete increased inside us confidence that the museum should use its specificity for learning opportunities.

A year later, in **2006**, our students had an opportunity to meet the two stars at the same time. We enjoyed the lectures of experienced Peter van Mensch from the Netherlands and the young and promising museologist Francois Mairesse from Belgium.

Peter talked about the use of modern technologies in cultural heritage, museum's role in conservation of the heritage and shared his theories about theoretical museology. To my mind, use of technologies, like mobile phones and GPS, in learning about heritage was too early for us – we were not ready for it, yet. But with great interest we learned about museum development

tendencies, new trends in museology taught by Peter and Francois. A real benefit was translations of articles "Museum's mission and economic requirements" written by Francois Mairesse and "Museum and management – enemies or friends?" by Peter van Mensch.

The fourth session (2007) we devoted to museum mission, vision, values and branding. We knew quite well about museum mission. In 1998 we had a stormy debate about necessity to develop a unique mission for each museum. This discussion was connected with development of museum accreditation system. As you probably know, the mission is the main point of reference for evaluation of museums. Then, at the end of 1990-ties our museum people became quite annoyed and were reluctant to accept the idea that the mission would be required for each museum. They said: who doesn't know what the museum's mission is – museums are repositories for future generations!

In 2007 situation was completely different. All museums had defined a mission of their own. All directors were trained in basics of museum management. But still not many of them define museum values, not to mention the creation of museum's brand. Anja Dauschek - an outstanding museum consultant and the director of the prospective Stuttgart museum – is a real expert on this subject. Her lectures about mission, vision, values and branding were exciting and made us to look more critically at our work at museum.

Lynne Teather from University of Toronto, Canada told about museum development tendencies in different regions of the world; team formation; quality management development. In her article "Museum Studies. Reflections on reflective practice" Lynn analyzes museology and its development in different parts of the world and concludes with idea:

"The future of museology depends on our ability to define it as balance between objectives and means, as well as critically examine it on the basis of the unity of theory and practice."

This finding is significant for designing the BMS and other continuing education programs in future.

In 2008 a tradition was launched that all the Baltic countries in turn takes charge of the organization of BMS, leaving the choice of topics and speakers on Latvian terms. In 2008 the BMS focused again on the museum's social role. Alf Hatton and Jane Leggett helped to understand this issue in a very pleasant, unobtrusive manner. In his article "The Development of Museums Social Purpose", Alf Hatton found:

"The museum's social role contributes to key decisions connected with mission, strategy and policy. Thus, discussion of museum's social role is highly relevant to museum professionals, especially those in management positions. "

The year 2009 came with a shock - all economic and financial improvements, that were

achieved, instantly disappeared. We were dropped back to the beginning of 1990-ies in a situation where we had to learn again, how to survive without incurring significant losses. Unsurprisingly, for this year we chose the topic “Managing Changes in Museums” and invited as a lecturer experienced manager, a director of National Museums Liverpool David Fleming. For the first time lecturing duties were entrusted to our Latvian colleague Agrita Ozola.

In 2009 everyone had to tighten their belts – the government desperately sought ways to cut the budget. The cuts affected everyone – both museums and individuals. Museums had no choice but to dramatically cut costs and look for opportunities to work more effectively. David Fleming with his experience came at the right time.

We realized that the continuation of BMS is under threat. It was clear that in the coming years, museums will not be able to afford the luxury to pay for their employees' participation in the School. Therefore we used the opportunity to participate in the project competition and luckily received a grant from Nordic Culture Point for a three-year long project.

Thanks to the support of the NCP, in 2010-2012, the project was continued in the same format as previously.

In 2010, the time had come for intangible heritage. In ICOM General Conference in Seoul (2006) museum definition was supplemented by intangible heritage. Our museums traditionally had been engaged in identifying and promotion of intangible heritage, but it was unclear, whether the museum is entitled to do so or not. For example, the folk art studies at the museum, until recently, were considered to be unauthorized. Assessing the museum's functions, it was stated that weaving, embroidery and similar activities should be dealt with in cultural centers, but museums may store the finished things in their collections.

Yvette Staelens and Paula dos Santos are two absolutely different personalities, but they so good complemented each other – one with a passionate position in the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, the other with her harmonic approach to the preservation of folk traditions and wonderful singing. They both assured us of the need for museums to be engaged in preservation of things which could not be stored but should be continued for sake of people.

In 2011, under the direction of Martin Schaerer attention was paid to the process of musealization, semiotics, visualization and exhibition evaluation. For learning purposes we used mainly the new exhibition of Estonian History Museum *Spirit of Survival*, in Tallinn. The excursion into the history of development of exhibitions offered by Marja-Liisa Ronkko also gave us wider understanding of exhibition development.

In 2012, again we focused on the subject of collections. In our region more and more often we talk about need to evaluate the museum collections and put a bigger emphasis on collections policy-making and its compliance. So we invited experienced and well-known to us Francois

Mairesse and Susanna Pettersson to teach us about these issues.

This year, the BMS will be held for the tenth time. It is quite a long time for such an event. If you remember, then ISSOM productive life lasted about as long. The gained experience allows to assess the effectiveness of the School. BMS participants' score is quite positive.

Participants see the importance of joint project as follows: it is one of the main factors and guarantee of quality, it opens possibilities for making contacts for further collaboration and exchange of information, it creates community spirit – more fun together, it develops richer context, and it is an opportunity to see the neighboring museums.

From the organizers side, it should be noted that the organization of the BMS as a joint project makes easier to attract the lecturers, easier to attract the funds and easier to attract participants; responsibility is shared to the three; collaboration strengthens links with neighbouring countries.

In turn, foreign lecturers are one of the main guarantees of quality; their participation gives opportunity to meet face to face with excellences; with them the world's breath flows in our countries.

What is the benefit of the BMS? Are the aims of the BMS being achieved?

Speaking in terms of figures:

- 1) Since 2004 more than 300 participants from 70 museums and 7 countries have acquired knowledge of museum theory in the BMS,
- 2) 14 museologists or museographers from USA, New Zealand and Europe have had an opportunity to meet with Baltic museum people and discover their museums and countries,
- 3) About 30 museological articles have been translated into Baltic languages and added to the museological library.

Speaking into positive changes, we feel bigger interest about studies of museology, bigger interest to participate in the BMS and better museum operation – exhibitions, programs, attitude etc.; museum employees are becoming more self-critical and see problems not just in lack of financing but also in museum specialists themselves.

One of the practical tasks of Baltic Museology School clearly proved the self-criticism: when students had to identify the most topical problems of museums' professional operation, museum employees of all three Baltic States put at the top of the list problems linked with personnel. They mentioned such problems as lack of professionalism and management skills, internal communication difficulties, lack of fair of new ideas and increase of workload, lack of elasticity, gaps in planning and others.

The second biggest problem was communication issues of all types: communication with society, various museum communication forms, museum marketing, definition of museum message, communication with negatively minded social groups, museum PR strategy, museum positioning in society, etc. It just shows the necessity for further learning about those issues.

Conclusion

Museology plays an important role in ensuring professionalism. Like the surgeon makes decisions only when he is convinced of the validity of that decision, the museum staff should act in accordance with the belief that the following action will contribute to the implementation of the museum's mission, and not that it will be technically perfectly executed. Such confidence can give just an understanding of the interrelationships of the operation of museum in all its ways.