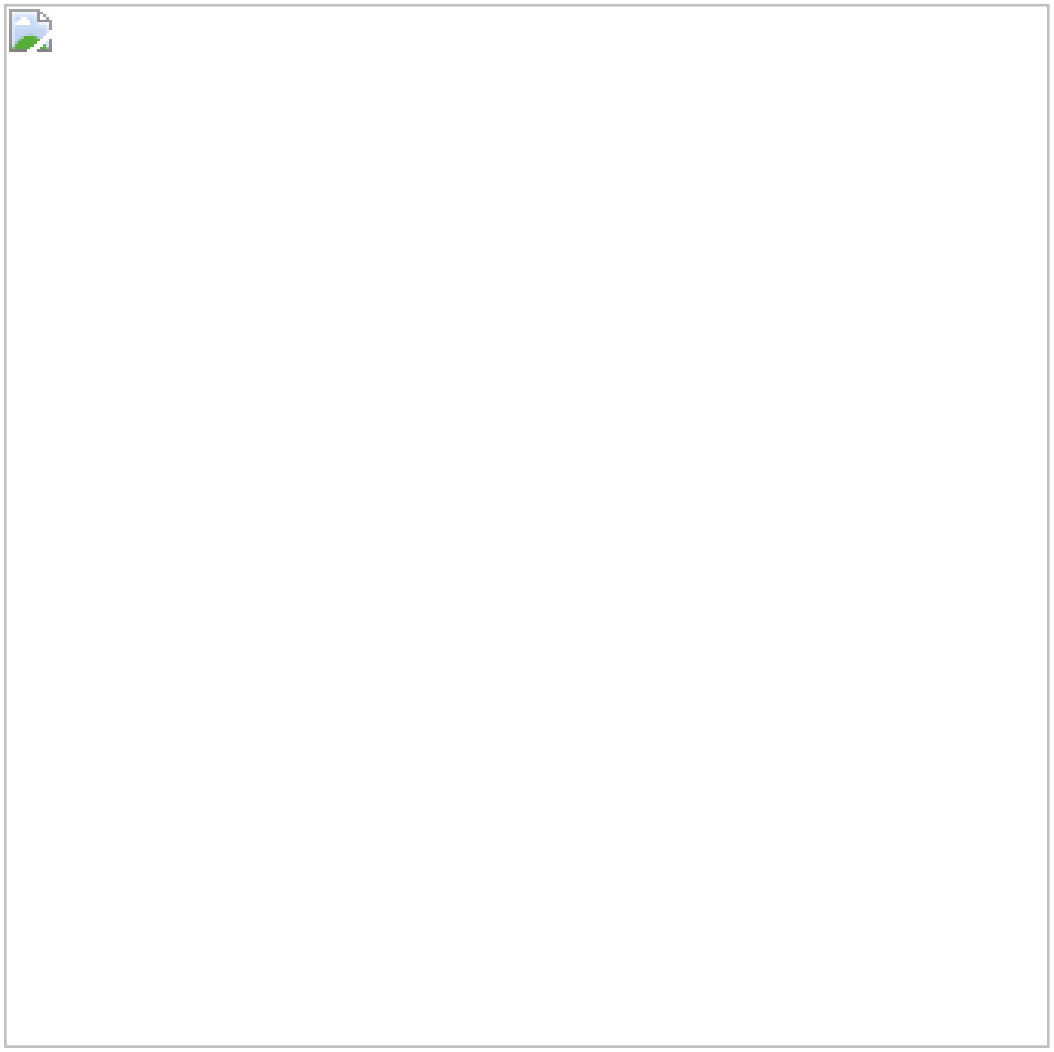

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OBITUARY

In Memoriam: Dr. Ottó Merkl (1957–2021), Budapest

Wolfgang Schawaller

Not only the international community of coleopterists, but also the editorial board of this journal recently lost an extraordinary, experienced and helpful colleague and friend, Ottó Merkl from Budapest. Since 2008 on the editorial board, Ottó improved numerous manuscripts with his comments and corrections, and thus raised the scientific quality of our journal (formerly "Stuttgarter Beiträge zur Naturkunde Serie A, Biologie").

Ottó was born on August 26, 1957 in Budapest. He studied at Eötvös-Loránd University, the oldest Hungarian university, and got his final degree in 1981. After the death of the unforgotten Zoltán Kaszab (1915–1986), eminent coleopterist and director of the Hungarian Natural History Museum in Budapest, Ottó Merkl was entrusted with the curation of the entire Coleoptera collection, one of the largest in Europe. The collection of darkling beetles (Tenebrionidae) alone is essential for all entomologists working on this family. The collection was established and mainly built up by Zoltán Kaszab, who was the most outstanding expert of this family (and of Meloidae) at that time. It consists of nearly 12,000 tenebrionid species, and more than 5100 species or infraspecific taxa are represented by type specimens. In addition to the types of species that were described by Kaszab himself, many types of Edmund Reitter, Hans Gebien, Sebastian Endrődy-Younga, Carl Koch and other specialists are also preserved in the collection. Through the high number of loans he prepared and the endless questions he answered concerning his taxonomic expertise, Ottó was well embedded in the community of world coleopterists. Besides his position in the museum as a senior curator, Ottó Merkl had just recently been nominated as director of the Department of Zoology.

Ottó Merkl also curated the collection of Hungarian Coleoptera, prepared a checklist, and conducted field research in order to find species previously unknown from Hungary and to confirm doubtful species with new, reliable data. Since 2005, his team found more than 160 species that were previously unknown from Hungary. The number of species in Hungary already exceeds 6300.

The research interests of Ottó Merkl were the taxonomy of Indo-Malayan Tenebrionidae, the taxonomy of Indo-Australian and Indo-Malayan Lagriini, also belonging to this family, the taxonomy of Palaearctic Coccinellidae, and the faunistics of Hungarian Coleoptera. His first scientific article about beetles was published in 1980, when he was a 23 year-old student. And, self-evidently, he was a welcome co-author for the family Tenebrionidae in the first edition of the "Catalogue of Palaearctic Coleoptera" (2008) as well as in the second, revised edition (2020).

Expeditions and study trips outside Europe lead him to Uzbekistan (1981), Armenia (1982), North Korea (Kumgang-san and Paekdu-san) (1988), Kenya (Mt. Elgon and

Fig. 1. Dr. Ottó Merkl in the Coleoptera collection of the Prague Natural History Museum on the occasion of the Fifth International Tenebrionoidea Symposium in March 2018 (photo by Christopher C. Wirth; reproduced with permission).

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Mt. Kenya) (1992), Indonesia (Gunung Palung National Park in Kalimantan Barat) (1993), Malaysia (Cameron Highlands and Pulau Tioman) (1995), Laos (Dong Hua Xao and Phou Khao Kouay) (1998), Taiwan (twice in 2002), and Nicaragua (2007).

My first visit to Budapest, together with Dr. Roland Grimm, was in 1985, when Zoltán Kaszab was still in duty. He taught us, always friendly and patient, the first steps in tenebrionid taxonomy. Then, from 1991 to 2005, I was ten times a guest of Ottó Merkl, typically for one week, for identification work and comparative studies. These were unforgettable, fruitful weeks spent mainly in the company of beetles. Without this cooperation my own scientific studies on tenebrionids, as well as the expansion of the Coleoptera collection in Stuttgart, would have been impossible. I could always show Ottó unusual beetles and asked for his opinion, and I never forget his words, pronounced several times: "Wolfgang, let us first check if it is a tenebrionid".

During these visits we did not speak only about beetles, but also about many other things, for example about the political and economic situation in his country in general and the uncertain future of the Hungarian Natural History Museum in particular. Since years, stupid plans exist to move the museum away from the city centre of Budapest, first to the suburban belt and, in recent years, far out in the countryside. Ottó and his colleagues suffered much under this political pressure. During the Fifth International Tenebrionoidea Symposium in March 2018 in Prague (Fig. 1), we discussed a petition against these plans, but Ottó feared that international interference would not be helpful and could make the situation even worse.

On the morning of February 19 this year, Ottó Merkl had a heart attack in the Budapest metro and passed away on the way to the museum and to "his" Coleoptera collection.

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