

PERSONAL REMEMBRANCE OF TIBOR JERMY  
AS A DIRECTOR

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From a perspective of over 30 years, it is not easy to remember those years, months and days when dr. TIBOR JERMY was the director of the Research Institute for Plant Protection under the supervision of the Hungarian Ministry of Agriculture. First, we have to try to go back in time, in terms of our way of thinking, to quite a different era, the so-called ‘ancien régime’. At that time, a totally different political system, with other rules, determined our everyday way of life. That era was the period of the construction of socialism and, during that time, directives regarding a centrally planned economy, and the monopolistic role of the Party in the country’s politics, had an overwhelming effect on all aspects of life. In fact, 30 or 40 years ago, no one would have dared to think of radical changes of any kind, nor of any real likelihood of Hungary returning to a capitalistic society. No kremlinologists in the United States, nor any historian or policy-maker would have dreamt that, during the early 1990s, the socialistic world system would collapse.

Therefore, it was in 1969, during the time of the construction of socialism and the socialistic transformation of agriculture, that TIBOR JERMY became director of the Research Institute for Plant Protection. The question arises: why did TIBOR JERMY become director? Of course, I do not know – only he could give a reliable answer. However, it seems certain for me that, when GÁBOR UBRIZSY, the academician awarded the Kossuth Prize and then director of the Institute, was dismissed, the responsible authority looked for somebody who would have the necessary professional experience, would be known in the field of plant protection and who might represent, at high level, the plant protection sciences within and outside Hungary. Dr. JERMY was appointed and he accepted the task. It must have been a challenge for him and, in particular, it was important that he continue in the development of this Institute, which already had a good international reputation.

With regard to TIBOR JERMY’s activity as a director, the question arises as to whether it was a good strategy to place the burden of complicated and troublesome administration, personnel work (today: human resources) and the labyrinth of Institutional finances on the shoulders of a man who was a researcher to his fingertips. In addition, he had to have a wide knowledge in fields of science other than his own. As director, he had also to follow closely all the manifestations of the party leaders who had complete political control over the country, as well as to consider

the opinions and objections of the trade union. The management also had to deal with such problems as the women's movement, and the youth and the political organisations representing them. Additionally, he had to do the impossible: he had to work out fair wages for something that was not measurable – scientific performance – whilst, at the same time resisting unfair financial demands. And at all times, he had to do all this in such a way as to ensure that he could not be attacked either morally or professionally. This was clearly a significant challenge for director JERMY.

Recalling his period as director thirty years ago, I can safely say that the challenge was met by the right man. Dr. JERMY was director of the Research Institute for Plant Protection between 1969 and 1978 and, as I see it now, it is clear that management was not for him, as he remained a full-time researcher. In retrospect, it appears that he never considered the possibility of stopping his entomological research nor of restricting his tuition of young candidates. At the same time, he purposefully prepared himself to abandon this post on his retirement so that he could return, with all his enthusiasm, to full-time scientific activities.

How could he successfully face this challenge? The answer is in his personality. Though I may be wrong and subjective, I would emphasise the following important factors. Professor JERMY very much loved his scientific vocation and, for him, it was fundamental to share his doubts, to put questions, and to search for answers in biology, in the world of insects and in the complexities of evolution and ethology. For him, being a director could “only” be a part-time job, because he made a conscious return to the scientific world he desired and planned. So, contrary to the ways of many of his contemporaries, management was not a question of prestige. Let us remind ourselves that, should someone have to leave a high position at that time, this would have included a kind of “demotion” or even complete fall from favour.

We know TIBOR JERMY is a modest man. This modesty is reflected in the environment around him, e.g., particularly in his “director's office”, which had the simplest but very practical furniture. Of course, the Institute could have afforded some luxury in his office but this was contrary to his personality. Several times, his modesty was noted (of course, not in his eyes) and his colleagues told him that he should put more emphasis on his appearance. At that time, the type, size and colour of the boss's car were very important symbols of authority. You only had to look out of the window when a “big boss” arrived for a visit to know this. Well, these things were of no importance to director JERMY. He considered that the little money available for research should be spent on indispensable matters and the same was true for the trappings of power. We agreed with this attitude but, as a

consequence, our Institute was not the favourite place for visits by the supervisory authority.

Searching in my memory, it is easy to recall another important fact. TIBOR JERMY was fond of order and was very precise. He was very serious about his job as director because he liked the Institute. He knew quite well that there was no direct relationship between scientific performance and the working hours you spent in the Institute. He, nevertheless, expected his colleagues to respect their work place, to like their vocation in spite of the low wages, and to work in the Institute during working hours because of the particular features of our professional field. So, during his era, strict order prevailed in the Institute.

It was not an easy job to be a one-person manager and to try to agree, on a daily basis, with the leaders of the Party, with the trade union and with the youth organisation and to cooperate with the personnel leader. Looking back on those years, I think he did a good job under those conditions, although I suspect that his hairs may have turned increasingly grey at that time.

By that time, the dark years of cold war were already over. Hungary wanted more than just the compulsory relationships with the Eastern block countries and tried to look for contacts towards the West. In our field, this became more and more evident. Nonetheless, in this respect, TIBOR JERMY, with the help of his excellent knowledge of languages, wisdom and human reliability, was again different from many of his contemporaries for, in spite of strongly maintaining scientific co-operation with Western researchers, he never had the slightest thought of neglecting his scientific contacts with Russian-Soviet researchers. There was only one important factor for him in scientific matters: high *scientific value*, and it was therefore just as important for him to know what was being achieved by an excellent Ukrainian or a Russian-Jew as by an American or other Western scientist. I have always greatly highly admired professor JERMY, because he never referred to language barriers, nor (as some researchers do) considered as non-existent research results which were unavailable to him.

I know that he had the courage to support excellent Russian scientists whose significant results were, who knows whether intentionally or not, ignored by the Western world. This showed, in my eyes, that he recognised only one science – neither Hungarian, nor Western, nor Russian, but only that which was called entomology or, in a larger context, biology, ecology, etc.

Director JERMY planned for the future and, as soon as he was 60 years old, he asked for his retirement. Many of his colleagues never noticed a small, narrow “tube office” when they studied the plans for the construction of the laboratories to be built at the Institute near Nagykovácsi. This office was tiny, with just enough room for books, the most important “objects” to director JERMY. Beside the many

comfortable large laboratories and offices, this “tube-office” was also built as designed by professor JERMY, member of the Academy. He had thought that it would be a safe and long lasting work place and that future generations would not envy it. His knowledge of human nature and his wisdom have come true.

Now I want to touch on one of the most important questions. How did the Institute develop while professor JERMY was its director? My older colleagues must remember that the Research Institute for Plant Protection of the 1960s and 1970s differed a lot from that of today. During that time, the Institute had a core of excellent researchers dealing with certain fundamental problems of plant protection. Let me just mention the high quality work done by ZOLTÁN KIRÁLY and his colleagues in phytopathology, by GUSZTÁV SZELÉNYI in cenology, by JÓZSEF VÖRÖS in mycology, by GYULA JOSEPOVITS on the mode of action of fungicides, and by TIBOR JERMY in biological control, insect ethology and the theory of evolution. In addition, and based on long tradition, scientists of the Institute paid much attention to applied research and to the development and evaluation of pest management programmes for pesticide registration, to working out analytical methods for designing new pesticides, to studies on herbicides and mixtures of pesticides, on the economics of plant protection and to practical aspects of farm management and, in general, working out pest management programmes. Much of this work was done under contract with the chemical companies.

In addition to the activities performed in the service of agricultural practice, modern fundamental research was also undertaken at the Institute. However, in the 1970s, great changes took place in both the higher administration and in research on plant protection in Hungary. This was the period of great expansion in the organisational, financial and intellectual life of the Plant Protection Service and its nation-wide organisation. Other research institutes, such as the Institute for Viticulture and Enology and those for Horticulture and Cereal Production, as well as their plant protection sections were greatly improved, while the number of specialists with plant protection degrees has greatly increased.

Director JERMY recognised this changing world and made great efforts to modify the profile of the Institute in relation to the new situation. As a consequence, development and management programmes and servicing activity decreased and so, consequently, the amount of time spent on fundamental research increased. This shift in emphasis to research was of great concern to certain colleagues, whose skill and age were such as to make a change in their career difficult. These changing circumstances also raised another important point. It was necessary for director JERMY to keep good, regular contacts with practices in plant protection and with the official body responsible for plant protection. Thus, he had to establish useful co-operation with the Plant Protection Service and, later, with the

plant protection management within the Ministry of Agriculture. Thus, the leaders of the Institute also took part in the work of the inter-ministerial committee responsible for decision-making in plant protection.

The image of the Institute has also changed. As a result of these changes, the Institute has become integrated into the organisation of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and has maintained its good reputation within and outside the country. Being an internationally recognised institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the Research Institute for Plant Protection has survived the shocks of the political changes (which caused major changes to and even the collapse of some non-academic institutes) with relatively little injury.

I really consider that I am totally unqualified to assess TIBOR JERMY's activity as a director and also feel that this insight and remembrance of him is inadequate and incomplete. Nevertheless, I wish to close these few lines by stating that his activity as the director has induced significant, beneficial and lasting changes in the life of the Research Institute for Plant Protection. Even though this position must have been a real challenge for him, I think that he always found a well-balanced solution to each challenge within the framework of the legal possibilities of that time, based on moral directives under the omnipresent political pressure. His only aim was to serve the science of plant protection and to provide good conditions for his fellow scientists to do their research. We have a great deal to thank him for.

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