

## OVER-WRITING MEMORIES

presentation paper

by Izabella Csordás, Coordinator of Volunteer Program, Museum of Fine Arts Budapest, Hungary

VOLUNTEERING FOR THE FUTURE CONFERENCE, MANCHESTER (UK), JUNE 9-13, 2009

SESSION: VOLUNTEERING IN HERITAGE TO DEVELOP CONFIDENCE & BREAK DOWN SOCIAL ISOLATION

**“Can I help you?” – this is how the 90 volunteers at the Museum of Fine Arts Budapest greet visitors when they approach our information desk. This is quite an achievement considering the history of volunteerism in the Central European region.**

### I. The Museum of Fine Arts Budapest, Hungary

The Museum of Fine Arts Budapest (MFAB) opened its gates to the public in 1906. The collection’s major part was donated by scientists, aristocrats and scholars - our first ‘volunteers’. After the change of regime in 1989 in Hungary, museum management has been struggling with the traditional attitude within museums that their museum’s only role is preservation. But in 2004 with the arrival of new manager-type general director at the MFAB a new era came placing higher priority on visitor services issues.

### II. Hungary and communism: obligatory “volunteer” work *Era of mistrust and social isolation*

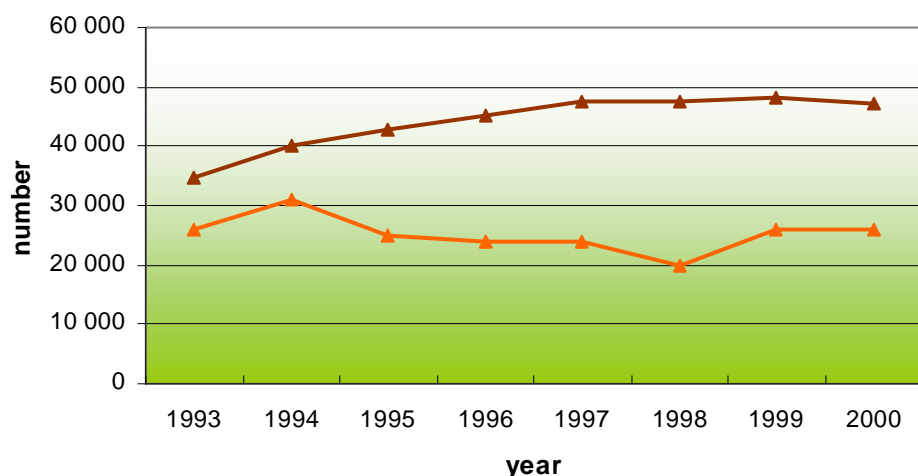
After the second World War Communist regimes in the region (Central and Eastern Europe) altered society’s basic values, forcing people to volunteer for the regime. Suddenly, the political changes of 1989-90 offered a free market, the free movement of goods and persons (and ideas) to generations who had lived and grown up in highly regulated political systems.

*Example – Raise your hands who does not want to do volunteer work tomorrow at road building!*

Change of government represented a relief.

Just where does volunteerism fit in to such societies?

The chart below shows individuals’ general attitude: while after the change of the regime in 1989 the number of NGOs grew rapidly, the number of those volunteering for organizations (and not for relatives and friends) fell. Today 5% of the adult population (more than 400 thousand people) volunteers within the framework of organizations.



—▲— no. of volunteers (data provided by organisations) —▲— no. of NGOs in Hungary

The Friends of the Museum of Fine Arts – among many other non-governmental organizations – has existed since 1995 and its volunteer docent programme has been traditionally run with the participation of foreign volunteers, but local, Hungarian participants were very rare. The programme was established

by an American lady married to a Hungarian. And wives of diplomats were happy to be able to enrich themselves by learning about the collection and to feel useful by providing the public with free tours.

As one of the qualified docents I also applied for becoming the Executive Coordinator of the Friends organization with the idea in my mind to recruit one paid intern and some Hungarian volunteer helpers. An informal volunteer group of 10-15 young students selected from the 40 applicants started to help out occasionally in office work or event organization.

*Challenge 1: Breaking down the mental isolation of applicants and Board members generated by unknown new pattern of volunteerism.*

### III. Mixed motivation

My idea of creating a Volunteer Programme of Hungarians (separate from the Docent Programme) was realized in August 2006 – still the **first general museum volunteer programme** in the country, although there are always more and more museums where volunteers get formally or informally involved. While there was significant doubt among our colleagues that this project could be successful 16 years after the political changes, this August we will celebrate our 3<sup>rd</sup> anniversary, with 90 participants.

*Challenge 2: Breaking down the social isolation of the Hungarian citizens generated by distinguishing negatively the foreign volunteerism which can be afforded due to luxurious salaries of husbands.*

When establishing our programme, because of having no budget for recruitment, we used only free of charge, online advertisements. This decision was not only cost-saving but lucky: online application means that both the applicant was able to use a computer (edit necessary data in MS Word and navigate the Internet) AND that he/she had Internet access, which now is the key to communicate with close to 100 people. This resulted in a haphazard lucky choice from our side in the era of relatively low Internet penetration.

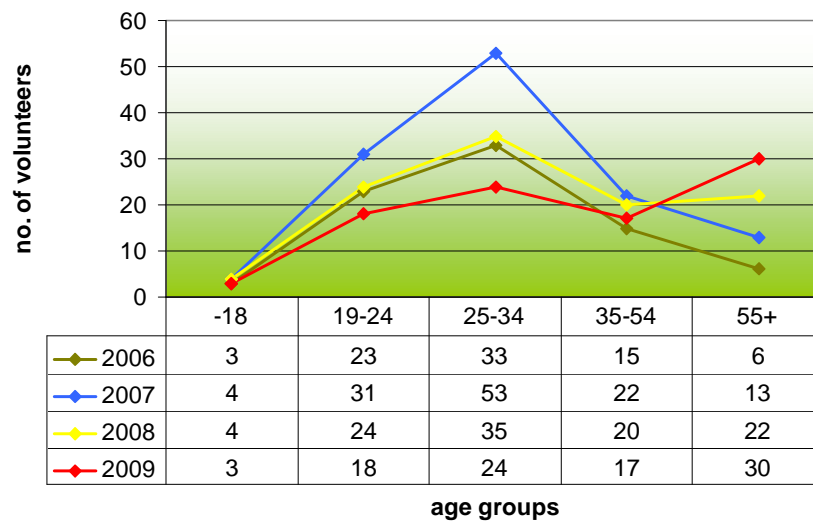
*Challenge 3: Breaking down the mental isolation of the elder Hungarian generated by bad experiences and associations originated from communism .*

This meant that mostly young people applied – which was, as I saw, very unusual in Anglo-Saxon countries (home of the volunteer movement), but we had a very colourful bunch of applications considering age and qualification. Today we are happy to maintain a balance of people with the following motivations:

Type of volunteerism	Traditional	New
<b>Motivation</b>	Re-socialization, Belonging to a community, It feels good to help, Tradition in the family Altruistic attitude of giving	Gaining new/necessary experiences, Professional development, Self-knowledge, Useful leisure time Awareness of the benefits of volunteer work
<b>Characteristics</b>	Rather elderly people	Rather younger people

From August 2006 to May 2009, our programme became more balanced age-wise. The outstanding number of younger volunteers between 18-25 decreased by 2009 and the number of those above 55 increased. The chart below shows this age distribution for every year (2009 marked with the red line).

### Age distribution of volunteers



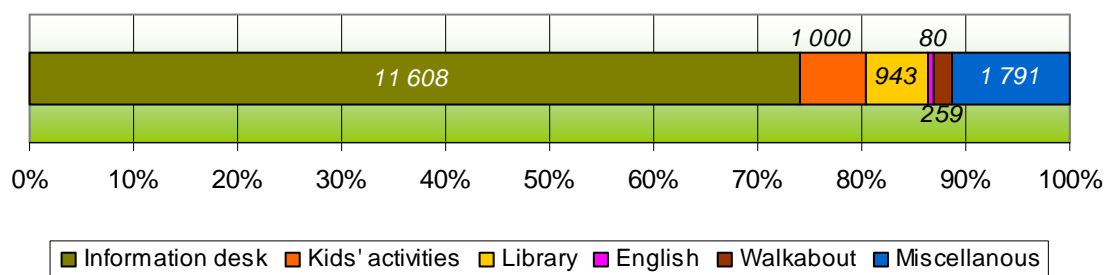
#### IV. Volunteer services – visitor services

Tour guiding and information services are classical volunteer fields and visitor services. For this reason, oftentimes volunteer services go under the umbrella of the visitor services department, although in many cases volunteers also lend a hand in many other areas. Our volunteers:

- run the information desk,
- perform office administration,
- conduct membership registration and administration,
- give translation help,
- do IT tasks – building and maintaining the Volunteer Programme’s website,
- help out at kids’ activities, family days,
- guide new staff members around in the museum (walkabout),
- help in the library, etc.

The chart below shows the general distribution of the 16,712 volunteer hours (close to 2,100 working days) over the past 2,5 years (August 2006 - February 2009).

#### Total volunteer hours 2006-2009



**Challenge 4: Developing confidence and breaking down rejective attitude of colleagues generated by prejudices on the value of volunteer work.**

Traditionally our most important volunteer field is Information services, since at the moment of the Volunteer Programme’s establishment there was no information desk in the museum and room minders were not able to inform visitors in foreign languages. This is the reason for the high number and percentage of information volunteer hours, while “miscellaneous” covers help at opening ceremonies, office administration, translation and many other tasks.

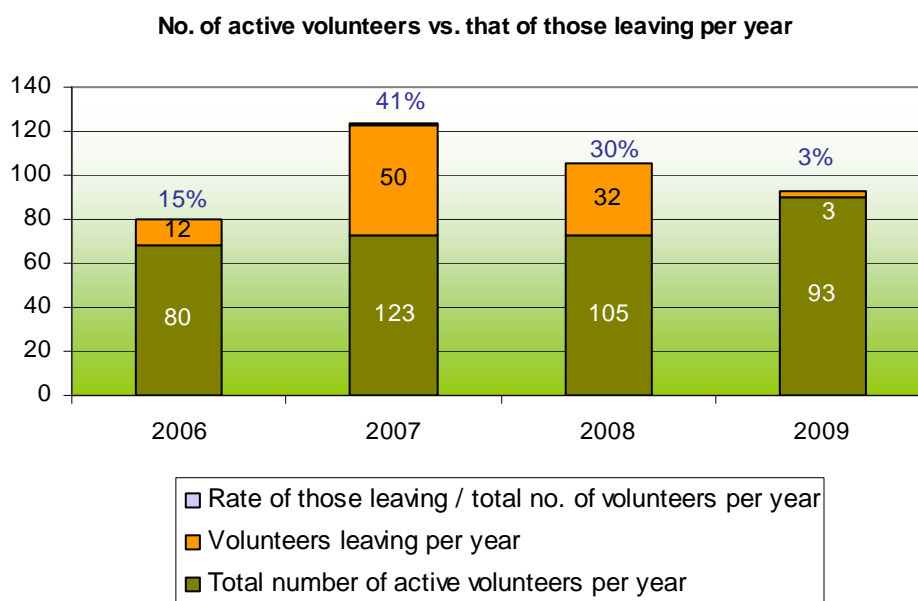
Since colleagues spread the word among themselves about volunteers and get to know them in person, trust is growing towards volunteer team members. After 2,5 years operation of the programme we have arrived to a point when colleagues from different departments (museum education, exhibitions, secretary, etc.) start calling our office to ask for some volunteer help. Thanks to the e-mail availability

of our volunteers we are able to answer promptly these internal needs, what is always highly appreciated. And especially in this economic situation we shall realize the occasions when the museum is in desperate need of any help.

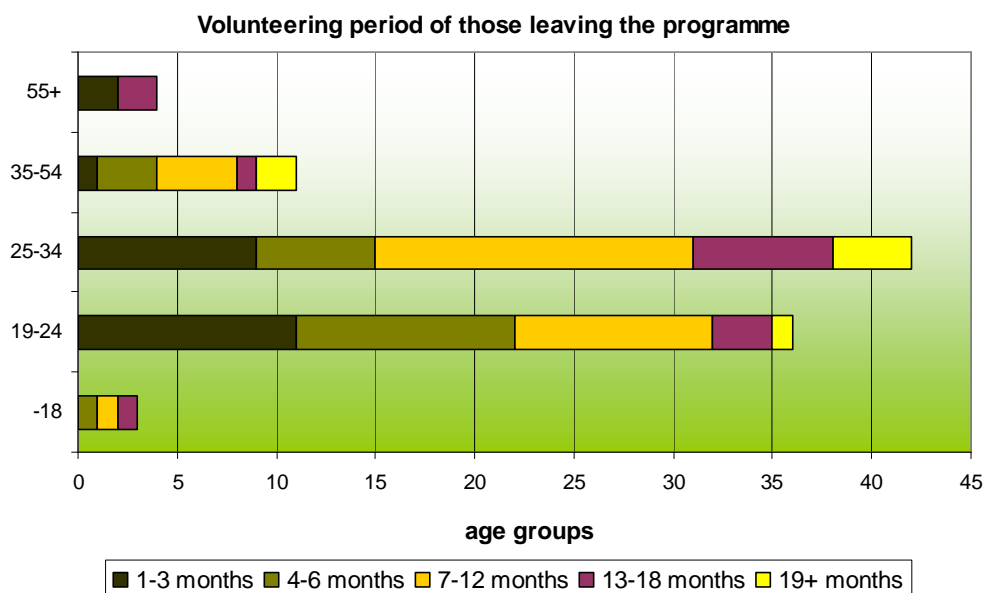
### V. They stay with us! – holding on to volunteers

Establishing the Volunteer Programme – a strange example in a Hungarian museum – raised several questions. Luckily, I could observe several volunteer programmes abroad and return with great ideas, which likely reduced fluctuation in number and increased the general satisfaction of our volunteers.

The chart below shows the rate of those leaving in the indicated year and the total number of volunteers that same year. This rate decreased from 41% to 30% in the past two full years of the programme. This year, our volunteer team comprises 23 people who joined in 2006 (surviving the programme’s childhood), 22 people who joined in 2007, 25 who joined in 2008 and 20 who joined this year – which shows an even and balanced distribution.

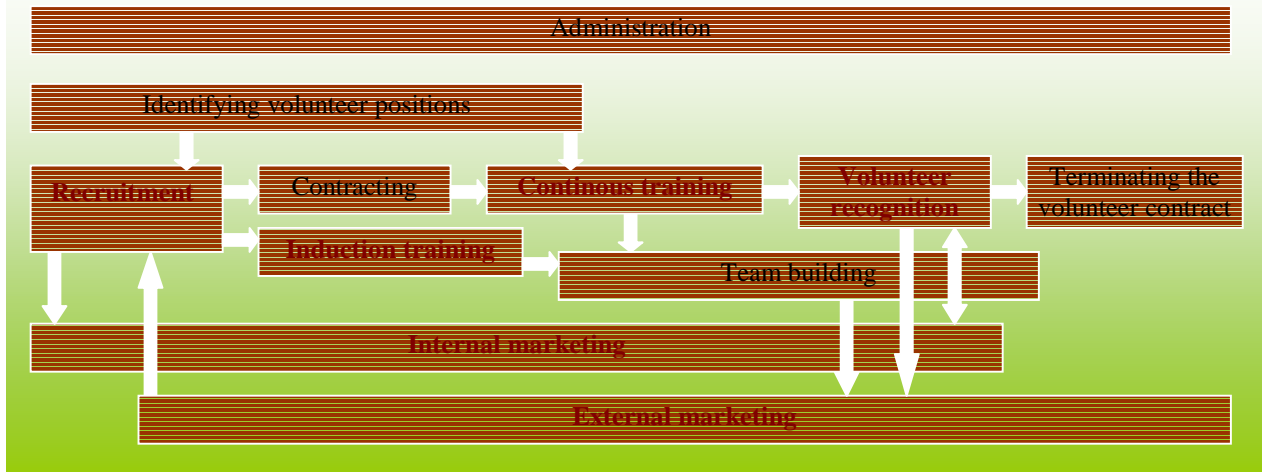


As I have seen in the United States and in England, the average period a volunteer spends with an organisation is 3 years. With a not too long history we can say that the biggest part of the volunteers who have already left our programme stayed with us for a period of 7-12 months, as the below chart shows the same data broken down into age groups.



For setting up our volunteer programme we used the model below which helps you understand the system of the fragile and at the same time massive volunteer movements. The highlighted management elements are those which can help building trust within the organization and/or outside the organization and breaking down social isolation. The chart seen on the following pages focuses on MFAB routine and best practices, referring to the Challenges (Ch1-Ch4) indicated above.

### MANAGEMENT OF THE VOLUNTEER RESOURCES



Taking into consideration the history and development of the idea of volunteerism in Central Eastern Europe, it is obvious to say that establishing modern volunteer programmes represent great milestones of social changes. This happened in the Museum of Fine Arts Budapest or also in the Hermitage in Russia, which officially works with volunteers since May 2003.

Western patterns provide us with valuable help management-wise, although oftentimes local characteristics have to be taken into consideration.

The last chart summarizes some practical experiences which we had during the past 2,5 years when beating down prejudices and making our volunteer programme grow.

**Izabella Csordás** established and coordinates the Museum of Fine Arts Budapest's Volunteer Programme; she is the coordinator of the Friends of the Museum of Fine Arts organization, as well.

#### Contact details:

Szépművészeti Múzeum - Múzeumpedagógiai és Közönségszolgálati Osztály (Museum of Fine Arts - Education and Visitor Services Department), H-1146 Budapest, Dózsa György út 41.

Tel: +36-1-428-2067, E-mail: [izabella.csordas@szepmuveszeti.hu](mailto:izabella.csordas@szepmuveszeti.hu)

Web: <http://www.szepmuveszeti.hu>, <http://www.mfab.hu>

### Celebrating the programme's 2nd anniversary with our volunteers in September 2008



Management tools developing confidence and breaking down social isolation	Areas of application in the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest (MFAB)
<b>1. OPEN COMMUNICATION</b>	
Recruitment – Ch2	<i>Call for application</i> – clear wording of expectations and benefits
Recruitment – Ch1	<i>Interview</i> – highlighting the seamy side of volunteer life as well (such as avoiding later misunderstandings), revealing the adaptability of volunteer’s personality to the team
Induction training – Ch1	<p><i>Induction training / mentoring</i> – meetings with established volunteers and learning on-the-job</p> <p><b>a</b>, MFAB – newcomers first take a treasure hunt in the museum, then observe mentors 2 times on the job and fill in a conflict handling quiz. Then the mutual decision is made and the contract is signed. This is followed by the next steps of the induction training: 3 more mentor sessions (the newcomer participates actively), walkabout (tour of the House, history, highlights) and newcomers’ quizzes.</p> <p><b>b</b>, Kew Gardens (UK) – the induction training in the Kew lasts a whole week and comprises museum information, institutional structure, visitor services training, guided tours, etc.</p> <p><b>c</b>, The British Museum (UK) prepares its Hands On volunteers for the job with lectures provided by curators who literally give the works of art in the hands of the volunteers – very memorable way of learning.</p>
External marketing – Ch2	<i>Website</i> ( <a href="http://volunteer.mfab.hu">http://volunteer.mfab.hu</a> ) - Using the museum’s website for spreading the news about volunteers is a MUST, but using a separate website for volunteers and on volunteers is an asset. One of MFAB’s volunteers developed an invaluable website enabling us to communicate with team members (inform and schedule them) and to publish our own advertisements and experiences (among them in the Hungarian version: my best experience, my worst experience, why did I join the volunteer team, my biggest challenge as a volunteer).
<b>2. EVALUATION</b>	
Volunteer recognition – Ch4	<i>Volunteers are unpaid colleagues</i> - Volunteers – just like paid staff – definitely need feedback and recognition of their work and they also need to feel as a member of the staff. Name badges, shop/café discounts, insider tours of the museum.
Volunteer recognition – Ch4	<i>Appreciation from the highest level</i> - IMJ, Field Museum in Chicago (USA) and several museums provide volunteer appreciation reception or lunch for these unpaid, committed workers. In MFAB we had so far the two Deputy Directors speak at the Volunteer Programme’s 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> birthday party and we hope for having the General Director next time.
Internal marketing – Ch4	<p><i>Statistics</i> - Asking for budget, preparing an executive’s report are crucial elements of all organisations’ work. Managing unpaid staff is more difficult because it has to struggle with the misconception of free labour.</p> <p>- National Maritime Museum, Hampton Court (UK) used to label volunteer hours with the minimum wage. An executive report based on numbers like this can help expressing volunteer efforts in financial terms which many directors need.</p> <p>- Based on this example and our hourly statistics, MFAB applies this method making the General Director familiar with the programme’s costs, income and personal, institutional results.</p>

<b>3. DEVELOPING SOCIAL TIES</b>	
Continuous training – Ch4	<i>Embedding volunteers in the museum's hierarchy</i> – getting to know the faces of colleagues, their responsibilities (building bridges between paid and unpaid staff members) - We try to organize one tour per month highlighting our exhibits an/or providing volunteers with insider information – like meeting the head of exhibitions or restorers, etc.
Continuous training – Ch1	<i>Conflict-handling training</i> - MFAB being one of the most well-know Hungarian museums also attracts the high probability that a volunteer meets an aggressive or a manipulative visitor. Further developing Kew Gardens' example of several hour-long session, we ask volunteers to participate in one-day-training focusing on role plays and common solutions to difficult situations. It is important to make volunteers aware of their scope of responsibility and prepare them for such situations.
Internal marketing – Ch4	<i>Volunteer Journal</i> - MFAB started to issue a “Volunteer Quarterly” March 2008 – following the example of MOMA and IMJ. The journal informs volunteers about team members, meetings, events, etc. – providing them with the feeling of belonging to the community. We make the journal accessible for all paid colleagues via Intranet.
Internal/External marketing – Ch2	<i>Logo</i> - we developed our own logo for the volunteer team. The creative help of one of the team members led to the final layout of our expressive logo which is well accepted both in the group and in the Museum.
External marketing – Ch2	<i>Media</i> - Good media connections are important to all institutions just like to our Volunteer Programme. Major Hungarian TV channel, radio and several newspapers prepared interviews on us resulting in a continuous interest for the programme. We try to make these accessible on our program's website, as well.
External marketing – Ch2	<i>Brochure</i> – Field Museum prepared a superb brochure on their Volunteer Programme, titled: “Let your interest consume you”
Administration – Ch3	<i>Participation in national/international civil movements</i> – Participation in “Think future, volunteer together” EU-project with the opportunity of sending two senior volunteers abroad, participation in Volunteer Days, providing presentations in civil environment on volunteerism