

## **Obituary: Ernst M. Lang 1913-2014**

Basel Zoo is mourning the loss of former Director Ernst M. Lang who died on 21 October at the age of 101. Professor Lang was a unique character who presided over the zoo as its Director for a quarter of a century (1953-1978) and substantially shaped its development.



Photo: Basel Zoo

Ernst M. Lang retained close ties with the zoo throughout his life. Even into old age, he came to the zoo as often as possible from his home nearby and regularly attended the monthly 'press appetizer', which he had initiated during his tenure. Ernst M. Lang had a particular connection with his foster child, female gorilla Goma, who grew up within his human family in the late 1950s and their relationship became the focus of worldwide attention. Their reunions at the zoo were always joyful and it meant a lot to him to be able to experience Goma's 55th birthday celebrations in September. He was not able to attend in person for health reasons, but followed the birthday with interest in the media.



Ernst M. Lang with Goma. Photo: Basel Zoo

Born in Luzern on 16 October 1913, Ernst M. Lang studied veterinary medicine in Bern and Hannover. After receiving his doctorate, he moved to Binningen where he opened a veterinary practise not far from the zoo until 1942 when he took up the position of veterinarian at Basel Zoo.

He became director in 1953 as the successor of Prof. Dr. Heini Hediger.

Lang had an exceptional flair for publicity and managed to cement awareness of the zoo among Basel's residents and far beyond the city's borders. The 25 years Ernst M. Lang spent as Director saw the opening of numerous forward-looking enclosures and the expansion of the zoo site. In 1956 the third carnivore house opened, in 1959 the rhino and pygmy hippo house was finished, in 1969 the great apes and in 1970 the monkeys moved into their new buildings. In 1972 the vivarium was inaugurated, with a record number of visitors being registered, and the children's zoo, inaugurated in 1977, both still stand the test of time. During his tenure, director Lang benefitted from the expertise of landscape designer Kurt Brägger who redesigned the zoo to become an animal collection with international vibrancy. This was due in part to the ingenious layout of the paths, which gives the park a deceptively large appearance.



Ruaha on arrival. Photo: Basel City archive

Ernst M. Lang ushered in a time of great success in breeding at Basel Zoo. Rather than displaying individual animals, his aim was to create breeding groups and bring suitable mates to Basel. On 1 November 1952 he made zoo history by bringing one-year-old elephant Ruaha to Basel. He had taken Ruaha and four other young elephants to Basel Zoo from Africa by boat and train. In 1956 he turned the international attention to Basel zoo again with the arrival of 'Rudra', the first Indian rhinoceros to be born in a zoo. Goma's birth in 1959 was legendary – the first gorilla born in a European zoo. Goma was

raised by Ernst M. Lang and his first wife, and still lives in the monkey house among her own species as an elderly lady. At that time there was hardly any newspaper, radio or television station that did not report about the gorilla baby in Basel.

During his time as director, Ernst M. Lang regularly published articles in the „Zolli-Bulletin“, which he had founded in 1958 together with Dr. Hans Ehinger. Today, his articles provide us with an insight into an important area of zoo biology.

Breeding exotic animals in captivity was long considered an unattainable goal. Ernst M. Lang harnessed advances in veterinary medicine and animal nutrition and was able to witness the first captive births of species such as Indian rhinoceroses, flamingos, Spectacled bears, bongos, Somali wild asses and Okapis at Basel Zoo.