

**In memoriam Dr. Olivér György Dely (1927–2003)**

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It is with deep regret that we announce that one of the last professional scientific students of Hungarian herpetology, reconstructor and curator of the herpetological collection in the Hungarian Natural History Museum, author of the basic reference books (*“Fauna Hungariae”*) of Hungarian amphibians and reptiles, Dr. OLIVÉR GYÖRGY DELY after a long suffering passed away on the 19th of November, 2003.



Dr. OLIVÉR GYÖRGY DELY (photo by FERENC MIHÁLYI, 1988)

This is especially painful for the senior author of the present obituary, since the deceased had been supervisor of his dissertations for his university and the doctoral degrees, his first mentor in the museum, and the one who introduced him into the science of herpetology. OLIVÉR DELY has handed over not only the professional bases, the qualities of modesty, correctness and objectivity which are needed to be a scientist, but has also shown an example to follow in honesty and strength of being a character. He had an exceptionally wide education, and with his far-reaching trains of thought, long afternoon talks, almost speeches provided such a picture of a hard, already vanished epoch which we will never forget.

OLIVÉR GYÖRGY DELY was born on the 27th of April, 1927, in Nagyszalonta (Salonta, today in County Bihor, Romania). His loving addiction to his homeland, Transylvania, accompanied him during the entire life. He lost his father, GÉZA DELY, at the age of 7, whose influence to his life, however, was determining. His mother, MÁRIA BAJOR, a retired schoolteacher brought up the two brothers, ALAJOS (later a dermatologist doctor) and OLIVÉR with hard work. There were also two important friends, his uncle, ANDOR DELY, and the Trianon diplomat, IVÁN PRAZNOVSZKY, who partly replaced his father. As a result of the support of the entire family, the two boys both became well-known, educated persons, and found their place in the world.

He studied in the schools of Nagyvárad (= Oradea) and Nagyszalonta (= Salonta), but World War Two broke his studies with a short captivity in a Russian prison camp during his military service. He passed his final examinations already in a Budapest secondary school in 1946. In the same year he started to study museology at the Faculty of Arts of the Péter Pázmány (later Budapest) University, where he graduated in 1950. He began to work in the herpetological collection of the Department of Zoology, Hungarian Natural History Museum (HNHM), Budapest. At that time, there were two herpetologists in the museum from whom DELY could learn: Mrs ARANKA MÁRIA FEJÉRVÁRY-LÁNGH was curator of the collection, and ISTVÁN BOROS was director-general. The latter, having studied in the Soviet Union, was a faithful communist, relating to other people with great humanity. Later DELY and BOROS co-authored three papers together on the greatest scientists of Hungarian herpetology (LAJOS MÉHELY, GÉZA GYULA FEJÉRVÁRY, and ISTVÁN BOLKAY). OLIVÉR DELY became senior curator for the herpetological collection in 1952, and remained so eventually until the end of his life.

The fall of 1956 brought a political revolution to Hungary, when during the Budapest confrontations between Hungarian revolutionists and the Russian troops resulted in a tragic attack fighting the National Museum, and later the Department of Zoology of the HNHM. In the big fire caused by a shell, almost the entire herpetological collection was destroyed, more than 40 thousand specimens preserved in al-

cohol (including the MÉHELY-types) burnt to ash (BOROS 1957). After the revolution was subdued, it was completely DELY's task (and later his merit) to rebuild the collection. The museum received many donations from other European museums (e.g., Berlin, Prague), but it was the tireless work of OLIVÉR DELY, accompanied by his faithful assistant, Ms ELISABETH ÓRY, which increased the holdings of the collection from almost nothing to the present 16000 specimens.

Unfortunately, not only the entire collection but also all the scientific manuscripts of the young scientist and the material based for it was destroyed in the fire of 1956. OLIVÉR DELY had to start his work again, and it took 8 more years for him to complete his dissertation for the Candidate of Science degree. Finally, he received this title from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1965 for his taxonomical and ecological studies on the Hungarian populations of the Alpine Newt (*Triturus alpestris*).

To partly replace the loss of the collection in 1956, DELY conducted the first Hungarian Africa expedition into Egypt in 1957. In 1973, he participated in another expedition to the Algerian Sahara, where he suffered a serious accident during a night collecting. His left leg was injured by a shotgun, and the healing lasted for almost two years. Unfortunately, his health could never be completely recovered, and the consequences of this accident (including the break of his leg three times) influenced later his entire life.

OLIVÉR DELY married to ÁGNES DRASKOVITS in 1965, who also worked in the Hungarian Natural History Museum as a specialist on Diptera. They went together on an expedition to North Korea in 1978, the fourth one of a series of 22 conducted by the HNHM which created a world-wide reputation of the accumulated East Asiatic material in this institution (KORSÓS 2002).

Despite all the difficulties in his life, DELY was a real professional herpetologist, whose work and merits were admired all over Europe. In a pioneer manner, he organised the First Herpetological Conference of the socialist countries in 1981, which actually became a forum for bringing together 47 representatives of this field of zoology from 14 countries, including, among others, the United States, France, Germany, Austria and Russia. Ten years later, in 1991, he was elected to be the honorary president of the 6th Ordinary General Meeting of the Societas Europaea Herpetologica, held also in Budapest (KORSÓS & KISS 1992).

OLIVÉR DELY has published a total of 83 scientific papers (in German, French, English and Hungarian), and although this number is not exceptionally high, there can be no doubt about the scientific accuracy, credit and details of his publications. He had learnt the details, exact observations and descriptions, causal explanations and careful evaluations from the greatest Hungarian herpetologists (MÉHELY, BOLKAY, FEJÉRVÁRY), hence becoming a deserved follower of them.

His papers – with a few exceptions – dealt with members of the Hungarian herpetofauna; DELY's authentic purpose was to elaborate all of its species from the taxonomical and systematic points of view. His favourite subject was to investigate the morphological variability at the individual and population levels; he measured body size parameters, counted scale rows, and drew head-shield patterns, in order to clarify questions of microevolution of co-existing and isolated amphibian and reptile populations.

In his dissertation for the Candidate of Science degree, he described four new subspecies of the Alpine Newt from Hungary (*Triturus alpestris bakonyiensis*, *bükkienis*, *carpathicus*, and *sátoriensis*). These forms, however, were not accepted later as valid taxa (GASC *et al.* 1997). He elaborated in separate publications the following species of the Hungarian herpetofauna: *Rana arvalis wolterstorffi*, *Salamandra salamandra*, *Lacerta* (= *Zootoca*) *vivipara*, *L.* (= *Podarcis*) *taurica*, *Anguis fragilis*, *Coluber caspius*, *Vipera berus* and *V. ursinii rakosiensis*; listed their distribution records, and discussed the population variability and zoogeographical history in some cases. He contributed to the great European herpetological book series initiated in the 1980s (“Handbuch der Reptilien und Amphibien Europas”, edited by W. BÖHME) with a chapter on *Lacerta vivipara* and on *Anguis fragilis*. He wrote the appropriate chapters on amphibians and reptiles in the scientific results of the work of the HNHM in three of the Hungarian National Parks (Hortobágy, Kiskunság and Bükk), as well as that of the Bátorliget Nature Reserve. Together with his geneticist colleague GÁBOR STOHL, they established hereditary morphotypes in the head-shield patterns of three lacertid lizard species (*Zootoca vivipara*, *Podarcis taurica*, the Mongolian *Eremias argus*) and the Hungarian Meadow Viper (*Vipera ursinii rakosiensis*), and commented on them with phylogenetic considerations. He also published papers on some exotic reptiles: on the South American amphisbaenid *Anops kingii*, the Egyptian turtle *Pelomedusa subrufa*, and the lacertid genus *Eremias*, based on the collections made by ZOLTÁN KASZAB in Mongolia.

As his most important contributions to Hungarian herpetology, the two books in the academic series *Fauna Hungariae* can undoubtedly be considered (Amphibia, 1967, and Reptilia, 1978). These were, and still are, the most comprehensive scientific summaries of all the amphibian and reptile species in the Carpathian Basin. They are sought-after books all over Europe despite the fact that they were written only in Hungarian.

In 1959 OLIVÉR DELY initiated and later edited all the subsequent 23 volumes of the museum's periodical *Vertebrata hungarica*. He had put a lot of effort into the editorial work of this journal, filled it with high-standard articles written by himself and well-known colleagues, and it was a great pity for him when in 1989,

mainly for financial reasons, the publication had to be discontinued. He always admired the literature of his predecessors, collected their publications with great honour, and paid attention to remember and understand their life and activities. He was a real tradition-making character who followed many old traditions himself. “Honesty, honour, commitment, patriotism” were all the cornerstones of his way of thinking. As long as he could make it, he regularly visited the museum, and tried to maintain a good and up-to-date relationship with his herpetologist students, followers, and foreign colleagues. Even during the last months of his life, painfully struggling with the consequences of the 1973 accident and his former heavy smoking habit abandoned long time ago, he wanted to organise his reprint library, and planned to prepare herpetological works for final publication. We can only regret that OLIVÉR GYÖRGY DELY has taken away with him many details of his vast knowledge of herpetology.

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