

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

ZOLTÁN KORSÓS

Department of Zoology, Hungarian Natural History Museum  
H-1088 Budapest, Baross u. 13, Hungary  
korsos@zoo.zoo.nhmus.hu

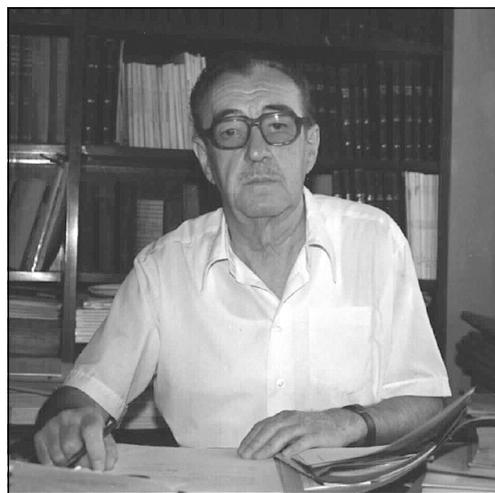
It is with deep regret that we announce that Dr. Olivér György Dely, professional student of Hungarian herpetology, re-constructor and curator of the herpetological collection in the Hungarian Natural History Museum, and author of the classic books on Hungarian amphibians and reptiles (in the series *Fauna Hungariae*), passed away on 19 November 2003 after a long illness.

Olivér György Dely was born on 27 April 1927 in Nagyszalonta (= Salonta, today in County Bihor, Romania). His love for his homeland, Transylvania, remained with him throughout his life. At the age of seven he lost his father, Géza Dely, who, nonetheless, was an important influence on his life. His mother, Mária Bajor, a retired schoolteacher, brought up the two brothers, Alajos (later a dermatologist) and Olivér. Two important friends, an uncle, Andor Dely, and the Trianon diplomat, Iván Praznovszky, who served partly as a father figure, also played a role in Dely's upbringing. 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.

Olivér Dely studied in the schools of Nagyvárad (= Oradea) and Nagyszalonta, but a short period of captivity in a Russian prison camp during his military service in World War II interrupted his studies. He completed his final exams in a Budapest secondary school in 1946. In the same year he started to study museology at the Faculty of Arts, Péter Pázmány (later Budapest) University, where he graduated in 1950. He began to work in the herpetological collection of the Department of Zoology of the 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 general director. The latter, having studied in the Soviet Union, was a faithful communist, relating to other people with great humanity. Later Dely and Boros wrote 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 kept this title until the end of his life.

The fall of 1956 brought political revolution to Hungary, and the Budapest confrontations between Hungarian revolutionaries and Russian troops resulted in a tragic attack against the National Museum, and later the Department of Zoology of the HNHM. In the major fire caused by a shell, the entire herpetological collection was almost destroyed - more than 40,000



Dr. Olivér György Dely  
(photo by Ferenc Mihályi, 1988)

alcoholic specimens (including the Méhely-types) burnt to ash (Boros 1957). After the end of the revolution, it was Dely's task to rebuild the collection. The museum received many donations from other European museums (e.g., Berlin, Prague, St. Petersburg), but it was the tireless work of Dely, accompanied by his faithful assistant, Ms. Elisabeth Öry, that increased the collection number from almost nothing to its present 16,000 specimens.

Unfortunately, not only the entire collection but also all the scientific manuscripts of the young scientist and the material on which they were based was destroyed in the fire of 1956. Olivér Dely had to start his work again, and it took eight more years for him to finish his dissertation for the Candidate of Science degree. Finally, he received this title from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1965 for his taxonomic 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 into the Algerian Sahara, where he suffered a serious accident during night collecting. His left leg was injured by a shotgun, and the healing process took almost two years. Unfortunately, his health never completely recovered, and the consequences of this accident (including the repeated breakage of his leg) subsequently influenced his entire life.

In 1965 Olivér György Dely married Ágnes Draskovits, who also worked in the Hungarian Natural History Museum as a specialist on Diptera. They were together on an expedition to North Korea in 1978 - the fourth of a series of 22 conducted by the HNHM, which established a worldwide reputation for the institution based on its accumulated East Asiatic material.

Despite all the difficulties in his life, Dr. Dely established himself as a prominent herpetolo-

gist, whose work and merits were admired throughout Europe. In a pioneering act, he organised the First Herpetological Conference of the Socialist Countries in 1981, which 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 after, in 1991, he was elected to be the honorary president of the 6<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Meeting of the Societas Europaea Herpetologica, also held in Budapest.

Dr. Dely published 83 scientific papers (in German, French, English and Hungarian), and although this number is not exceptionally high, there can be no doubt about their scientific accuracy, value and utility. He learned the value of exact observation and description as well as careful analysis and interpretation from the greatest Hungarian herpetologists (Méhely, Bolkay, Fejérváry), and he was a worthy successor. Dely's papers – with a few exceptions – deal with Hungarian amphibians and reptiles and his goal was to eventually treat the entire herpetofauna from a taxonomic and systematic perspective. His favorite subject was 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*, *bükkiensis*, *carpathicus*, and *sátoriensis*). These forms, however, were not subsequently accepted as valid taxa. In separate publications he considered the following species of the Hungarian herpetofauna: *Rana arvalis wolterstorffi*, *Salamandra salamandra*, *Lacerta* (= *Zootoca*) *vivipara*, *Lacerta* (= *Podarcis*) *taurica*, *Anguis fragilis*, *Coluber caspius*, *Vipera berus* and *Vipera ursinii rakosiensis*; listing their distribution records, and discussing popu-

lation 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 two chapters on *Lacerta vivipara* and *Anguis fragilis*. He wrote the relevant papers on amphibians and reptiles in the scientific results of the work of 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 Dr. Gábor Stohl, they established the hereditary nature of head shield patterns of three lacertid lizard species (*Zootoca vivipara*, *Podarcis taurica*, and the Mongolian *Eremias argus*) and the Hungarian Meadow Viper (*Vipera ursinii rakosiensis*), and commented on the phylogenetic implications of their findings. Dely also published papers on some exotic reptiles including the South American amphisbaenid *Anops kingii*, the Egyptian turtle *Pelomedusa subrufa*, and the lacertid genus *Eremias*, based on the collection by Z. Kaszab from Mongolia.

His two books in the academic series *Fauna Hungariae* (Amphibia, 1967, and Reptilia, 1978) can undoubtedly be considered his most important contributions to Hungarian herpetology. 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 throughout Europe, despite the fact that they were written only in Hungarian.

In 1959 Olivér Dely initiated the museum's periodical *Vertebrata hungarica*. He edited all of the subsequent 23 volumes, filling it with high-standard articles written by him and well-known colleagues. It was a great pity for him when in 1989, mainly because of financial reasons, the publication had to be stopped. He always collected the literature of his predecessors and honored their lives and contributions. He valued tradition and followed many old traditions himself. "Honesty, honor, commitment, patriotism" were the cornerstones of his way of thinking.

As long as he could make it, he regularly visited the museum, and tried to maintain good and current relationships 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, long since abandoned, he wanted to organize his reprint library, and planned to prepare herpetological works for final publication. He had an exceptionally wide education, which was evident in his long afternoon talks, almost speeches, which provided his friends and colleagues with an unforgettable picture of the difficult times he had lived and worked through. To the people surrounding him, he has not only bequeathed the professional grounding in herpetology and the modesty, accuracy and objectivity that are needed to be a scientist, but has also provided an example to follow in terms of honesty and strength of character.

