



Imre Janos Eifert

April 15, 1934 - August 14, 2020

Imre János Eifert was born on April 15, 1934 in Soltvadkert, Hungary, the son of Imre Eifert (no middle name) and Erzsébet Eifert (née Szekeres). From his childhood he had memories of World War Two, with bombers flying high overhead heading for Budapest, of Hungarian troops retreating through Soltvadkert before the advancing Russians (the soldiers loved his mother's bean soup). But he also had memories of loving parents and wonderful sisters, of farming and love of the earth and plants. He remembered his father's care when plowing so as not to disturb the native animals, like the eggs of snakes, and his father's showing Imre a rare species of wildflower (in the family Gentianaceae) on the farm that was to be protected. At the age of about 13, Imre eagerly showed his father a species of wildflower (family Ranunculaceae, perhaps an *Aconitum*) that was found in only one small population in the area. By a couple of years after that, he had begun amassing a collection of rare cacti and was exchanging cacti with other Hungarian cactophiles; he had to leave that collection behind when he left Hungary, but at least some of those cacti are still in the possession of family members in Hungary.

The name of Imre's home town, "Solt-vad-kert", roughly means "Solt's wild garden" (Solt was an ancient tribal chief). Imre was apparently born to be a lover of plants.

Although his family was little favored by the Communist regime, through an uncle's help Imre went to university in Budapest to study botany. However, he fled Hungary on November 7th, 1956, following the failed revolution of 1956, entering Austria and then Germany. His escape into Austria, as he told it, was both harrowing and mundane; thousands of Hungarians were attempting the same thing and most made it. Once in Germany, he was eventually able to continue his botanical studies under the well known plant morphologist Wilhelm Troll at the University of Mainz.

Imre arrived in Austin on April 19, 1965, to pursue a doctorate in the Department of Botany of the University of Texas at Austin. He dove into a taxonomic study of the genus *Hoffmannseggia* (Fabaceae), studying under Dr. Marshall C. Johnston. For a number of reasons he found himself unable to finish that study, and he never received his doctorate. Nevertheless, he determined and published the correct name for the most common and widespread species of the genus, *Hoffmannseggia glauca* (Ort.) Eifert, and wrote the treatment of the genus for Correll and Johnston's *Manual of the Vascular Plants of Texas* (1970). He also did work in the related genus *Caesalpinia* and was coauthor of a number of chemosystematics studies in various plant groups done by the Tom J. Mabry laboratory in the Department of Botany.

In 1978, Imre started working for the University of Texas Libraries, specializing in the cataloging of foreign language materials. His native language was Hungarian; he spoke German, Russian and English fluently; he learned to read Japanese and Arabic for cataloging purposes; and he knew written classical Latin well. He retired in 2005 and was much missed by many friends there, many of whom he continued to see.

Imre's path to U.S permanent residency was long and somewhat tortuous and his friends will all remember spirited conversations about that path. Worries about his immigration status and fears of deportation led to deep worries that dogged him for many years, from his latter Department of Botany years onward, until with a huge sigh of relief he received legal permanent U. S. residency in August of 1992. Unfortunately, however, bureaucratic problems with this persisted almost until the end of his life.

Imre loved plants, both the studying and the growing of them. Long after he abandoned the pursuit of a botanical doctorate and career, he continued studying botanical literature, nomenclature and flora, often being seen in his free time in the Life Sciences Library at UT. His knowledge of botany was encyclopedic. At the same time, he was an inveterate and diligent gardener, having for many years a plot at the community gardens in Austin and being a member of various gardening clubs, including the Austin Daylily Society (perhaps his favorite) and others. The first night he arrived in Austin in 1965, he smelled a

very distinctive fragrance which he remembered the rest of his life; the next morning he found it to be from the flowers of the Chinaberry tree (*Melia azedarach*), a common naturalized species in the Austin area. Wherever he was, he had to know about the plants. Plants were so important to his life.

But so were people. Imre kept in close contact with his sisters in Hungary throughout his life. He loved conversation, on any topic whatsoever, the longer the better. He could at times seem very pessimistic (and indeed his life had given him reasons to be so), but most conversations eventually came around to his essentially optimistic core. Among his botany friends, this view of life came to be epitomized by an off-hand comment he once made and of which he was forever after reminded: "Life is not so bad after all." His wry smile and twinkling eyes often sent the same message.

Imre was raised Baptist in a country where that denomination was not numerous. When asked, he said that the meaning of life is life itself; "it would not be created if it had no meaning". Imre certainly loved life in all of its manifestations.

Comments



“ I was the apartment manager where Imre lived for 22 years. He was a selfless, beautiful soul and I will never forget him.

kathy terry - August 27 at 05:45 PM



“ My favorite Imre story is the one he told me about the epiphany that was the origin of his life long love of , and almost mystical feeling for plants. He was 5 years old and his old and his mother sent him to get something at the grocery store. His way led past some low rises in the land , a sort of sand dunes. They had a few plants on them. Suddenly one these plants caught his eye and he stopped and looked at it. As he gazed he was slowly overcome by a feeling of awe. It was as if he had never seen a plant before. He found himself saying , my god that thing is alive! He never recovered from this awakening to the wonder of plant life. I will miss him greatly.

Mike Legan , a fellow gardener at the sunshine site community garden

mike legan - August 26 at 05:57 PM