

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on February 7, 2017,
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Herbert Walter
Levi was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

HERBERT WALTER LEVI

BORN: January 3, 1921
DIED: November 3, 2014

Spider biology has fascinated scientists and laymen alike and has even inspired the inception of a superhero. Consider a shy young student fleeing the Nazis and arriving to the New World, a young man studying chemistry though fascinated by spiders, an idealist trying to enlist in the U.S. Army but instead being classified as a German enemy alien, a young scientist who in later years would become a professor at an Ivy League university. Marvel needn't have invented their character; he was already a reality. Indeed, Herbert W. Levi was a superhero, a giant among a new generation of zoologists, who at the Museum of Comparative Zoology trained some of the most brilliant and prolific zoologists of the twentieth century. Today, few young spider biologists lack a connection with Herb in their pedigree. His respect among the arachnological community was immense, with proof not only in his written legacy and the numerous awards he received but also in the ultimate gift for any taxonomist—the more than 40 species, and two genera, named after him.

Herbert W. Levi was born in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, on January 3, 1921, and spent part of his childhood at his grandparents' mountain house in Eppenhain, where he developed his love for the outdoors. In 1937, during the Nazi ascendancy, he was sent to a boarding school in London as Jews were no longer allowed to attend school in Germany. There, he became known for his artistic skills. In 1938, he was reunited with his family and sailed across the Atlantic. He repeated a year of high school in New York, allowing him to improve his English. His high school art teacher recommended he apply to the Art Students League of New York, where he received a full scholarship. He worked for his sponsoring relative, his uncle, in the dye plant of a textile mill.

When the United States entered World War II, Herb registered for the draft but was rejected, instead classified as a German enemy alien and prevented from leaving Shelton, Connecticut. During that time, he both obtained a copy of *American Spiders and their Spinning Work* from Yale University's library and made his first acquaintance with Willis J. Gertsch, Curator of Arachnids at the American Museum of Natural History in New York.

By 1943, Herb was enrolled at the University of Connecticut, majoring in chemistry. After completing his degree and becoming a naturalized American in 1946, he illustrated a book on Connecticut insects. It was then that he recognized his future field, choosing spiders because few others were actively working on the subject. Herb entered a zoology program at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where he received his doctorate in 1949. That year, he married fellow student Lorna Rose, his partner in life and early career, with whom he published almost 20 scientific papers and the popular book *Spiders and Their Kin*, first published in 1968. Lorna continued to edit his scientific writing for life. For five years after receiving his Ph.D., Herb taught different zoology courses, first as Assistant Professor and then Associate Professor at the University of Wisconsin.

Herb came to Harvard in the summer of 1955 to work at the MCZ and then assumed the position of Assistant Curator of Arachnology in 1956. He started his Harvard teaching career at the School of Education. He was promoted to Associate Curator in 1961 and to full Curator in 1966, and in 1964 he held a position as Lecturer on Biology. In 1970, several MCZ curators, including Herb, joined the Faculty of Arts and Sciences as full Professors of Biology. In 1972, he was appointed Alexander Agassiz Professor of Zoology, a title he held until his retirement in 1991.

Herb documented spiders incessantly until his death. He published more than 200 scientific papers and described 1,254 new spider species, 1,204 of which are still considered valid to date. Herb's holistic view of spiders led him to produce detailed species descriptions, beautifully illustrated and incorporating multiple views of their genitalia, a practice that has become standard in descriptions not only of spiders but also of many other arthropods. Herb's superb drawing skills enabled the interpretation of highly complex structures such as the spiders' copulatory bulb—one of the main characteristics for identifying species of spiders.

Herb spent quite a lot of time in the field collecting spiders all over the world, from the Americas to Papua New Guinea, with a great deal of time near his home in Pepperell, Massachusetts, and in Gothic, Colorado, where he spent many summers at the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory in the 1960s.

Herb was a founding member of the American Arachnological Society, serving as president for two terms (1979–1981) and hosting its annual meeting in 1987. He was also an active member in the International Society of Arachnology (ISA; originally the *Centre International de Documentation Arachnologique*), serving as president from 1980 to 1983. In addition, he was a member of the editorial boards of several zoological journals and, in 2007, was the first recipient of the ISA Eugène Simon Award for Lifetime Achievement. He was an honorary lifetime member of both the AAS and ISA. After his death, the AAS established the Herb Levi Memorial Fund for Arachnological Research.

Herb graduated 14 Ph.D. students while at Harvard and assembled for the MCZ one of the best arachnological collections in the world. His students hold or have held many prominent positions in great American institutions and he mentored many others in a more or less formal capacity, adding vast numbers of visitors to his “collection.”

Herb Levi died on November 3, 2014, at the age of 93. Sadly, Herb’s death was shortly followed by that of his beloved wife of 65 years and research partner, Lorna Rose Levi, on November 15. They are survived by daughter Frances Levi, who lives with her husband in Townsend, Massachusetts, next to her parents’ home of 60 years.

Respectfully submitted,

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