

Aino M. Henssen in memoriam



Aino Henssen, summer 2003 in Römerswil, Switzerland. Photo: Rosmarie Honegger.

Lichenology lost one of its major figures when Professor Aino Marjatta Henssen passed away peacefully in her sleep in the night between the 28th and 29th of August 2011 after many years of ill health (she spent her last year in a nursing home). She was born the 12th of April 1925 in Elberfeld, but grew up in Dresden where her German father was Professor of folklore, and a great expert of the Brothers Grimm. Her mother was Finnish, and she took Aino with her, at the end of the Second World-War and moved to Marburg to get away from the Russians, with the words: “Wir kennen die Russen”, reflecting that she as a child had experienced the Russian rule over Finland.

Young Aino took an interest in natural history and took her doctoral degree at the University in Marburg in 1953 on a plantphysiological work about the Lemnaceae, a theme she never returned to, but in her later periods in Berlin in the 1950s she became involved in blue-green algae (as they then were called) under the guidance of Professor Geissler (as well as Actinomycetes). In that work she also encountered lichens with these as partners. She got fascinated by their anatomy and turned to these difficult, poorly understood organisms, often called “the small black ones”, of which she became the great master. A scholarship in the early 1960-ies made a stay in the Mecca of lichenology, Uppsala, possible for her, and it was here

she became a lichenologist under the tutorship of Rolf Santesson. She made a study of the Lichinaceae which resulted in the now classic monograph of this group, a work which displays her great exactness in anatomical observations and the importance of studies in apothecial ontogeny, which became her speciality. She would spend hours only to get a perfect section, and then even longer to obtain a good photo, the negatives of which she personally processed in the photolab to achieve the best results. She had that impossible combination of Finnish “sisu” (stamina) and German “Gründlichkeit” (exactness), which served her well in scientific work, but which sometimes made life in modern society rather difficult for her.

I first met her in Uppsala in the 1970s when I studied there, and she stopped by on the way to her beloved Finland, where she once even was engaged to a Finnish botanist (though the engagement took place in Argentine during an excursion). I offered to guide her way in the Uppsala traffic with her car (she always drove a stylish BMW). I then happened to put my hand down into the glove department in the door beside me, and to my surprise found a pistol! I was thunderstruck, but she claimed it was needed on the dangerous Swedish roads where anything might happen, with which I disagreed, and even pointed out that it might be illegal.

From this rather shaky start, including a disagreement over the specific taxonomy of *Erioderma*, I gradually gained her confidence. We wrote our first paper together after she had pointed out to me the following: “You write excellent descriptions, but your photos are awful. Why don’t we join forces? – you’ll write the text and I’ll make the photos!” I was therefore particularly happy when she recently praised my volume of “the blue-greens” in ‘The Nordic Lichenflora’, and added – “with such wonderful photos.”

After this start we constantly kept in contact. She was particularly keen on assistance with complicated nomenclatural questions and often phoned me late at night. One midnight she wanted to know what Zahlbruckner had recorded for a specific species – and I had to disappoint her in admitting that I did not know that ten volume catalogue by heart! Often when she was eager, she used several languages in the same conversation, but my slim knowledge of Finnish sometimes forced me to stop her by shouting: “Deutsch, bitte.” She then often turned to Swedish!

Aino became Professor at the University in Marburg in 1970 and was known to take great care of her students who appeared as a closely knit group. She was the most generous of persons, but a rather demanding teacher, not pleased with anything less than the perfect. She was described as a “mother-hen” to her students, often even caring for their private lives. This group produced many high-quality works. With her first student Hans Martin Jahns she produced a popular textbook in 1974 – ‘Lichenes’, a standard work which reflects her view of the macrotaxonomy of the group, one which she stressed included several provisional solutions, but it was certainly a great improvement on older views, e.g. that of Zahlbruckner which was dominant for decades. Also with her students Keuck, Renner and Vobis she made a very valuable contribution to Reynold’s book about the Ascomycetes (1981) on ‘The Lecanoralean centrum’.

It is perhaps surprising that a person so keen on anatomical details should have such interest in the larger taxonomic questions, but the detail often reveals the larger scheme and she remained convinced that ontogeny was such an important detail. She was not as brilliant in floristic descriptions, and was sometimes accused of writing papers which were difficult to use in “daily lichenology”. They were, however, usually not intended for such use, but actually when carefully read they really do explain, though often surprisingly clumsily how to recog-

nize the species. During a discussion in letters on a particularly difficult case concerning the worst of all genera, *Pyrenopsis*, she claimed that I had failed to understand the difference she had noted because I made such poor sections. My sections were certainly inferior to hers, so I therefore asked if I could come down to her with the specimen to get it sectioned properly, so we could study the case together. Of course that was possible, but after several failed attempts to get a good section where she could demonstrate this structure, I late one night exclaimed in desperation: “Dear Aino, what is the point in using characters which only you can see when having made a perfect section.” – To which she laughed heartily and opened the lower drawer of her desk, taking out a marzipan bar (she loved “Lübecker Schwarzbrot” which she always kept a stock of in her drawer) and offering a cup of coffee. That I believe is Aino in a nutshell!

Another unusual feature of a scientist, who loves microscopy, was her great joy of being in the field collecting these little black ones. That is often hard work, hammering with chisel on hard rocks, and though many strong, young men often came to her assistance, she made a tremendous effort herself. She travelled the world, even to such remote places as Prince Edward’s Islands, to get material often in such quantity that it could be distributed in her exsiccate. Her house was filled with these collections, 60.000 is a published figure. She even had them under her bed. I can testify to that, as I have been there searching for a particular specimen. This love for specimens brought her into a most unfortunate fight with her university which claimed that she had kept material belonging to them (as funders). This is not the place to discuss the facts, but for an outsider it seemed an unnecessary waste of her time, when she was forced in her later years with bad health to divide her collections, but she managed even that onerous task. One cannot but regret that the time was not spent to finish the numerous projects which are now left unfinished. However, her private herbarium is now housed in Helsinki (H) accompanied by her permanent microscopic slides when she had managed to make them. I know it made her particularly happy that such an arrangement was possible, and it will be of great benefit for future studies of these groups.

It is not easy to break new territory in a science, particularly for a woman, and Aino was often met with scepticism, certainly also because the structures she used in her taxonomy are not easily seen and few have studied them. She was certainly generally admired for her detailed anatomical studies, but as I once heard as a comment after one of her lectures “Damen können keine Systematik machen!” Hard on someone who above all aimed at improving the lichen taxonomy! She fortunately also received signs of recognition, such as the Acharius-medal in 1992, and she had several species named after her, as well as a genus, *Ainoa*. There can be no doubt that her life’s efforts in lichenology have been substantial and have brought the knowledge of these groups of lichens forward in a remarkable way. Personally I regard it as a privilege to have known her and to have been so lucky as to have had her guidance. In respect of her industrious life and her love for her mother’s native country, I end by saying:

LEPÄÄ RAUHASSA (R.I.P.)

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