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Karl Heinz Rechinger – a Grand Old Man in botany*

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Abstract: A brief survey and appreciation of K. H. Rechinger's manifold activities is given on the occasion of his 80th birthday – as plant taxonomist, phyto-geographer specializing in the flora of Greece and SW. Asia, author of Flora Aegaea and editor of Flora Iranica, plant collector, head of the Department of Botany and later Director-General of the Natural History Museum in Vienna and as academic teacher at Vienna University.

If this eulogy were to be limited to scientific activities alone, it would not do justice to the personality of Hofrat Univ.-Prof. Dr Karl Heinz Rechinger. Here, not only the role played in his life by science in its strictest sense will be described, but also his diverse and manifold activities.

Where shall we begin? Straight chronology is singularly inappropriate for this occasion while a review of Rechinger's publications totalling several thousand pages would far exceed our time limit. Let us therefore begin from another angle. Vienna, the city of music, was and is the centre of Rechinger's life: here he was born, here he studied, here he had his second home in the Natural History Museum, here he wrote his important publications. In this same city a certain form of music reached its climax and ultimate perfection – the string quartet. Let me now try to compare Rechinger's achievements with a string quartet, this interaction of four different instruments in the stream of musical development with its *crescendi* and *diminuendi*.

In the string quartet, the voice of the viola has the least weight; only rarely does it come to the fore. Academic teaching is the viola in Rechinger's life: it has played a comparatively subordinate role. However, academic teaching is the reason, why we have all gathered here today in the Institute of Botany of Vienna University and why I am speaking to you as the last of Rechinger's students. In 1953, Rechinger submitted his Phytogeographia Aegaea as Habilitationsschrift. He was vested with the right to deliver lectures, nominated Universitätsdozent and thus belonged to the teaching staff of Vienna University. Shortly afterwards he accepted for the first and

* English version of a speech given in the Institute of Botany, University of Vienna on October 18th, 1986 on the occasion of K. H. Rechinger's 80th birthday.

only time an appointment as visiting professor: he went to Baghdad University, where he laid the foundations of the University Herbarium.

On RECHINGER's return to Vienna from Iraq, Dr A. SCHÄRF, then Federal President of the Republic of Austria, bestowed on him the title of Professor Extraordinary and the Austrian Academy of Sciences elected him corresponding member. Honours from the Deutsche Akademie der Naturwissenschaften Leopoldina in Halle, the Kungliga Svenska Vetenskapsakademien in Stockholm and the Linnean Society of London followed. RECHINGER's academic career reached its zenith when he received an honorary doctorate at Lund University and the Golden Doctor's Diploma of Vienna University – this is the highest honour which can be conferred by the university (50 years after awarding the doctorate) to a member of its doctoral college. This honour brought to mind the wide range covered in RECHINGER's life. He wrote his thesis under the supervision of R. v. WETTSTEIN and received (as his last student) his doctorate in May 1931. Barely three months later WETTSTEIN died: many of you have passed his bust in the foyer of this institute thousands of times. WETTSTEIN was followed as full professor and director of the botanical garden by his two assistents, F. KNOLL, and in succession, L. GEITLER, and finally by Univ.-Prof. Dr F. EHRENDORFER who hosts this meeting. Why did academic teaching only play the part of the viola in RECHINGER's life? His main interests lay in other fields; for many years he kept announcing his "Introduction to scientific work" but gave only very few lectures. "Phytochoria and their characteristic plants" was the title of one of his first lectures, practical courses on *Gramineae* and *Compositae* were to follow. Being placed on the fringe of the university so to speak and only connected by the right to give lectures, RECHINGER supervised relatively few students, who wrote their thesis under his supervision – strictly speaking, only four: A. PATZAK, G. LEUTE, G. TUISL, and H. W LACK. The low number stands in marked contrast to their future successes. Apart from PATZAK who, because of ill health, was later forced to give up botany, two of his students have been appointed wissenschaftliche Oberräte—LEUTE in Klagenfurt, and TUISL in Vienna – while I, the fourth student, work in Berlin.

However, in academic life the term student should not be interpreted too narrowly. Not only was EHRENDORFER influenced to a considerable degree by RECHINGER, the same holds true for RECHINGER's successor as director of the Department of Botany at the Natural History Museum – Hofrat Univ.-Doz. Dr H. RIEDL, who was introduced to phanerogamic botany by him.

However, RECHINGER's personality as an academic teacher reached far beyond Vienna and Austria. Always generous with his rich knowledge and long experience he gave advice to many botanists, thus often decisively influencing their work. Here I mention only two: Prof. Dr G. WAGENITZ, who had just received his doctorate from Göttingen University, and is currently full professor at the same university, worked for a year with RECHINGER in Vienna on various aspects of *Cynareae* systematics; Prof. Dr W. GREUTER, formerly curator at the Conservatoire et jardin botaniques in Geneva and now full professor at the Freie Universität Berlin and director of the Botanical Garden and Botanical Museum Berlin-Dahlem, published, together with RECHINGER, Chloris Kythereia, a flora of the island of Kythera in Greece.

In a string quartet the cello no doubt commands the fullest carrying sound. The voice of the cello in RECHINGER's life is his activity as a civil servant. This position helped him to establish the material basis for his life.

I have used this rather long-winded approach on purpose. At the beginning the voice of the cello sounded weak, then there was a lengthy rest, later the sound became stronger. Those were meagre years: 42 Schillings a month was the salary for a Demonstrator at this institute, a position WETTSTEIN had offered to RECHINGER. A respite of nearly ten years followed. RECHINGER moved from the university to an institute, the name of which has already been mentioned several times today – the Natural History Museum. The grandeur of the vast building on the Burgring with the splendour of its marble stairs and cupola hall stood in marked contrast to the low tide in the economy of the Republic of Austria in the thirties. Starting as an unpaid volunteer, later as a more or less unpaid aspirant, RECHINGER received some grants from the Natural History Museum's funds for drawing up inventories but repeatedly even these funds dried up. It was only the substantial financial support received from his family which made this extremely long period of very straitened circumstances endurable.

In those lean years the situation in the Department of Botany was very unusual indeed. Due to SEIPEL's drastic economies, the scientific staff had been reduced to Hofrat Dr K. v. KEISSLER who, because of his age, left active duties more and more, so RECHINGER, de facto, took over all continuing commitments. As late as early 1938 but, significantly before the occupation of Austria by the German Wehrmacht, the cello started to play again. At the age of 31, RECHINGER obtained a post as temporary scientific assistant (thus subject to notice of dismissal at any time); five years later his position was made permanent. The gradual promotion in the hierarchy of the civil service leading to Kustos 1. Klasse took place in the fifties, but, curiously nothing changed in RECHINGER's official duties. In reality, he had taken over the responsibility for the Department of Botany in the thirties and kept it until his retirement in 1971, i.e., for about 35 years. This is an extremely long tenure: even A. ENGLER was not director of the Botanical Garden and Botanical Museum Berlin-Dahlem for such a long period.

And what years these were – the decline and fall of the First Republic, the Second World War, the ten years of allied occupation of Austria and finally, the years of recovery and the beginning of prosperity.

The political upheaval in 1938, however, had nearly cost the apolitical RECHINGER his newly obtained job. His first call-up papers followed in 1941. In the following three years the immense collections of the Natural History Museum – no less than 16 million specimens plus a library of approximately 600 000 volumes – were evacuated; in 1944 and 1945 Vienna went down under allied bombing raids; the State Opera was in flames, the Art History Museum, Burgtheater, and Parliament were severely hit. Miraculously, the Natural History Museum remained intact. RECHINGER experienced the end of the Second World War and the occupation of eastern Austria by the Soviet Army in the village of Lunz am See in Lower Austria; there considerable parts of the herbarium had been stored for safety and were now to be brought back to Vienna.

Lunz in November and December 1945 – freezing temperatures, darkness, hunger; calls on the Soviet Kommandantura Lunz; loading literally thousands and thousands of fascicles on a vehicle and transporting them to the railway station; trying to find an undamaged wagon, which would give shelter from rain and snow during the trip to Gaming; again, further calls on the Soviet Kommandantura; a

renewed search for a wagon; loading from the narrow-gauge railways to the wagons of the Westbahn. All these RECHINGER performed.

Sad circumstances also in Vienna at the Natural History Museum: no lift, no personnel. Thus, fascicle after fascicle, tome after tome had to be carried up the 144 steps to the second floor. Only a single room in the Department of Botany could be heated, winter overcoat and scarf were thus necessary for working in the herbarium. The Natural History Museum and RECHINGER's first home were situated in the then international sector, the Botanical Institute of Vienna University was in the British sector and later RECHINGER lived in a flat in the Soviet sector. These were hard times but years of optimism and of recovery. The network of scientific contacts had to be restored, a task entrusted to RECHINGER by the then Erster Direktor (= Director-General).

When RECHINGER was elected Director-General of the Natural History Museum in 1962 as successor to the zoologist H. STROUHAL by a majority of 17 to 4 votes, the choice was confirmed by the Federal Ministry of Education. This signified the climax of his career as a civil administrator. He received the title Hofrat and shortly afterwards was promoted to Wirklicher Hofrat, Dienstklasse VIII; there was, and is, no higher position in the hierarchy of Austrian Federal Museums.

Being primus inter pares, RECHINGER remained director of the Department of Botany. He now had to shoulder extensive additional duties – the overall responsibility for a great building on the Ring with all its staff and budget problems including official duties and obligations. One example of the latter may be cited – when exhumed medieval bones of members of the Babenberg family were handed over to the Natural History Museum, Cardinal DÖPFNER, archbishop of Munich, had to be received.

At that time RECHINGER argued energetically for the Natural History Museum as a scientific research institute. Today this goes without saying but the ministry then regarded popular education as the prime task of the institute. During his nine years as Director-General RECHINGER served under four ministers – DRIMMEL, PIFFL-PERCEVIĆ, MOCK, and FIRNBERG; he was in personal contact with them all. DRIMMEL, for example, gave a reception for the participants of the first Flora Europaea meeting at the Palais Starhemberg which at the time received much publicity.

Let us now turn to the part of the second violin – RECHINGER's activity as botanical collector. With a total of more than 75 000 numbers, he is one of the outstanding botanical collectors of this century. Plants, both phanerogams and cryptogams, have been gathered in all five continents, with particular emphasis on the flowering plants of Greece and the highlands of SW. Asia. Amongst Austrian botanical collectors only TH. KOTSCHY brought back a similar number of gatherings. The quantity is prodigious, RECHINGER collected not only 75 000 numbers, but also very often plentiful duplicate material which was later distributed to several major institutes. Thus RECHINGER's collections can be found not only in the Natural History Museum, but also in Berlin, Edinburgh, Geneva, Lund, Munich, Stockholm, with some earlier collections in London and Washington. His consistently excellent preparation of the exsiccatae and his precise field notes always giving accurate geographical and ecological data are equally impressive. Moreover it has to be noted – and this aspect seems to me most important and exemplary – that this

immense amount of material has been identified by RECHINGER himself and thus was always quickly available to the scientific community.

The sound of the second violin could be heard very early. RECHINGER once told me that he had collected his first plant – an alga – together with his father in the Ausseer Land when he was four years old, i.e. probably in 1911. At that time RECHINGER's father, who had been an assistant to A. KERNER v. MARILAUN and WETTSTEIN at this institute, was k.u.k. Kustos 1. Klasse at the Department of Botany at the Natural History Museum, thus being a member of the household of Emperor Franz Joseph I.

For many years the Ausseer Land remained a favourite collecting area, since the RECHINGER family regularly spent the summer in their villa in this part of Styria. Later the mountains near Vienna, in particular the Schneeberg, which on clear days could be seen from the windows of his parents's house on Karlsplatz, became the goal of botanical excursions. It was, however, an excursion with his father to the Parndorf plain in Burgenland which turned into a decisive experience: the invincible desire to travel, the inexplicable drive to the east, here his Wanderlust – as RECHINGER told me – may have had its origins. The Tatra and the mountains on the border between Yugoslavia and Albania were the first destinations outside Austria. At the age of 21, again at the suggestion of his father, RECHINGER made his first journey to Greece, a country he kept visiting in the following decades, travelling as extremely few scientists have done, from the steep slopes of Kajmakčalan to the tiny islets and cliffs of the Eastern Cyclades, collecting thousands of plants in an area which botanically then still was to a considerable degree terra incognita. First gatherings of hundreds of species found their way to Vienna and into RECHINGER's herbarium. In a café in Mariahilfer Strasse in Vienna was born the plan for a journey to Iran, which took place in 1937; this country, botanically even less known than Greece, was also to become the destination of several long collecting trips. The last was in 1977, just before the outbreak of the Iranian Revolution. Afghanistan, botanically almost completely unknown and a country which opened up to travellers as late as the early sixties, was the destination of three more collecting expeditions. Heavily laden with numerous botanical rarities from regions frequently not previously botanised, RECHINGER returned time and again to Vienna.

These journeys were not only adventurous, but also uncomfortable and dangerous; a rented rowing boat was used to travel from island to island in the Aegean, the nights being spent in shabby small rooms, where bed bugs awaited their meal. Mules were employed as means of transport and also an Opel with faulty brakes fit only for the scrap heap, driven by a chauffeur who smoked opium in the evenings and by day drove the car in a reckless manner over mountain tracks near Tehran.

The scientific value of RECHINGER's collections cannot be overestimated; nobody can seriously work on the flora of Greece and the highlands of SW. Asia without having studied his specimens kept in the Vienna Natural History Museum. Sad to say, back in the ministry there was only a limited understanding of RECHINGER's collecting activities. He was granted some terms of leave and a few journeys were subsidized – this was all the support given.

Greece and the Iranian Highlands formed RECHINGER's main collecting areas; the journeys to these regions were also used for gathering plants; trips to the western Mediterranean rounded off his knowledge. As a participant in several International

Botanical Congresses and other scientific meetings, RECHINGER was able to collect in North America, Scandinavia and South Africa. After his retirement he gathered plants on private tours in Western Australia, Indonesia, India, the Azores, the West Indies and – three weeks before his 80th birthday – in Kashmir.

The fourth instrument in a string quartet is the first violin: its voice, the melody of scientific work in the sense of publication of newly acquired knowledge, also started to play early. Before he had received his doctorate RECHINGER's first contribution to the taxonomy of the genus *Rumex*, a group which has fascinated him for his whole life, as has *Cousinia* in later years, was published. Let us start with the second subject of the first violin – RECHINGER's activity as editor and his care for posthumous works. Nobody who has not edited a journal himself, can imagine the amount of labour involved. RECHINGER completed F. VIERHAPPER's studies on the flora of Crete and expanded the manuscripts left by the Swede G. SAMUELSSON and by the Ukrainian G. I. ŠIRJAEF into papers ready for publication. In the first years after the Second World War, RECHINGER edited the Annalen des Naturhistorischen Museums in Wien and later a volume of the second edition of G. HEGI's Flora von Mitteleuropa. Most important of all – RECHINGER is editor of Flora Iranica, a project founded by him with the aim of giving a complete Flora of Iran, Afghanistan, western Pakistan and northern Iraq, including small adjacent mountainous regions of Soviet Turkmenistan and Soviet Azerbaydzhan.

Whoever prepares Flora manuscripts written by external contributors for the press will know what a colossal amount of work RECHINGER has done over the last quarter of a century – correspondence, translations, proofs and lists of exsiccatae; this has been his occupation in the evenings and at night time. So far 160 fascicles have been published; Flora Iranica does not yet surpass in size the second mammoth work produced by a member of staff of the Department of Botany of the Natural History Museum – ZAHLBRUCKNER's Catalogus lichenum universalis – which, however, being a compilation can scarcely be compared with it.

The first violin's first subject is phytotaxonomic research, in particular the understanding and describing of the flora of Greece and the highlands of SW. Asia, his two main collecting areas. This is reflected in the title of his two most important publications – Flora Aegaea and Flora Iranica; but RECHINGER is not only founder and editor of Flora Iranica, he has also written a very considerable number of contributions for it.

Nearly all other publications – up to now, more than 200 papers, mostly printed in journals ranging from Botanische Jahrbücher to Magyar Botanikai Lapok and Taxon – have a direct bearing on these two main centres of interest. Flora of Lowland Iraq, the fruit of the year as visiting professor in Baghdad, is one of the few works published independently. Papers on the flora of Gmunden in Upper Austria, studies on the genera *Salix* and *Sorbus* represent RECHINGER's interest in the flora of Central Europe. Whereas Flora Aegaea, published towards the end of the Second World War, was basically a one man work, this for obvious reasons does not hold for Flora Iranica: there are a few dozen collaborators. The magnum opus has not yet been finished, but there remain to be treated only a few groups, e.g., *Astragalus*, the genus with the highest number of species in the area, the very intricate *Umbelliferae* (to be published in 1987), parts of the *Liliaceae* and *Chenopodiaceae*.

However, in another respect Flora Iranica is also not a one man work but actually a couple's work: similar to the violin's bridge which is necessary to bring the

instrument to full sound, RECHINGER has found in his wife WILHELMINE a perfect collaborator, who accompanied him on several journeys to Greece and SW Asia and has devoted many thousands of hours to his work. Without her, Flora Iranica would not be what it is today. The work usually done by a fully staffed secretariat is handled here by a couple. In this respect, however, life was twice favourable to RECHINGER: his first wife FRIDA also collaborated with him, joined him in his tours to Greece and Iran and helped with the manuscript work for Flora Aegaea.

Is there a secret in RECHINGER's scientific work? Yes, I think so. To me it seems to lie in the rare combination of two attributes, which are actually contrasting – the capacity for analysis, evident in the ability to recognize and describe several hundred new taxa, and the capacity for synthesis, as evident by the production of voluminous monographs and floras. In the whole history of botany only E. BOISSIER in Geneva had a similar insight and knowledge of the flora of the Near East.

The power of synthesis is most evident in RECHINGER's phytogeographical publications, in particular his Phytogeographia Aegaea written during the first post-war winter in thick winter clothes, the feet on a hot-water bottle in the middle of bomb-shattered, freezing Vienna.

Let us look back: Vienna is a city of old traditions, one of them being the botanical exploration of the Balkans and the Near East. About four centuries ago – in 1569 to be precise – GHISLAIN DE BUSBECQ bought in Istanbul the Codex Aniciae Julianae for the imperial library in Vienna. The second director of the Botanical Garden of Vienna University, N. J. v. JACQUIN, planned to edit this Byzantine herbal with scientific commentaries but his project was abandoned. Proofs of the engravings, however, were part of the luggage of J. SIBTHORP, Sherardian Professor of Botany at Oxford University, who started from Vienna on his first journey to the Ottoman Empire. The Austrian FERDINAND BAUER, who had already worked for JACQUIN here in this garden, accompanied SIBTHORP as a natural history painter. His marvellous plant portraits were published in the first flora of Greece, the Flora Graeca, at a time when BAUER had already returned to Vienna; there he lived for the rest of his life about 600 m from RECHINGER's present flat in Beckgasse 22. In the 19th century KOTSCHY collected vast amounts of plant material on his extensive oriental tours, which brought him deep into the Sudan and Iran. His gatherings arrived at Vienna and found their permanent place in the k. k. Botanisches Hofkabinett, which was then housed in the so-called Old Museum, a building in the Botanical Garden destroyed by bombing during the Second World War and never rebuilt. Like KOTSCHY, the physician J. v. HALÁCSY, author of the fundamental Conspectus Florae Graecae, also lived in Vienna; upon his death his Herbarium Graecum became part of the collection of this institute.

All four – BUSBECQ, BAUER, KOTSCHY, HALÁCSY – had lived for years in Vienna. The crown of Vienna's tradition in the botanical exploration of the Balkans and the Near East, however, belongs to RECHINGER; none of his predecessors has enlarged our knowledge in this field to such a great extent.

On the occasion of his 80th birthday we wish Hofrat Univ.-Prof. Dr K. H. RECHINGER all the best, good health and the strength to finish his magnum opus. May he in the coming years be able to say what his colleague Hofrat F. v. GRILLPARZER in the k. k. Hofkammerarchiv expressed in his epigram

Hier sitz ich unter Faszikeln dicht,
Ihr glaubt – verdrossen und einsam –
Und doch vielleicht, das glaubt ihr nicht,
Mit den ewigen Göttern gemeinsam.

Here I sit between fascicles tight –
You may think me annoyed and lonely –
But believe me it's all right:
I sit with eternal gods only.

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