

Obituary

Emil Müller, 1920–2008

*Exegi monumentum aere perennius
regalique situ pyramidum altius,
quod non imber edax, non Aquilo impotens
possit diruere aut innumerabilis
annorum series et fuga temporum.**

Horace (Odes 3, XXX)

Prof. Dr. Emil Müller (known to his friends, colleagues and students as Ascus) died on April 2, 2008, after a long illness.

Emil Müller was borne on March 5, 1920 in Zürich. His interest for natural history took him to the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zürich, where he studied, graduating in Agricultural Sciences in 1944. For almost 4 years he worked as a consultant and teacher at the Plantahof Agricultural School in Landquart (Canton Graubünden), where he became interested in fungi, in particular grass-inhabiting ascomycetes. This interest led him to start taxonomic and ecological studies on species of the genus *Leptosphaeria*, a work that, under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Ernst Gäumann (who gave him the nick-name 'Ascus'), earned him his Ph.D. in 1949. His treatise on *Leptosphaeria*, which set the foundations for subsequent taxonomic work, was concluded in less than 18 months. In recognition of this accomplishment, the ETH awarded him with a silver medal for science.

From that time on, Emil's mycological work proceeded relentlessly. During the four years he spent at the plant breeding department at the Reckenholz Federal Research Station (Zürich) Emil Müller published 16 papers on Ascomycete taxonomy. In 1954 he was appointed Curator of the Herbaria at ETH and was allowed to dedicate himself fully to taxonomic research. During his scientific career he published more than 200 peer-reviewed articles, among them several books that are considered landmarks in mycology. An almost complete list of his publications can be found in Sydowia 38 (1985:

*I have built a monument more lasting than bronze, of mighty shape and taller than the Pyramids, which the gnawing rain and the powerful north wind cannot destroy, nor the countless series of years and the flying time.

404). He may be best known for two publications co-authored with his Swiss friend, colleague and fellow Gäumanns student J.A. von Arx: “Die Gattungen der amerosporen Pyrenomyceten”¹ (Genera of the amerosporous Pyrenomycetes, 1954), followed eight years later by “Die Gattungen der didymosporen Pyrenomyceten” (Genera of didymosporous Pyrenomycetes²). These publications are unique in modern ascomycete taxonomy for their taxonomic breadth, and large number of genera included and species that were described and illustrated. The pocket-size book “Mykologie”³, that Emil Müller and his friend Wolfgang Löffler published in German remains an important and unsurpassed reference book; it has been translated into English, Polish and Spanish.

Müller’s scientific work was honoured and recognised not only at the ETH, where he taught Mycology, first as a Lecturer (Privatdozent) in 1966, then as Associate Professor (1970) and eventually as Full Professor (1973) until his retirement in 1987.

Ascus was known and respected by mycologists throughout the world. An active participant in both of the seminal Kananaski Conferences (1969 and 1979) where ascomycete and ‘deuteromycete’ taxonomies were melded, he received many international accolades, including appointment as a corresponding member of the Mycological Society of America (1982) and election as Honorary Member of the British Mycological Society (1982).

Emil Müller published most of his work in *Sydowia*, an International Journal of Mycology (formerly *Annales Mycologici*), of which he had been editor for several years. He took over editorship of the journal after the death of its founder and first editor, Dr. F. Petrak in 1973, with whom the young E. Müller and J.A. von Arx spent a 6-month-long postdoctoral period in Vienna. Petrak established *Sydowia* at least in large part because he did not appreciate intervention by reviewers or editors in his own publications. Thus, *Sydowia* fell into disrepute from a lack of scientific rigour in many of the articles published in it. When Emil Müller took over editorship of *Sydowia*, he actively, and successfully, reversed the poor reputation of the journal. He continued as a member of the editorial board almost until his retirement.

A keen mountaineer, Emil Müller’s main interest were the alpine fungi. During his whole life he actively collected in the Swiss Alps:

¹ Arx, J.A. von & Müller E. Die Gattungen der amerosporen Pyrenomyceten. German, 434 pp. Beiträge zur Kryptogamenflora der Schweiz XI,1; 1954.

² Müller, E. & Arx, J. A. von. Die Gattungen der didymosporen Pyrenomyceten. German. 922 pp. Beiträge zur Kryptogamenflora der Schweiz XI,2; 1962.

³ Müller, E. & Loeffler, W.: Mykologie. Grundriss für Naturwissenschaftler und Mediziner. 302 pp. Stuttgart: G. Thieme, 1968 (more recent editions available).

his preferred hunting grounds were located in the Canton Graubünden, where he loved to take his students for field trips that were both socially very enjoyable and scientifically highly rewarding for all participants. A very modest person, he was not only a gifted scientist, but also an open, lovable friend who enjoyed greatly human contact with students and friends. All his students and friends, in fact, remember “Ascus” not only as a mentor but also equally as a dear friend. Ascus knew the biology of the Alps! He could identify all the alpine phanerogams (in addition to all the spots on each of them); he never ceased to marvel at the great geological activity that formed those great mountains. He was equally familiar with the human history of his nation, adept at pointing out sites of Roman habitation as in discussing difficulties experienced by modern farmers. Evenings with Emil Müller, after a day of collecting in the mountains, were magical as students and international visitors mixed Science, local lore, and ecology with good food, wine and beer.

For many years Emil Müller collected and identified the alpine ascomycetes of Canton Graubünden, with the idea of eventually publishing a treatise on these fungi. This monumental work could not be completed because of his illness. We sincerely hope these invaluable investigations will some day be available to Mycology.

Emil Müller's death came one day after the death of his friend and colleague Dr. Margaret Barr-Bigelow (April 16, 1923 – April 1, 2008). Emil and Margaret were two of the greatest mycologists of our time. Their careers spanned the transition from classical to molecular systematics. They were among the most active and widely knowledgeable mycologists of any time and, as such, they contributed significantly to developing the bases of ‘pyrenomycete’ and ‘loculoascomycete’ systematics that are being tested and expanded now by younger mycologists with the tools of DNA sequence analysis. Paraphrasing Horace's words, with their work they have erected a monument more enduring than bronze, a landmark for which all mycologists and Science are grateful. The mycological world has lost with them two enormously gifted scientists; those personally acquainted with them will miss not only their profound knowledge of fungi, but also their open and valued friendship.

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