

## IN MEMORIAM OF ALEXANDER FAIN 1912 – 2009



Professor Alexander Fain, the greatest Belgian acarologist and parasitologist, has passed away on 4 January 2009, at 96 years old. He died peacefully, while asleep, calmly blown out like an extinguished candle.

The Professor, as he was called behind his back by many colleagues and collaborators, had written over 1160 scientific contributions, and the number of taxa he discovered is astonishing. During his long and extremely productive scientific career he had described over 2,580 new taxa of mostly parasitic animals, among which there were 2,407 species of Acari. It would not be an exaggeration to say that A. Fain had created the foundation of the taxonomic system for the majority of parasitic acariform mites, and especially those associated with mammals. He is also widely known for his pioneering works on house dust mite systematics, which appeared as soon as it was realized that these mites are major source of allergic reactions in humans and provide the solid basis for numerous applied studies.

Alexander Fain was born on 9 August 1912, in Mechelen, Belgium, in a family with the French, German and Flemish roots. He spent his childhood and youth in Brussels and received a Christian education at Saint Mary College (1924–1930). At the age of 26, he graduated from the Catholic University of Louvain (1932–1938) with the diploma of a physician and departed to the Belgian Congo where he worked for 18 years. He worked at first as a director of the medical hospital, in which he mainly carried out surgery, and later as a director

of the medical laboratory of the Belgian Congo and Rwanda. Being a skillful hunter, he turned out to be interested in various helminthes, arthropods, and other parasites, which he collected from his game trophies. Eventually his interest focused on the systematics of parasitic Acari, mainly acariform mites. An enormous collection of parasitic mites, which he had accumulated during his work in Africa, was willed to the Institute royal des Sciences naturelles de Belgique (Brussels). Without exaggeration, this collection is the pride of this research institution.

On his return to Belgium from Africa in 1957, Prof. Alex Fain was already a world known acarologist. He started to teach parasitology in the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Antwerp and in the Catholic University of Louvain in Louvain-la-Neuve, as well as acarology in several universities in England, France and in Switzerland. He substantially expanded his mite collection as he received materials from around the World sent to him for identification. His scientific activity was almost incredible. In his best working period he was able to describe up to five species a day and produced numerous high-quality publications. Because of his capacity for work, there were rumors among acarologists that Prof. Fain had a perfectly equipped acarological laboratory and a large staff of assistants. Actually, his only formal duties were numerous lectures and studies of helminthes. Besides that, he was a practicing physician, loving husband, and father of three children, to whom he paid a lot of attention. It could seem surprising,



Kwango River, Belgian Congo, 1945

but Acari were only a scientific hobby of this multifaceted man; he practically received very few grants for his investigations, and his main research equipment was a relatively old but extremely well-made Swiss microscope. Sometimes, preparing some great monographs, he paid his own money to draftsman for making drawings in Indian ink. Using his annual leave, Fain visited the British Museum several times, where he collected mites from ethanol preserved mammals. Because of the support of Edward Baker, his friend and colleague, Prof. Fain had received a grant to investigate the scabies mites, and had undertaken several visits to museums in the United States.

In the early 1980s, Fain retired from the teaching, completely devoting himself to his scientific passion, the parasitic mites. The Institut royal des Sciences naturelles de Belgique, where he started to work as a volunteer, provided him with an office and access to some facilities. Beginning with that time, he started his most productive period in acarology.

AVB and SVM had the luck to become personally acquainted with Prof. Fain and collaborate with this astonishing man in 2000–2002, when he was already in his late eighties. Even in these years, his lively and active mind and working capability were striking. He always walked quickly, with a slightly jumping gait, carrying a customary old-fashioned brief case. Almost every day he came to the lab in IRSNB, where he worked for four or five hours; then he returned home and usually worked a few hours in the evening.

Almost to the last years of his life the Professor worked as a systematist-acarologist. Being in old age and realizing that he did not have a long time ahead, he arranged all his collection in excel-

lent order and completed all his projects, as he did not want to have any unfinished duties.

As it was said, Alex Fain was not a professional biologist by education, and treated theories of other investigators with suspicion and skepticism, while his own theories were sometimes a bit naïve. He was a practical systematist. Alfa systematics was his home, and there were no researchers equal to him in acarology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. An incredible expertise and explorer's intuition helped him to create quite suitable classifications, most of which were confirmed by modern phylogenetic methods. His scientific legacy will serve as a subject for studies for the next generations of acarologists. His name will be written in the tablets of systematics for ages.

Fain was a surprisingly kind and generous man, but always was able to show a firmness of his character. He was a Man with principles. A temper of early explorers of Africa was always felt in him. Researchers from the Department of Entomology in IRSNB, where he worked as a volunteer for about 30 years, greatly respect him and even were rather afraid of the Professor, knowing his straight and authoritative character. Looking at him, we always wanted to say that it was a pity that men like this appear no more among mankind. He was one of the brightest representatives of the past century and one of the prominent sons of Belgium. With his death the World has become duller. We will always remember our teacher and friend.

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