

## OBITUARY

### HEINRICH JOHANN WILHELM GIESS (1910–2000)

Willi Giess (Figure 1), as he was known to most, was born on 21 February 1910 in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. He was the elder of the two sons of Wilhelm and Lilly Giess. He completed his schooling at the 'Adlerflycht Realschule' in Frankfurt in 1925. The Giess family then emigrated to South West Africa in 1926 (Kolberg & Strohbach 2000; Gunn & Codd 1981).

Willi Giess started working as a volunteer on farms at the tender age of 16 until he enrolled for a diploma in agriculture at the Neudamm Agricultural College near Windhoek from 1928 to 1929 (Kolberg & Strohbach 2000). He was one of the first three students that were registered at Neudamm. During his subsequent career he often re-visited Neudamm as a lecturer to try and impart his knowledge of local rangelands, as well as a love for the local flora, to budding young farmers.

In 1931 Willi Giess contracted Malta fever and, as was quite common in those days, was sent to Germany to recuperate. True to his nature, he was not satisfied with

spending time resting, but enrolled at the Animal Breeding Institute (Herdbuch-Abteilung der Karakulschafzucht, Tierzuchtinstitut der Universität Halle). He completed his training as Technical Adviser for Karakul Breeding in 1933 and returned to South West Africa where he applied his newly gained knowledge as manager of a karakul farm. After four years, Willi Giess purchased his own farm, Dornfontein-Süd, between Dordabis and Leonardville in the east-central part of the country (Kolberg & Strohbach 2000).

Soon World War II followed and Willi Giess, together with a number of others who later were to become well-known botanists, was interned at Andalusia (now Jan Kempdorp, South Africa) for six years. The 'Andalusia Camp University' was promptly established and under the guidance of the late Prof. O.H. Volk, Giess studied plant taxonomy. A number of plants were collected from the area in the camp that was accessible to internees, identified and drawn (Figure 2). He contributed significantly to the booklet *Bestimmungsschlüssel für südwest-afrikanische Grasgattungen* by producing engravings on tomato-box wood for the illustration of the key (Glen & Perold 2000). He was allowed to return to his farm in December 1946 after having collected plants in the Cape with the University of Stellenbosch as his base.

In 1953, initiated by Prof. Dr H. Walter of the University of Hohenheim, Germany, the Director of Agriculture, Dr J.S. Watt, agreed to establish a botanical section within the directorate. Prof. Walter donated over 2000 herbarium specimens and Willi Giess agreed to temporarily work on the development of a herbarium. For four years he travelled weekly from his farm Bergland, about 50 km south of Windhoek, into town. In 1957 the SWA Administration took Giess into permanent employment as curator of what was then the SWA Herbarium (Giess 1978). He held this post until his retirement in 1975, but continued to work in the herbarium until 1980 under the new curator, the late Dr Mike Müller (Gunn & Codd 1981). From April 1985 to January 1986 he was again acting curator while his successor completed his Ph.D. degree.

Willi Giess made an important contribution to the collection of what is now the National Herbarium of Namibia (WIND). Of the ± 73 000 specimens in the present-day collection, about 18 750 were collected by him, often together with others like O. Volk, D. van Vuuren, B. de Winter and H. Merxmüller. These specimens were always collected in triplicate, often more. Anyone who has ever collected for a herbarium will appreciate the amount of work involved in such a collection. Even today, the Giess specimens, with their carefully typed or hand-written data labels, are often the best, if not the only ones of a certain species, to be found in the collection of the National Herbarium.

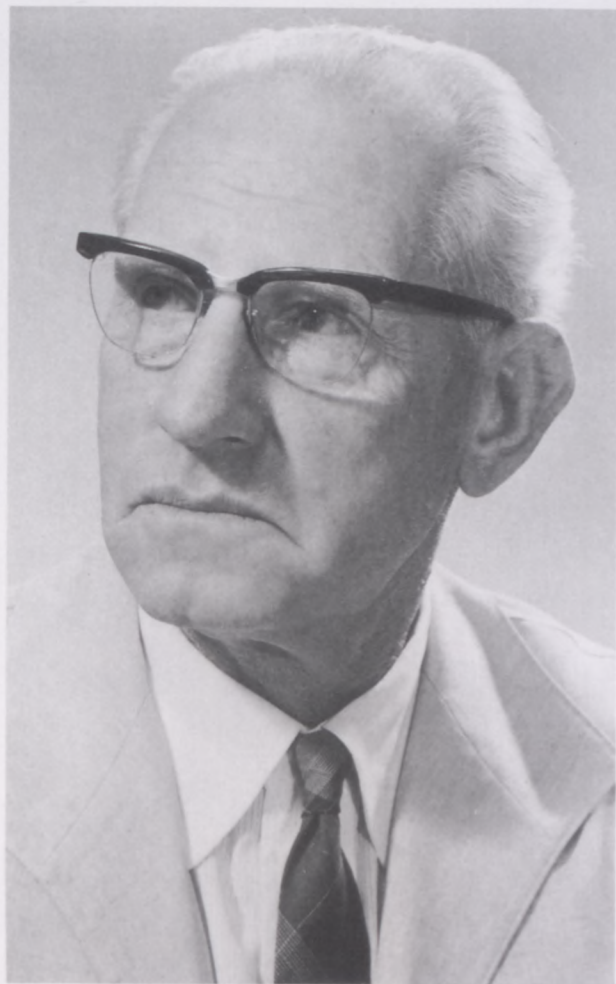


FIGURE 1.—Heinrich Johann Wilhelm Giess (1910–2000).



FIGURE 2.—*Ipomoea bolusiana* painted by W. Giess in 1942.

During his collecting trips, Giess covered almost the entire country (Figure 3). Important collections, which have to a large extent not been repeated in years following his expeditions, are those made in the Kaukaveld (later known as Bushmanland), Andara area on the Okavango River, Brandberg area, Lüderitz District (Aus, Zebrafontein, Namuskluft, Witpütz), Farm Ameib in the Erongo Mountains and the Kaokoveld. Plant collecting trips to the Kaokoveld in the late 1950s must have been quite a feat, considering that even to this day, with modern vehicles, equipment, maps, GPSs and improved roads, a trip to the Kaokoveld is considered somewhat of an adventure! The collected specimens of Merxmüller and Giess

were often the basis for taxon descriptions in the *Prodromus einer Flora von Südwestafrika*, the last volume of which was completed in 1971, and to date is still the only reference work for many Namibian plant groups.

Other collections that made a considerable difference to botanical knowledge in Namibia were his many index cards of indigenous plant names. When Willi Giess moved from Windhoek to Swakopmund, just two months before his death, these valuable boxes of cards were donated to the National Botanical Research Institute where they will be incorporated into a proposed publication of local common names for plants.



- Up to 100 specimens collected per grid
- ⊙ Between 101 and 300 specimens collected per grid
- ▲ Between 301 and 600 specimens collected per grid

FIGURE 3.—Quarter-degree grid squares in Namibia where W. Giess collected herbarium specimens.

Willi Giess first published the journal *Dinteria* (named in honour of Prof. Kurt Dinter, Namibia's first official botanist) under the auspices of the South West Africa Scientific Society in November 1968. He remained editor until 1991 (vol. 21). The journal aimed at making contributions to the flora and vegetation of Namibia. In vol. 4 (1971), Giess first published his *Preliminary vegetation map of South West Africa*, which was re-printed twice—in 1978 and 1998, and is still the only approximation to a vegetation map of Namibia to this day (Kolberg & Strohbach 2000). Despite his very busy schedule, he managed to publish several papers (see end of this obituary; Giess 1989), ranging from popular to scientific articles, including the description of a number of new plant species: *Aloe argenticauda* Merxm. & Giess, *A. dewinteri* Giess, *A. namibensis* Giess, *Aristida dewinteri* Giess, *Sphaeranthus wattii* Giess ex Merxm., *Tridentea marientalesis* (Nel) L.C. Leach subsp. *albipilosa* (Giess) L.C. Leach and *Zygophyllum schreiberianum* Merxm. & Giess.

Whilst in retirement, Giess utilized his very comprehensive private literature collection to compile the *Bibliography of South West African Botany*, published by the SWA Scientific Society in 1989.

The pioneering work of Willi Giess did not go unnoticed in the international botanical world. He was honoured on several occasions: in July 1964, he became a Correspondent of the Naturhistorisches Museum in Vienna; in 1968, the Swedish Royal Academy of Sciences in Stockholm awarded him the Great Lineé Medal in Silver; on the 200th anniversary of the birth of Alexander von Humboldt, Willi Giess received a commemorative issue on the life of Von Humboldt from the consul of the Federal Republic of Germany to honour his achievements in the field of botany; the Bavarian Academy of Science honoured him with the Bene Merenti Medal for his contributions to the *Prodromus einer Flora von Südwestafrika*; the South African Association of Botanists awarded him a Certificate of Merit in 1979; in 1980, Giess received the Academy Medal in Gold from the South African Academy of Science and Arts; and in 1998, the Windhoek Municipality honoured Willi Giess by naming a street after him.

A number of plant species were named in honour of Giess, bearing testament to his collecting efforts and the assistance he gave to numerous scientists the world over: *Isoetes giessii* Launert, *Aizoon giessii* Friedrich, *Salsola giessii* Botsch., *Crassula ausensis* Hutch. subsp. *giessii* (Friedrich) Toelken, *Indigofera giessii* A.Schreib., *Zygophyllum giessii* (Merxm.) A.Schreib., *Euphorbia giessii* L.C. Leach, *Commiphora giessii* J.J.A. van der Walt, *Heliotropium giessii* Friedr.-Holzh., *Jamesbrittenia giessii* Hilliard, *Petalidium giessii* P.G. Mey., *Eriocephalus giessii* M.A.N. Müller, *Senecio giessii* Merxm., *Lachenalia giessii* W.F. Barker and *Stipagrostis giessii* Kers.

His keen interest and an eye for the unknown, meant that he often also collected insects associated with plants. In this way, a termite, *Okavangotermes giessii* (Coaton 1971), and a beetle, *Zophosis* (*Protodactylus*) *giessii* (Koch 1962), were also named after him since he collected the first specimens. The former is a monotypic genus and is known from only a single site east of

Rundu. The beetle is the most widespread of the *Protodactylus* subgenus and occurs along the outer margin of the Namib Desert from Gobabeb to Rosh Pinah.

I had the pleasure of working with Willi Giess for merely one year and was absolutely amazed by the wealth of his knowledge. For every species, locality or collector, he had some anecdote to tell or some memories to share. I remember going on a short field trip with him to collect material for Mike Müller, who was struggling through his Ph.D. in Stellenbosch. While passing his former farm Bergland, he showed me a fair-sized hill, which he had de-bushed manually in the early 1950s. To this day, the vegetation on this hill is visibly different from those nearby. Every little hill or farm we passed he would have something to say, like: 'Oh yes, *Aloe viridiflora* occurs in these koppies. I collected it there in 19.....' or 'When old so-and-so had this farm, the grazing conditions looked much better!' or 'We spent three days under this tree in 19.... when our car broke down and we had to wait for the Government Garage to send a mechanic.' I continued to be amazed by this extraordinary person when, about 20 years after retirement, he could still identify just about any plant you presented to him!

It was also a great inspiration to see Willi Giess and his wife Brigitte (formerly Bleissner) work together and support each other in all aspects of life. If one of them forgot where something was written or to be found, the other would remember. From 1963 to 1980 Brigitte Giess assisted her husband in the herbarium and accompanied him on his many collecting trips on a voluntary basis. Together with Volk they collected a large number of specimens in the early 1960s. Sadly his partner and soul-mate pre-deceased him in 1999.

Willi Giess died in Swakopmund on 28 September 2000. It is with sadness that we say farewell to our friend, colleague and mentor. Namibian botany would have been much the poorer without his invaluable pioneering work.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge the information received from Dr E. von Koenen. Patricia Craven is thanked for producing the map, extracting information on Giess collections from the WIND database and making some valuable suggestions for inclusion in this text. The use of data from the National Botanical Institute, Pretoria, is gratefully acknowledged. My appreciation also to Eugene Marais for providing information on the insects mentioned in this article. Many thanks to Gillian Maggs-Kölling, who reviewed drafts of this paper.

#### REFERENCES

- GIESS, W. 1978. 25 Jahre Landesherbarium Südwestafrika. *Mitteilungen der SWA Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft* XIX/2: 3–5.
- GIESS, W. 1989. *Bibliography of South West African Botany*. SWA Scientific Society, Windhoek.
- GLEN, H.F. & PEROLD, S.M. 2000. Obituary: Otto Heinrich Volk (1903–2000). *Bothalia* 30: 215–224.
- GUNN, M. & CODD, L.E. 1981. *Botanical exploration of southern Africa*: 400. Balkema, Cape Town.
- KOLBERG, H. & STROHBACH, B. 2000. Obituary: Heinrich Johann Wilhelm Giess (1910–2000). *Dinteria* 26: 21–24.

## PUBLICATIONS BY W. GIESS

- EISEB, E., GIESS, W & HAACKE, W.H.G. 1991. A preliminary list of Khoekhoe (Nama/Damara) plant names. *Dinteria* 21: 17–30.
- GAFF, D.F. & GIESS, W. 1985. Drought resistance in water plants in rock pools of southern Africa. *Dinteria* 18: 17–36.
- GIESS, W. 1962a. Some notes on the vegetation of the Namib Desert with a list of plants collected in the area visited by the Carp-Transvaal Museum Expedition during May 1959. *Cimbebasia* 2:1–35.
- 1962b. Wunder unserer Flora—Wonderwêreld van ons plantegroei—Wonders of our flora. *Kleine Reih*e 5: 1–34. Afrika Verlag, Der Kreis, Windhoek.
- 1962c. Herbarium und Pflanzensammeln, aus der Praxis für die Praxis. *Wissenschaftliche Forschung in Südwestafrika* 1: 38–43. SWA Scientific Society, Windhoek.
- 1965. Die Vegetationsverhältnisse (des Schwarzen Nossobgebietes). In H.W. Stengel, Der Schwarze Nossob. *Wissenschaftliche Forschung in Südwestafrika* 4: 45–49. SWA Scientific Society, Windhoek. (translated into English and Afrikaans)
- 1966a. 'Veldkost' in Südwestafrika. *Journal of South West Africa Scientific Society* 20: 59–68.
- 1966b. *Hoodia parviflora* N.E.Br., eine für Südwestafrika neue *Hoodia*-Art. *Mitteilungen der Botanischen Staatssammlung, München* 6: 239–243.
- 1966c. Plantkundige versamelingsritte in Suidwes-Afrika. *SWA Annual* 1966: 21–25.
- 1966d. The 'Veldkost' of South West Africa. *SWA Annual* 1966: 105–107.
- 1968a. Kurt Dinter. *Dinteria* 1: 4–7.
- 1968b. A short report on the vegetation of the Namib coastal area from Swakopmund to Cape Frio. *Dinteria* 1: 13–29.
- 1968c. Die Gattung *Rhigozum* Burch. und ihre Arten in Südwestafrika. *Dinteria* 1: 31–51.
- 1969a. Die Verbreitung von *Lindernia intrepidus* (Dinter) Oberm. (*Chamaegigas intrepidus* Dinter) in Südwestafrika. *Dinteria* 2: 23–27.
- 1969b. Prodrum einer Flora von Südwestafrika. *Dinteria* 2: 29–36.
- 1969c. *Welwitschia mirabilis* Hook. fil. *Dinteria* 3: 1–55.
- 1970a. Eine neue *Aloe* aus der Namib (*Aloe namibensis* Giess). *Mitteilungen der Botanischen Staatssammlung, München* 8: 123–126.
- 1970b. Ein Beitrag zur Flora des Etoscha Nationalparks. *Dinteria* 5: 19–55.
- 1970c. *Moringa ovalifolia*, die boom van die sprokieswoud in die Nasionale Etosha Wildtuin. *Dinteria* 5: 57, 58.
- 1970d. Die Verbreitung von *Moringa ovalifolia* Dinter & Berger in Südwestafrika. *Dinteria* 5: 59–64.
- 1970e. Pflanzenwunder in Vley, Pfannen und Wassertümpeln im trockenen Südwestafrika. *SWA Annual* 1970: 181–183.
- 1971a. Gramineae, a new species of *Aristida* from South West Africa. (*Aristida dewinteri* Giess). *Bothalia* 10: 365, 366.
- 1971b. A preliminary vegetation map of South West Africa. (Text in English, German & Afrikaans). *Dinteria* 4: 1–114.
- 1972a. Vegetation types. In W.G.H. Coaton & J.D. Sheasby, Preliminary report on a survey of the termites (*Isoptera*) of South West Africa. *Cimbebasia Memoir* 2: 15.
- 1972b. Der Botanische Garten auf der Farm Lichtenstein bei Windhoek im Jahre 1922. *Dinteria* 7: 13–15.
- 1973. A new species of *Aloe* from South West Africa. (*Aloe dewinteri* Giess). *Bothalia* 11: 120–122.
- 1974a. Zwei Fahrten zur *Jensenobotrya lossowiana* Herre. *Dinteria* 10: 3–12.
- 1974b. South West Africa: Flora. *Standard Encyclopedia of South Africa* 10: 149–150. Nasou, Cape Town.
- 1974c. Beobachtungen zur Südwester Flora. *Dinteria* 10: 35–44.
- 1974d. Eine neue Stapelie aus Südwestafrika. (*Stapelia albipilosa* Giess). *Mitteilungen der Botanischen Staatssammlung, München* 11: 349–352.
- 1976. A preliminary vegetation map of South West Africa. *Boissiera* 24: 651.
- 1978a. 25 Jahre Landesherbarium Südwestafrika. *Mitteilungen der SWA Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft* XIX/2: 3–5.
- 1978b. Die boom van die sprokieswoud in die Nasionale Etosha Wildtuin. *Staatsmuseum Windhoek* 9: 10–12.
- 1978c. Ein schöner botanischer Fund. (*Drosera indica*). *Mitteilungen der SWA Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft* XIX/2: 6.
- 1979. The genus *Crinum* in South West Africa. *The Indigenous Bulb Growers Association of South Africa* 28: 1–6.
- 1981a. Pflanzen der Namib. *SWA Annual* 1981: 34–41.
- 1981b. Eine botanische Namibfahrt. *SWA Annual* 1981: 81–86.
- 1981c. Die in der Zentralen Namib von Südwestafrika/Namibia festgestellten Pflanzenarten und ihre Biotope. *Dinteria* 15: 13–72.
- 1982a. Weitere Neunachweise zur Flora des Brandberges. *Dinteria* 16: 7–9.
- 1982b. Zur Verbreitung des Tabaks in Südwestafrika (*Nicotiana africana* Merxm.). *Dinteria* 16: 11–20.
- 1984a. Die Pflanzenwelt des Großen Gamsbergs. *Journal of South West Africa Scientific Society* XXXVIII: 29–47.
- 1984b. Short note on *Brachystelma blepharantha* Huber. *Dinteria* 17: 81, 82.
- 1989a. Einiges zu unserer Flechtenflora. *Dinteria* 20: 30–32.
- 1989b. *Bibliography of South West African Botany*: 236. SWA Scientific Society, Windhoek.
- GIESS, W. & SNYMAN, J.W. 1986. The naming and utilisation of plant life by the Zu'hoasi Bushmen of the Kau-Kauveld. In R. Vossen & K. Keuthmann, *Contemporary studies on Khoisan I & II. In Honour of Oswin Köhler on the occasion of his 75th birthday*: 237–346. Buske, Hamburg.
- GIESS, W. & TINLEY, K.L. 1968. South West Africa (with vegetation map of SWA). Conservation of vegetation in Africa south of the Sahara. *Acta phytogeographica suecica* 54: 250–253.
- MERXMÜLLER, H. & GIESS, W. 1974. *Aloe pachygaster* Dinter und eine damit verwechselte neue Art. (*Aloe argenticauda*). *Mitteilungen der Botanischen Staatssammlung, München* 11: 437–444.
- ROBINSON, E.R. & GIESS, W. 1974. Report on the plants noted in the course of a trip from Lüderitz Bay to Spencer Bay, January 10–21, 1974. *Dinteria* 10: 13–17.

HERTA KOLBERG\*

\* National Plant Genetic Resources Centre, National Botanical Research Institute, Private Bag 13184, Windhoek, Namibia.