

OBITUARY

RUDOLF GEORG STREY (1907–1988)

Rudolf Georg Strey (Figure 1) was born in Templin in the Uckermark region north of Berlin, Germany, on the 28th of April, 1907. His father, Wilhelm Georg, was a pharmacist with a concession for the only pharmacy in a town of some 7 000 inhabitants. Wilhelm Georg later took over his brother's pharmacy at the outbreak of the First World War, in Stettin, and Strey attended school there at the Friedrich-Wilhelm Gymnasium from 1914 to 1918. In 1916 Strey's father rented the Adler Pharmacy in Angermünde in Neumark, halfway between Stettin and Berlin, and Strey completed his schooling at the Uckermärkische Real-Pro Gymnasium, in Angermünde, from 1918 to 1923.

Strey was the second son by two years, and as the tradition was at the time, the first son followed the father's profession and the second son was sent to study agriculture. Strey attended a number of agricultural institutions between 1923 and 1928, in Genschmar im Oderbruch, at Gross Lubras in West Havelland, at Gross Santerleben in the Magdeburger Börde, and finally at Graeningen near Rathenow where his father had opened the Grüne Pharmacy after the war. In 1927–1928 he went to an agricultural college, the Höhere Lehranstalt für Praktische Landwirte in Potsdam, and qualified with the diploma 'Staatlich geprüfter Landwirt'.

Owing to the depression and devaluation of the currency in Germany after the war, and the Wall Street disaster, Wilhelm Georg offered his son a passage to one of the German colonies where his prospects would be better. Strey sailed for Cape Town and arrived in South West Africa in October 1929. He became apprenticed to A. Stauch, a diamond merchant, to work on his farm Dordabis, and it was here that he met his first wife on the neighbouring farm Ibenstein. Shortly afterwards Stauch's business went bankrupt and Strey attended a course on karakul breeding at Neudamm Agricultural College near Windhoek.

Strey's father and uncle came out to SWA in 1930, and Strey started on his own on the government farm Buellspoort No. 172 District Rehoboth, near the Naukluftberge. His father helped him buy the farm, but he stayed only a short while before returning to Germany. The farm proved profitable for dairy cattle until the big drought of 1933, after which Strey switched to farming with grey and black karakul. During this period he became seriously ill with a combination of Malta fever, amoebic dysentery and malaria, and he returned to Germany to the Tropen Institute Tübingen for treatment.

Strey developed an interest in botany because, as a farmer, he wanted to know the plants that were either palatable or poisonous to his stock. As there was little literature available he made efforts to consult various botanists. Dinter visited him at Buellspoort in December 1934 and he also met Prof. O. H. Volk and E. B. Schoenfelder. In 1940 Strey was interned, first at Baviaanspoort and Koffiefontein, and later he was sent to the Andalusia Internment Camp at the present Jan

Kempdorp, near Warrenton, in the N Cape. A number of visiting German botanists were also caught by the war, and Prof. Volk, Dr Mueller-Stoll, Dr Rehm and Dr Cloos started a University-type botany course in the camp. With the help of other scientists, this course started in 1940 and lasted until 1946. Students were examined regularly and after the war the German universities acknowledged the course. Other lectures on poisonous plants, ecology, pasture management and indigenous plants interested many of the farmers.

Strey built up a new Index of SWA plants, at the suggestion of Prof. Volk, and he combined the names from Dinter's index with Range's Flora and the herbarium lists of Schoenfelder and Rusch. He then started a card index for all correct plant names with information on literature, synonyms, types and voucher collections. During this time the whole of Phillips' *Genera of South African Flowering Plants* was translated into German. Strey's index is housed at PRE, along with his indexes of collectors, localities and botanical literature relating to SWA.

On his 37th birthday, towards the end of the internment, Strey was presented with the following eulogy which is framed and housed in the Natal Herbarium museum:

Streyina aculeata spec. nov. unica.
(post annos 37 in captivitate se evolutans)

Discipulus scientiae amabilis; altus agilisque, perfectae, fere patientiae, sed non raro distincte mucronatus.



FIGURE 1.—Rudolf Georg Strey (1907–1988).

Initiator collectionis magnae cartarum; colonus, copias magnas ovium cultivans, sed magno suo amore versans in regno variegato vegetabiliorum; omnes determinandi difficultates facillime superavit.

Habitat: in desertis extremis africae austro-occidentalis, in Porta Taurina.

Coelesti dent ei mox libertatem, vitam longam luxurians et multos successus.

Deterunt Andalusiae: ante diem quartam Calendas Majas anno Domini 1944.

Signed by O. Volk, H. Herre, A. Giess[?], Matz, Gunter, Kalun etc.

Loosely translated this means:

Streya aculeata, a unique new species
(developing in captivity after 37 years)

A disciple of the amiable science [botany]; tall and agile, well built, usually of perfect patience, but not rarely distinctly pointed.

Initiator of a large collection of cards; farmer, cultivating great quantities of eggs, but avidly studying the many-faceted plant kingdom; he overcame all difficulties of identification most easily.

Habitat: in the extreme desert of South West Africa in Buellspoor.

May the inhabitants of heaven soon grant him freedom, a long luxurious life and many successes.

Signed in Andalusia: 28.4.1944.

After internment he was released to Stellenbosch where he stayed for a few months with H. Herre, who had resumed curatorship of the Stellenbosch University Botanic Garden. Strey worked at the gardens and in the herbarium of the University with Dr Rehm.

At the end of November 1946 he returned to Buellspoor. Due to ill health, but also because of his new and different interests, he gave up farming. He started collecting from all parts of the country, sending his plants for identification to Kew, Munich, Kirstenbosch (National Botanic Gardens) and Pretoria (Botanical Research Institute). Bulbs, seeds and succulents were sent to Herre in Stellenbosch. Buellspoor became a well known type locality for plants and insects. Strey was a keen insect collector, gathering the first blind beetles from the Namib. He has a number of beetles and moths named after him by Dr Koch and Prof. Janse of the Transvaal Museum. He also collected fungi which are mainly deposited in PREM.

He continued compiling the indexes of SWA collectors, literature, place names and maps, but his chief interest between 1947 and 1952 was archaeology. This was principally because of his association with the renowned Abbé H. Breuil, an expert in palaeolithic archaeology, who is perhaps best known for his studies in cave art. Breuil occupied a chair at Witwatersrand University from 1944 to 1951, and he made three important trips to SWA between 1947 and 1950. Strey guided and helped organize these trips and together with Dr Scherz and others they explored, recorded and mapped prehistoric sites in SWA and the northern Cape. A cave in the Erongo Mountains is named after him. Strey also led an expedition to the Okavango with Dr Gusinde from America, in 1950, to study the Taung bushman tribe.

His collections of rock paintings, stone implements and other museum pieces are housed in the Windhoek Museum, the Swakopmund Museum and in the archaeological collections of the Witwatersrand University.

Strey met his second wife on one of the expeditions with Breuil. She worked as an artist with the group reproducing various paintings, including many details of the White Lady shelter in the Brandberg. An article by her (Rita G. Strey 1962) provides a fascinating insight into these excursions.

Strey sold the farm Buellspoor in 1950, and he travelled and organized expeditions until going up to Pretoria in 1953. He obtained employment working for a small printing press, eventually buying his own press in Germiston. On 17.2.1955 Strey was appointed as a technician to the Botanical Research Institute in Pretoria, to work in the National Herbarium.

In 1961 he produced a manuscript on 'Two hundred years of Botanical Research in South West Africa' which was the culmination of his earlier research. This gives an outline of the history of botany in SWA, divided up into periods, with the main collectors listed and the herbaria in which the collections are housed. The literature of special interest to SWA botany is recorded, including maps, ecology, physiology, medicinal and poisonous plants. Strey also described a species of *Cucumis* with A. Meeuse (Meeuse & Strey 1962). This is now a synonym for *Cucumella bryonifolia* (Merxm.) C. Jeffrey.

He worked in Pretoria for seven years, living on a plot in Silverton where he also bred chickens. In April 1962 he was transferred to Natal Herbarium in Durban where he became curator and later officer-in charge of the Botanical Research Unit.

His years in Natal marked the scientifically most active phase of his career. He revitalized and re-organized Natal Herbarium, building up a fine museum with early memorabilia from Medley Wood, and own collections of insects, wood, fruit and seeds. Strey developed the herbarium garden, planting large numbers of rare Natal plants. He realized that before Bews's *The Flora of Natal and Zululand* (1921) could be revised, a considerable amount of collecting was necessary to fill in the gaps. He collected from as wide an area as possible since many species were known from only a few specimens, and his collecting numbers which started at 4150 when he arrived in Durban, reached 11300 by the time of his retirement. Reference to Ross's *Flora of Natal* (1972) bears witness to the effective and untiring work of this dedicated collector.

Strey also made a point of visiting type localities of rare or once-collected Natal plants. His relocation of *Elephantorrhiza woodii*, not collected since the Medley Wood type from near Colenso, allowed J. H. Ross to emend Phillips's earlier description of the habit of the species when Ross revised *Elephantorrhiza* in 1974. This was possible because Strey succeeded in cultivating the species at Natal Herbarium.

His earliest research at Natal Herbarium, concerned the genus *Diets* in 1965, and his notes, dissections of petals and boxes of fruit and seeds are housed in PRE. He then took considerable interest in palms, particularly *Hyphaene* and *Raphia*. The latter resulted in his describing a new species with Mrs A. A. Mauve (Obermeyer & Strey 1969).

Strey concentrated particularly on the rich flora of the sandstone areas of southern Natal and Pondoland, with

its many endemic species. He often collected with Mr H. B. Nicholson of Skyline, St Michael's-on-Sea, and together they worked the region intensively. His publications arising from this activity are Strey & Leistner (1968) and Strey (1972). *Barringtonia racemosa* drew his attention and was written up for the *Flowering Plants of Africa* (Strey 1973a).

Strey developed a great interest in the family Araliaceae and his intensive research on *Cussonia* gave rise to the following publications: Strey 1973b, 1975, 1981. His original research in the Araliaceae also contributed to, and was acknowledged in Burt & Dickson 1975.

Plant species names which commemorate Strey are *Pseudosalacia streyi* Codd (Celastraceae), *Crassula streyi* Toelken (Crassulaceae), *Sonderina streyi* Merxm. (Apiaceae); *Piранthus streyianus* Nel (Asclepiadaceae), *nom. nud.* and now a synonym for *Orbea rangeana* (Dinter & Berger) Leach; *Lithops streyi* Schwantes (Mesembryanthemaceae), now a synonym for *L. gracilidelineta* Dinter [although this is not cited in the new *Lithops* book by Desmond T. Cole (1988).]; *Lapeirousia streyi* Suesseng. (Iridaceae), now a synonym for *L. caudata* Schinz subsp. *burchellii* (Bak.) Marais & Goldblatt; *Turraea streyi* F. White & B. T. Styles (Meliaceae); *Anthospermum streyi* Puff (Rubiaceae); *Indigofera streyana* Merxm. (Leguminosae), now *I. hochstetteri* Bak. subsp. *streyana* (Merxm.) A. Schreib. and *Indigofera herrstreyi* (my manuscript name).

Besides his published research, Strey built up very comprehensive biographical notes on early Natal botanical collectors, in particular M. J. McKen, J. Medley Wood and Wilhelm Keit. Most of his notes, accumulated during many hours of research in museums and libraries in South Africa and Europe (particularly on one overseas trip in 1978), are housed either at the Killie Campbell Museum or the Natal Herbarium in Durban.

Strey retired at the end of April 1972, but was re-employed for a further three years, until the end of 1975, before retiring permanently to his cottage at the Village of Happiness, near Margate. He remained actively interested in *Cussonia*, growing a fairly representative collec-

tion of species around his home. Today his cottage can still be easily singled out from a distance, as it is surrounded by these distinctive plants. Rudolf Georg Strey died peacefully on the 30th of June 1988 and was cremated according to his wishes. He leaves two daughters and a son by his first marriage, and one daughter by his second marriage.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following very much indeed for all their help in providing certain details: Mr Rolf Strey, Miss R. Williams, Mrs H. E. Noble, Mr H. B. Nicholson and Dr O. A. Leistner, and Dr H. Glen for the Latin translation.

REFERENCES AND PUBLICATIONS BY STREY

- BURT, B. L. & DICKSON, W. C. 1975. The morphology and relationships of *Seemannaralia* (Araliaceae). *Notes from the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh* 33: 449–464.
- MEEUSE, A. D. J. & STREY, R. G. 1962. *Cucumis umbrosus* A. Meeuse & Strey. In A. D. J. Meeuse, The Cucurbitaceae of southern Africa. *Bothalia* 8: 67.
- OBERMEYER, A. A. & STREY, R. G. 1969. A new species of *Raphia* from northern Zululand and southern Mozambique. *Bothalia* 10: 29–37.
- ROSS, J. H. 1974. The genus *Elephantorrhiza*. *Bothalia* 11: 247–257.
- STREY, R. G. 1962. A tribute to M. l'Abbé H. Breuil. *Lantern* 11: 48–57.
- STREY, R. G. 1969. A note on the identity of *Mesembryanthemum brachyphyllum* Welw. *Bothalia* 10: 55.
- STREY, R. G. 1972. A new species of *Eugenia* from Pondoland and southern Natal. *Bothalia* 10: 569–571.
- STREY, R. G. 1973a. *Barringtonia racemosa* (L.) Roxb. *Flowering Plants of Africa* 43: t. 1706.
- STREY, R. G. 1973b. Notes on the genus *Cussonia* in southern Africa. *Bothalia* 11: 191–201.
- STREY, R. G. 1975. A new species of *Cussonia* from the southern Cape. *Cussonia gamtoosensis*. *Bothalia* 11: 515–521.
- STREY, R. G. 1981. Observations on the morphology of the Araliaceae in southern Africa. *Journal of Dendrology* 1: 66–83.
- STREY, R. G. & LEISTNER, O. A. 1968. The rediscovery of *Rhynchochalyx lawsonioides* Oliv. *Journal of South African Botany* 34: 9–13.

B. D. SCHRIRE