

Wirklicher Hofrat Dr. Josef Eiselt †

3 May 1912 - 25 July 2001

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Wirklicher Hofrat Dr. Josef Eiselt passed away on 25 July 2001. He was 89 years old.

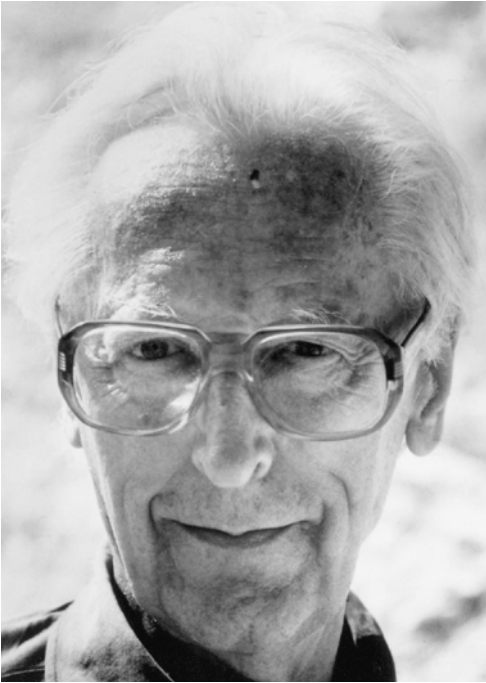
Josef Eiselt was born in Vienna on 3 May 1912 and, upon graduating from high school, enrolled in a two-year professional school for the innkeeping-, hotel- and coffee house-business. In 1933 Eiselt enrolled in natural history and physics at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Vienna. His doctoral thesis dealt with "The structure and function of the middle ear of frogs and toads". This work led to first contacts with the Natural History Museum Vienna and with O. Wettstein, who at that time was the director of the Herpetological Collection. His contact with another museum zoologist, namely O. Pesta, the director of the Crustacean Collection, promoted his interest in siphonostomous cyclopid copepods.

Eiselt received his Doctor of Philosophy degree on 3 May 1939, at which time he had already worked as a volunteer at the Herpetological Collection of the Natural History Museum Vienna. From 1 December 1939 to June 1940, Eiselt was an assistant at the Institute of Zoology of the University of Vienna. In June 1940 he was drafted into military service. On 15 October 1942, Josef Eiselt married Irene Scharf. This marriage gave rise to two daughters, Ulrike and Elisabeth. In autumn 1945, Eiselt returned from captivity. Between 1946 and 1949 he found employment as a transportation worker for the British occupying forces and at the same time volunteered his services in rebuilding the University of Vienna's Institute of Zoology, which was largely destroyed during the war.

During this time he also worked as a technician at the former Bundesstaatliche Hauptstelle für Lichtbild und Bildungsfilm des Oberösterreichischen Landesmuseums (Center for Photography and Educational Films of the Provincial Museum of Upper Austria) and as an exhibition designer. Eiselt completed his training year as a secondary school teacher in 1949/1950. After serving an additional 13 months as a volunteer at the Herpetological Collection and a further year as a secondary school teacher, Eiselt became a staff member of the Natural History Museum.

In 1952, Eiselt took over the scientific collection, whose inventory had still not been transferred back to the museum from safe storage. The 40-year-old Eiselt almost single-handedly transferred the alcohol collection, which encompassed over 100,000 specimens, back to the building on the Ringstrasse Boulevard. He arranged this material, along with nearly 3,000 skeletons and stuffed specimens, according to the latest systematic knowledge.

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He also newly cataloged the Collection's comprehensive scientific literature according to the criteria systematics, geography, key words and authors. This conscientious compilation of the herpetological literature was recorded on ca. 20,000 index cards by the time Eiselt retired.

Eiselt himself donated the thousands of reprints and numerous books he had accumulated over the course of his career to the Museum's library.

These curatorial accomplishments are all the more amazing when one considers that, up until a few years before his retirement, he had only one technical assistant at his disposal.

In 1972, Eiselt was named director of the First Zoological Department (Vertebrates) of the Natural History Museum Vienna. He also assumed the chairmanship of several internal commissions and took on the function as co-director of the Museum.

On 31 December 1977, Eiselt retired, having received the Austrian Cross of Honor for Sciences and Arts, First Class, in recognition of his services on 4 April 1976.

His extensive collecting activity during expeditions and his scientific research enriched the Herpetological Collection by several thousand specimens, including abundant type material. Eiselt's successful collecting trips, which often involved considerable personal risk and hardship, along with the scientific data this material yielded in the laboratory, gave the Herpetological Collection its reputation as housing a highly specialized Near East collection.

As a student, Eiselt participated in research expeditions to Zante/Zakynthos and to Varna; he utilized the opportunity for research sojourns at the marine biology stations in Naples (1936) and Rovinj (1937/1938) and also led collecting expeditions to Corsica (1937) and Elba (1938).

The post-war hardships and the above-mentioned employment in the first years after 1945 allowed time for only one excursion to Sorrento (1952) and participation at the XV International Congress of Zoology in London, with a subsequent visit to the marine biology station in Millport, Scotland (1958).

By 1962, Eiselt had brought the Herpetological Collection at the Natural History Museum Vienna to an operational status, which allowed him to consider enlarging the collection through renewed collecting activities of his own. Between 1962 and 1977, Eiselt visited Nubia, Turkey (11 trips), Iran (4 trips), with additional collection trips to southern Italy, Peloponnisos, Crete, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Freed of his administrative duties after his retirement, Eiselt's research efforts and activities continued undiminished: he conducted privately funded collection and research trips to Turkey in 1984, 1986, 1988 and 1990 in order to advance his work on the herpetofauna of the Near East. In 1992, at an age of 81 years, Eiselt traveled through Yemen.

The above-listed biographic data and the successful publication activity clearly mirror Eiselt's scientific career. Eight publications on siphonostomous copepods, with numerous first descriptions, stem from his earliest contact with the Museum and are attributable to the cooperation with O. Pesta, then director of the Crustacean Collection. This area of interest was subsequently displaced by his more intensive herpetological research activities. Eiselt published his last work on these small crustaceans in 1969.

Eiselt's first scientific publication appeared during his volunteer period at the Herpetological Collection. Here, he critically examined the *Eumeces schneideri* complex based on the comprehensive material from the estate of F. Werner and from a collection by V. Pietschmann. After his anatomically oriented dissertation, which was published in *Archiv für Naturgeschichte in Leipzig*, Eiselt's scientific endeavors were interrupted by the calamities of WW II and the uncertainties of the post-war years. The staff position at the Museum's Herpetological Collection then provided the basis for a renewed and continuous research activity. Progress in these early years was hampered by the above-mentioned exceptional circumstances surrounding the transferal and renewed exhibition of the specimens evacuated during the war.

In 1958, Eiselt published a taxonomic study on the fire salamander based on ca. 1000 adult and larval specimens. The precision with which Eiselt conducted these first comprehensive systematic studies is evident in the fact that R. Klewen, in 1988, was able to rely on Eiselt's descriptions in his treatment of known *Salamandra* subspecies for the book on the terrestrial salamanders of Europe, Part 1 (Brehm Publishers).

This period of reduced expeditions abroad corresponds with Eiselt's work on the amphibians and reptiles of Austria in the framework of the *Catalogus Faunae Austriae* (1961), a compilation of all amphibian and reptile species reported from within Austrian national borders. This work encompassed a first comprehensive reference list on native amphibians and reptiles that took museum collections into consideration.

After participating in the Nubia expedition in 1962 and publishing the results, Eiselt devoted his entire energies to studying the herpetofauna of the Near East. The first phase involved working up the amphibian and reptile collections made in northeastern Turkey by H. Steiner in 1961/1962.

The team members who accompanied him on his numerous trips were indefatigable collectors such as R. Petrovitz and K. Bilek, who were museum preparators, and volunteers such as F. Ressler, H. Tunner, H. Steiner or I. Adametz; moreover, staff scientists including F. Weiss-Spitzenberger, K. Bauer, G. Pretzmann, E. Kritscher and O. Paget contributed herpetological material from cooperative expeditions or from their own trips.

Eiselt cooperated with specialists from Turkey – Muthar Basoglu and Ibrahim Baran – in working up the herpetofauna from the Near East.

It is impossible to fully list the broad circle of persons who cooperated with Eiselt in this aspect of his scientific work. Nonetheless, special mention should go to Josef J. Schmidtler and his son Josef F. Schmidtler. J.J. Schmidtler already passed away in 1983, but, as the

reference list clearly shows, his son carried on the personal and scientific contact that had begun in 1966. This friendship, which endured over a generation, is reflected in numerous co-authored scientific papers.

In 1997, a several-decade-long scientific cooperation began with I. S. Darevsky from the Zoological Institute of the Academy of Sciences in Leningrad.

On 11 September 1979, Eiselt was voted president of the newly founded, first European herpetological society (SEH: Societas Europaea Herpetologica), a function he continued to fill – after re-election – without interruption until 1985. During this time he used his international scientific reputation and his vision to define the profile of this scientific society, which was the largest of its type in Europe; he was also instrumental in promoting the society's renowned scientific journal (*Amphibia-Reptilia*). The two SEH committees (Conservation Committee, Mapping Committee) founded during his tenure continue to work at the forefront of European nature conservation and to make progress on a Europe-wide survey of amphibian and reptile distribution.

In the last period of his life, Eiselt concentrated his work on the herpetofauna of Turkey and the Transcaucasian region, with emphasis on the *Lacerta*-fauna, including the problems involving unisexual forms. The results of this research were to be a synthesis of the *Lacerta*-fauna of the Near East and the Caucasus region.

In his untiring search for new knowledge and methods, Eiselt learned modern statistical methods at an advanced age and used the computer to apply this approach to his own work. Apparently undaunted by misfortunes, he continued his research up to a ripe old age.

The deceased continued to show a persistence and steadfastness in pursuing scientific questions that astounded colleagues and friends alike. After his retirement he worked almost daily at the Herpetological Collection of the Natural History Museum: 8 to 10 hour workdays were nothing out of the ordinary.

With the knowledge that his energies were fast waning, Eiselt began to clear out his office in the museum in the last months before his death. He also withdrew from projects that he planned with his long-standing scientific colleague and friend J. F. Schmittler.

Up until the end of his very productive life, he maintained his always correct, reserved and perhaps even somewhat distanced manner, which allowed both him and us only rare moments of personal contact.

Eiselt was instrumental in the development of the Herpetological Collection over decades and he put his work in the service of the collection far beyond retirement age. The collection was part of his life and its evolution was a matter of personal concern for him.

The staff of the Herpetological Collection mourns Josef Eiselt.

Update (compare TIEDEMANN 1992) to the list of taxa named after the deceased

Emys orbicularis eiselti FRITZ, BARAN, BUDAK & AMTHAUER, 1996

Update (compare TIEDEMANN 1992) to Eiselt's list of publications

1993 Untersuchungen an Felseidechsen (*Lacerta saxicola*-Komplex) in der östlichen Türkei. 2. Eine neue Unterart der *Lacerta raddei* BOETTGER, 1892 (Squamata: Sauria: Lacertidae). – *Herpetozoa*, Wien; 6 (1/2): 65-70.

- 1995 Ein Beitrag zur Kenntnis der Archaeolacerten (sensu MÉHELY 1909) des Iran (Squamata: Sauria: Lacertidae). – Herpetozoa, Wien; 8 (1/2): 59-72.
- 1996 Eidechsen und Schlangen! – Ann. Naturhist. Mus. Wien; (B, Supplement - 90 Jahre K. H. Rechinger) 98: 7-8.

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