

Wilhelmina Rechinger 1925–2019

E. Vitek* & H. W. Lack**



Fig. 1: Wilhelmina Rechinger in her home in Beckgasse 22 holding instalment 176 of 'Flora Iranica', 2005.

A life devoted to botany or – more precisely – devoted to a botanist came to an end on 20 August 2019 when Wilhelmina Rechinger (Fig. 1) died in Vienna at the age of ninety-four.

Born Wilhelmina Goedemans in Haarlem, Netherlands as the eldest of six children on 14 February 1925, Wilhelmina attended primary and secondary schools in her hometown, learning English, French and German quickly and with ease. This talent for languages accompanied her throughout her life. Since her family was unable to provide the means for a higher education, Wilhelmina started her career as an office worker in the Netherlands and after that stayed for a few years as an au pair girl in Stockholm where she learned Swedish.

* Ernst Vitek, Botanische Abteilung, Naturhistorisches Museum Wien, Burgring 7, 1010 Wien, Österreich; ernst.vitek@nhm-wien.ac.at (corresponding author)

** H. Walter Lack, Botanischer Garten und Botanisches Museum Berlin, Freie Universität Berlin, Königin-Luise-Str. 6–8, 14195 Berlin, Deutschland; h.w.lack@bgbm.org

Returning from a visit to her family in the Netherlands, Wilhelmina, aged 24, took a train from Hamburg to Stockholm. Coincidentally Dr. Karl Heinz Rechinger (1906–1998), Kustos 1. Klasse [curator] at the Natural History Museum in Vienna, then aged 42, was also traveling to Stockholm for a three months stay at the Naturhistoriska Riksmuseet upon an invitation by Professor Eric Hultén (LACK 2001). However, she was booked in a carriage whereas he was in a sleeping car. The coincidence did not stop there and when the wheels of the sleeping car began to run hot, Karl Heinz was obliged to move into the carriage and that is where he met Wilhelmina, who recounted "When this man entered the compartment I immediately knew that he is the man of my life – and I got him!". However, at that time Karl Heinz was married to Dr. Frida Rechinger, née Moser, though he was separated from her. As Frida rejected the idea of a divorce, Karl Heinz, back in Vienna and Wilhelmina, still in Stockholm, cultivated a long distance relationship, which became a more established relationship when Karl Heinz returned to Stockholm in 1950 to attend the VII International Botanical Congress, and in the following year to continue work in the Naturhistoriska Riksmuseet for three more months. There, his main activity was the determination of collections brought together by Gunnar Samuelson and Manoog Haradj[i]an in Turkey,

Cyprus, Syria and the Lebanon. Since Karl Heinz had worked and published intensively on the flora of the Balkan Peninsula (in particular Greece) and of Iran, the work done in Sweden bridged in his mind the pre-existing gap between the Aegean area and the highlands of Iran, which he had visited in 1937 and 1948. Gradually this led to the 'Flora Iranica', a project that he had envisaged as a 'Flora von Persien' in a letter to Joseph Bornmüller written in November 1944 (LACK 2007). However, before the first fascicle was published, more than a decade had to pass.

In 1952, Wilhelmina's daughter Lilian was born in Stockholm and soon after, the two moved to Vienna, where they started to live together with Karl Heinz in a small flat in Schwindgasse 7. It was in Vienna that Wilhelmina began to work as a secretary and it was from Vienna that she, together with Karl Heinz, set out for their first joint plant collecting tour to Greece in May 1955. Although no botanist by training, she quickly became Karl Heinz's assistant, both in the field and subsequently also in the museum, and later she occasionally collected independently from him. When Karl Heinz, by then promoted director of the Department of Botany in 1955, accepted an appointment as a visiting professor at Baghdad University in 1956 (Fig. 2), Wilhelmina joined him on



Fig. 2: Iraqi visa for Wilhelmina Rechinger, 1956.



Fig. 3: Wilhelmina, Björn and Lilian Rechinger (from left to right) in Iran or Afghanistan, 1967.

the long trip by railway from Vienna to Iraq, where they stayed for eleven months and enjoyed ample opportunities to collect plants and further travels.

Back in Vienna and free of maternal duties – Lilian meanwhile was staying with relatives in the Netherlands – Wilhelmina took a distance learning course to obtain the Matura [the Austrian high school certificate, the prerequisite for been enrolled at university]. In 1962, her son Björn was born in Vienna and the following year the first fascicle of the 'Flora Iranica', dealing with the Convolvulaceae, appeared in Graz. Karl Heinz was the author of this treatment, for good reason his name appears also as the editor on the title page, but it is safe to assume that most of the secretarial work was in fact done by Wilhelmina. Since Karl Heinz was reluctant to use typewriters and computers, Wilhelmina typed thousands of manuscript pages on his behalf. Over the years, she effectively became the technical manager of the 'Flora Iranica' project. Additionally, she acquired in-depth knowledge on the numerous collecting localities (and their orthographic variants) meticulously cited in this work. She was always taking into consideration their proper sequence from northwest to southeast in each of the countries dealt with, i. e. the mountainous part of Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan west of the Indus River, the south-east tip of Azerbaijan and the mountainous fringe of Turkmenistan). Karl Heinz's part was to determinate the material and to write the keys, descriptions and synonymies, while Wilhelmina listed the specimens studied, cared for the legends and dealt with the proofs – with her name nowhere mentioned.

In 1962, Karl Heinz had been elected Erster Direktor of the Natural History Museum, a choice subsequently confirmed by the Ministry of Education to take effect from 1 January



Fig. 4: Karl Heinz and Wilhelmina Rechinger on the back of camels on the Kuh-i Taftan, Baluchistan, Iran, 1977.

1963. Two years before Karl Heinz and Wilhelmine had moved from Schwindgasse to a spacious flat in Beckgasse 22 bought from family property. Situated within walking distance from the garden and park of Schönbrunn Castle it effectively became the centre of the 'Flora Iranica' project, well known to most external collaborators, where Wilhelmina and Karl Heinz also took pleasure in hosting their guests.

During all these years, Wilhelmina accompanied Karl Heinz in many of his collecting trips, of which the atmosphere recollected by one participant was "Happiness is an isolated railway station (Ulukişla, Zahedan. Sibi), presses full of choice plants, blotters drying on a sunny platform, a shady tree for a leisurely picnic hoping for the steam train, then the long road home to base with a little Schubert, a little Slivovicz and a lot of laughter and fun – and Willy [Wilhelmina]" (LAMOND 1996). However, questions were sometimes asked when the couple with different family names booked a room together, at that time considered improper behaviour even in central Europe. Complaining about this problem over dinner, Karl Heinz and Wilhelmina received a tip for a solution that they put into effect. In 1964, Lily Rechinger, Karl Heinz's mother, adopted Wilhelmina as her daughter, which resulted in her becoming Wilhelmina Rechinger. From that day on, the Rechinger 'family' no longer faced a problem when travelling.

In a sense Karl Heinz was a "genuine scientist", forgetting all realities of life when collecting plants. It was Wilhelmina who was ready to provide the necessary infrastructure and with her exceptional organisational skills was highly qualified to do so. In fact, she looked after food, clothes and equipment but also noted down localities and field observations, listed the collected specimens, arranged for the changing of drying paper. Legendary was the expedition to Iran and Afghanistan in a Landrover newly acquired for the Natural History Museum and undertaken with Wilhelmina, aged 42, Lilian, aged 15,

and Björn, aged 4, in 1967 (Fig. 3). Since Karl Heinz had no driving licence, Wilhelmina had also to be the driver on this and other expeditions (VITEK 1999). In addition, her talent for picking up languages, among which Farsi, was particularly helpful in the Near East.

Karl Heinz retired as First Director towards the end of December 1971 and henceforth could concentrate entirely on the 'Flora Iranica' project. It was only then that Wilhelmina regularly joined him when working in Hall 50 of the Natural History Museum, where the 'Flora Iranica' material was stored. When relations with Karl Heinz's successor as Director of the Department of Botany became less harmonious, the Rechingers preferred to visit the Natural History Museum only on weekends, where they could work in perfect peace and isolation (for a description of this atmosphere see LACK 1997). Informal agreements were made to enable the Rechingers to take specimens home to Beckgasse, which was the place where most of the late work for the project was actually done. In 1977 the Rechingers set out for their last expedition to Iran travelling in Baluchistan for a few days on the back of camels "with air temperatures 37–40 °C and without any shade" (RECHINGER 1989; Fig. 4).

Fourteen years after Wilhelmina's adoption, the legal situation changed in Austria and Frida could no longer block the divorce. Karl Heinz, aged 73, and Wilhelmina, aged 54, finally got married in 1979. Lilian acted as witness, while Björn, too young to be the second witness, participated with great pleasure and enjoyed half a day off school. During the two decades that followed, Karl Heinz travelled to many new destinations – to Australia, Indonesia, Kashmir, Chile, Sri Lanka, to name only those outside Europe – and collected plants, always accompanied by Wilhelmina.

When Karl Heinz passed away on 30 December 1998, the 'Flora Iranica' project was almost completed. However, the treatments of Rubiaceae and several parts of the giant genus *Astragalus* had not yet been published. Wilhelmina felt it was her duty to continue along the beaten track and to help finalising the great undertaking, and this indeed she achieved. Very appropriately, the instalments 175 (2001) – 181 (2015), totalling 1406 pages (indexes excluded) plus 792 full-page illustrations, have her name as editor on the title page. For instalment 176 (Rubiaceae) she is also given as the last of the co-authors because it was Wilhelmina who synthesized the miscellaneous treatments by contributors into a coherent volume (for a general appreciation of 'Flora Iranica' see PODLECH 1997, for a synopsis and critique see AKHANI 2006). Because of her outstanding contributions to the Natural History Museum, in particular for her share in the 'Flora Iranica' project,



Fig. 5: Wilhelmina Rechingner just having been honoured with the Ferdinand-Hochstetter Medal and her daughter Lilian (from left to right) in the Natural History Museum Vienna, 2013.

Wilhelmina (Fig. 5) received on 28 August 2013 the Ferdinand-Hochstetter-Medal, the highest honour this institution confers.

When the last fascicle came out, Wilhelmina had already completed her ninetieth year. With the onset of the old age, she gradually lost her short-term memory but still remembered episodes from the adventurous expeditions in Iran and Afghanistan undertaken with her Karl Heinz many years ago. She is survived by her children Dr. Lilian Rechinger in Vienna and Dr. Björn Rechinger in Copenhagen.

As a person Wilhelmine was unforgettable: rather small, extremely lively, always serene and mostly in a good mood, helpful and hospitable, ready to share a cup of tea in the herbarium at any moment, but also was a dedicated, effective and highly focused collaborator for her husband. In short, though not the brain of the 'Flora Iranica' project, Wilhelmina was definitely its heart.

References

- AKHANI H., 2006: 'Flora Iranica': facts and figures and a list of publications by K. H. Rechinger on Iran and adjacent areas. – Rostaniha 7 Supplement 2: 19–61.
- LACK H.W., 1996: Wien, Naturhistorisches Museum, Karsamstag 1973. – Annalen des Naturhistorischen Museums Wien, Serie B, 98 Supplement: 7.
- LACK H.W., 2000: Karl Heinz Rechinger – a life for botany. – Flora Mediterranea 10: 11–64.
- LACK H.W., 2007: The first idea for Rechinger's 'Flora Iranica'. – Rostaniha 7 Supplement 2: 395–402.
- LAMOND J., 1996: Reminiscences. – Annalen des Naturhistorischen Museums Wien, Serie B, 98 Supplement: 6.
- PODLECH D., 1996: Karl Heinz Rechinger und die 'Flora Iranica'. – Annalen des Naturhistorischen Museums Wien, Serie B, 98 Supplement: 57–65.
- RECHINGER K.H., 1989: Fifty years of botanical research in the 'Flora Iranica' area (1937–1987). – In TAN K. (ed.): Plant taxonomy, phytogeography and related subjects. The Davis & Hedge Festschrift. Pp. 301–349. – Edinburgh: University Press.
- VITEK E., 1999: Karl Heinz Rechinger (1906–1998). – Annalen des Naturhistorischen Museums Wien, Serie B, 101: 7–12.

Appendix 1 – Works edited by W. Rechinger

Flora Iranica 175 (2001) – 181 (2015)

Appendix 2 – Eponyms dedicated to W. Rechinger

Acantholimon wilhelminae RECH. f. & SCHIMAN-CZEIKA

Alcea wilhelminae I. RIEDL

Astragalus wilhelminae I. DEML

Cousinia wilhelminae RECH. f.

Delphinium wilhelminae IRANSHAHR

Gypsophila wilhelminae RECH. f.

Appendix 3 – Eponyms dedicated to K. H. and W. Rechinger

Delphinium rechingerorum IRANSHAHR

Kandaharia rechingerorum R. ALAVA

Onobrychis rechingerorum WENDELBO