

Marriage and malacology, an adventurous combination

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The author, a medical research professor, has been married to Edi Gittenberger for nearly 40 years and has always accompanied him on his fieldwork in Southeastern Europe. Here the views of a non-malacologist on collecting trips are presented, showing that marriage and malacology is an adventurous combination.

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Knowing how much my husband Edi Gittenberger has learnt to love making titles for his publications I was tempted to provide a title as "The life of a wife of a malacologist" which is at least more exciting than the first work under his name (in the long by him used German language): Beiträge zur

Right from the beginning of our relationship, and marriage soon after in 1969, I was confronted with Edi's hobby and passion: malacology. When he was fortunate to obtain a position as curator in the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie, as Naturalis was called at the time, the optimum combination was found. As so few positions were available in this field he counted himself extremely lucky. This event had a great influence on our future as I also decided to adjust my medical career and stay in the field of medical research, not taking up a clinical specialization. Leiden and the Museum of Natural History were going to be our base for what has turned out to be a wise and perfect decision. Now after more than 40 years and retirement Edi still loves his profession; during the last year he has been active in trying to secure a continuation, at his own pace, in the field of malacology. For me this is also a dream come true, because with two grown-up sons (one has followed his father's interest, but this time in the field of marine biology), Edi and I can resume some of our adventurous snail hunting expeditions. It is fascinating as we will most probably return to several fantastic locations because techniques have changed from collecting shells and dried animals inside to actual DNA collecting as Edi refers to it at present.

I would like to share with you a short overview and some highlights and anecdotes of our journeys over the last 40 years. My first memory of collecting snails was on our honeymoon at Lake Garda, where he spent one hour collecting some snails from a little stone wall and carefully, somewhat shy, introduced me to these beautiful sculpted shells. That was all. Later on he informed me that he didn't know whether I would appreciate this sort of collecting. Most probably I was a bit too enthusiastic because after that for almost 20 years all our holidays were in fact snail hunting excursions. I loved that combination as there always was a plan, something new or exciting to be discovered usually somewhere in remote areas. So we soon fell into a rhythm in which two or sometimes three times a year, mostly in spring or autumn, we would go to the Balkans. Curiously enough (I have never quite understood why), we never went collecting in Spain as his PhD thesis was on Chondrininae mostly from the Spanish Pyrenees. We did visit colleagues there several times, and I remember gaining five kilos being pregnant with our first son Edi junior, because the Spanish like to spoil you with at least four meals a day including late evening dinners and additional sweets.



Fig. 1. Early sixties: Edi as a young malacologist in discussion with Mr Klemm in his living room in Vienna.

As regards collecting destinations Edi in the museum was an outsider as most of his colleagues were specialized in South East Asia and Indonesia. But Edi kept himself strictly to South East Europe, most probably initially stimulated by his senior Austrian colleague Walter Klemm (fig. 1). Our excursions slowly moved from the southern part of Austria and the Karawanken to Monte Negro and eventually Greece. It turned out that the most exciting new species were to be found either at high altitudes or deep in caves. The high altitude snails were always found just 100 metres from the top and although I enjoyed mountain-walking very much my absolute vertigo caused several anxious moments. So I was quietly relieved when, also because of the birth of our first son, we moved to Monte Negro where Edi changed his interest to cave snails. Edi jr. had his first birthday in Kotor and his second in Budva. For me these were long days of waiting while Edi with a few words of Serbo-Kroatian tried to interest the local people to take him to unknown cave entrances. The only guidance he had were instructions from a colleague, who had searched for cave spiders and the route descriptions were real puzzles at times. He found many new species and brought back adventurous stories about being lost in a cave once because he trusted a local boy too much on knowing the way. As I do not suffer from claustrophobia I sometimes joined in the cave searches and we even took Edi Jr. along in a backpack. He enjoyed the adventure very much. Soon the whole family learned to pick snails from the rocks (fig. 2) and an endless stream of plastic bags with toilet paper containing (live) snails were taken back home. Sometimes the contents of our luggage had a funny smell, but nothing too bad. Slibovitch proves to be a good preservative for slugs (which, by the way, are not my favourites).

After some years we had to move south to explore new caves. To Edi's great regret we could not, and still cannot, expand into Albania. So after some deliberations he initiated to his most ambitious project: the exploration of the Ionian Islands of Greece. Having two children at that time it turned out to be the most ideal choice in combination with a family. Our first trip was to Corfu where we stayed in Benitses, rented a car and drove to all parts of the islands. We were lucky to meet a Dutch tourist guide, Vicky Tsatsa, who helped Edi in finding locations of caves. The local Greek people in general proved to be far less supportive to join in tracing caves. What still surprises me is that we always had to search for snails that had been described at the beginning of the last century, and had never been found again. A real highlight was the rediscovery of a cave in the Pantocrator (Katsuri), only accessible by squeezing through a narrow passage, with inside several shells of a beautiful white, small snail, *Sciocochlea collasi* Sturany, 1904. Although Edi returned several times, to his regret he never found a live specimen. From Corfu we went south to Cephalonia and Ithaka. During one trip to Cephalonia, where we stayed in Passion End (which was meant to be Pension and ...) above a very hot pizza restaurant, we traveled through a narrow gorge to Poros. Here I found my only, but very significant, species. Getting out of the car just to have a look at the straight cliff surface I saw a beautiful highly ribbed slender snail and cried out, poking my head through the car window, this is a new species! Edi named this species after me: *Albinaria adrianae* Gittenberger, 1979. I do not know whether it is a compliment or not but the species proved to be highly promiscuous and produced many bastards! For years it was investigated by PhD students and it features in many papers, on the front of a thesis and eventually on ties Edi wears after I took up silk painting.

Eventually we came to Kithyra (where the four of us stayed cramped in a car for one night after getting lost), and Antikithyra, where we had to live on fishes caught by our sons in order to survive as the ferry passed us by. Every trip always brought unexpected new discoveries and I became confident that we never, however small the place, would go to a location once. Coming home not only with plastic bags but also with kilos of bottom samples, Edi always discovered something exciting, new or unexpected, implying that we should return "as soon as possible". Edi Jnr. and Arjan loved those trips and proved to be valuable amateur malacologists and sampling went at a much higher speed and greater diversity. Sometimes we were confronted with interesting local customs like the time when I sat crocheting at a well. A perfectly innocent occupation which attracted the locals, and we were invited to see the holy snakes that had just appeared at that time and were kept in a glass jar in the church. Later on Edi published the story (if you are interested in the details, see Gittenberger & Hoogmoed, 1985).

It became time to move to the Peloponesos and co-incidentally a cardiology colleague from Greece brought us into contact with the American Greek family of Tsoukatos in Leonideon. The Greek family house was our destination for more than 12 years and also turned out to be a great holiday place as the high school period of our sons did not coincide with extensive excursions in spring and autumn. Caves were also found there (fig. 3), although our searching was not much appreciated as they were the local source of drinking water. However, some cave snails can even be found along ugly looking newly excavated roads. With his last new discovery of such a "surfacing" cave snail he returned within a week to Greece after coming home!

Our last destination for many years was Crete, which combined collecting trips and beautiful, sometimes strenuous, walks. I remember how disappointed I once was when the snail marked the previous season with a bright pink spot of nail polish, could not be found the next year.

Slowly Edi spread his interest through a university appointment as Professor of



Fig. 2. The next generation: Edi jnr, two years old, collects snails from a limestone cliff wall in Montenegro.



Fig. 3. Surfacing of the "three boys" from a small cave entrance in a hill north of Leonideon, Greece, where not only snails but also extremely large translucent white caterpillars were seen on the walls.



Fig. 4. Excursion to Zagoria, with view of the Vikos gorge in northern Greece in 2008 featuring myself and Edi, who holds the well known plastic bag with of course a species that is rare and special for that region, as always!

Systematic Zoology to an ever increasing group of students, some of whom wrote their PhD thesis on e.g. *Albinaria*. Evolutionary biology questions replaced mere descriptions of new species. At this time there was also a marked change in the atmosphere of our social conversations. The latter discussions, of course, also when Edi accompanied me on medical meetings, set the scene at dinners as they were exciting and somewhat different. The search for a specific snail in France on the premises of a mental hospital, where Edi was crawling about on all fours, is still remembered by my colleagues at this time.

Also, the way to distinguish species was at times no longer by their shell sculpture or interesting radula, but had moved to the anatomy of the genital organs. I must say that reference to a long and tortuous penis and other genital terms sometimes caused giggling or shocked responses from the audience. This has now all turned for the better as molecular techniques are the way to investigate the difference in species. It is highly remarkable to me, however, how close the results from the classical investigation techniques resemble the phylogenetic maps of the molecular biology data.

This brings me to current situation where Edi and I will return once again to our initial adventurous excursions (fig. 4). We would like to plan several trips a year to new and old locations on the hunt for snail DNA and we hope to regain a less management directed life style after retirement. Our interest has now expanded from mountains and caves to marine life and even South East Asia. After Edi learnt to swim, snorkel and scuba dive in recent years, I am not sure that he will not follow his son Arjan and start an investigation of *Epitonium* s.l. or other new species to be discovered. The future is bright.

REFERENCE

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