

IN MEMORIAM

Richard Paul Korf (1925–2016): leading specialist on discomycetes and inspiring mentor

The life of Dick Korf (28 May 1925–20 August 2016) was a long and varied one. As a mycologist he had an amazing influence on this discipline inspiring a significant number of students who went on to become prominent scientists throughout the world. He was an unabashed lover of systematics, especially the fieldwork that is an essential part of this area of interest. He was generous, fun-loving (Fig. 1), and kind, opening his home and sharing his family with a host of itinerate mycologists who came to Ithaca, New York, to study with him. First and foremost, Dick Korf loved his wife Kumi (Fig. 2) and their four children, Noni, Mía, Ian, and Mario. Originally from Japan, Kumi is an outstanding artist and all their children have become successful, productive professionals with families of their own.

Dick started life as the child of a relatively wealthy family who lived just north of New York City where he attended a private boarding school. Having entered Cornell University intending to become a gentleman farmer of Cornish game hens (as I remember it), he soon switched to mycology under the influence of Harry M.

Fitzpatrick (1886–1949) completing his PhD in 1950. With the untimely death of his major professor, Dick joined the faculty of the Department of Plant Pathology at a relatively young age. He was thus the major professor for several students who were about his age or older. He started as Assistant Professor in 1951 and eventually served as full Professor of Mycology, Department of Plant Pathology, Cornell University, from 1961 to 1992.

Dick Korf's doctoral dissertation was a monographic account of a group of very small but beautiful fungi, "A monograph of the *Arachnopezizae*"; these generally occur on dead wood. This stimulated his interest in the smaller inoperculate discomycetes referred to *Leotiales* as well as the larger operculate discomycetes of *Pezizales*. To this day his students and grandstudents are continuing the study of these difficult fungi. His 1973 key to the genera of the *Pezizales*, which appeared in the seminal Vol. 4A of *The Fungi: an advanced treatise* (Ainsworth GC, Sparrow FK, Sussman AR, eds), was used by generations of mycologists and is yet to be replaced. This was one of the first synoptic keys in which one can use any

set of characters to identify an unknown specimen, and this set the example for numerous future synoptic keys.

Fieldwork was Dick's passion, and he partook of it wherever possible. He collected avidly in the environs of Ithaca, especially in Ringwood Forest Preserve, but he also received National Science Foundation (NSF) grants to conduct fungal surveys of the Lesser Antilles (Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Dominica) and Macaronesia (The Azores, Madeira, and Canary Islands), amongst others, in which field work was a central activity. Collecting with Dick was definitely an experience. He often budgeted for two students but managed to include four or six by, as I recall, bunking in seedy bungalows in town or staying at abandoned, moss-covered, cement field houses with cold showers and rudimentary kitchens where dinner might be canned soup on rice. During the day he and his students wandered slowly through the rain forest sitting on the ground to pick up leaf litter searching with a hand-lens for minute but colourful apothecia. If an apothecium was found and following a shout of "peziza!", everyone would check out the specimen



Fig. 1. Richard P. Korf attacking a "roast" made from Quorn, a fungal meat-like product, 2005.



Fig. 2. Richard P. Korf with his wife Kumi, 2000.



Fig. 3. Richard P. Korf as Elias Fries, International Mycological Congress 1994, Vancouver, BC, Canada.

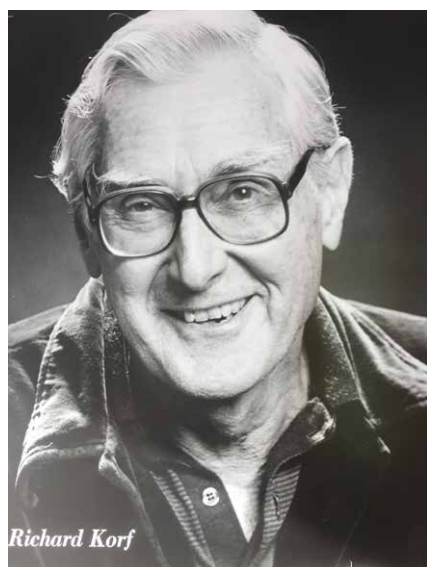


Fig. 4. Richard P. Korf, promotional photo as professional actor.

to develop a search image of the fungus often on the darkened midvein of a tattered skeleton of a leaf. Then all eyes would look for the same species. With effort twenty to fifty apothecia of these usually host-specific fungi would be found, later to become part of the *Discomycetae Exsiccatae* (1954–2009) of which several hundred numbers were issued.

The most fun times were evenings around the microscope attempting to identify what had been collected during the day. Chatting away, happy and obviously in his element, Korf would make a section of an apothecium to determine the tissue type of the exciple, put it under the travelling microscope and let everyone have a look. Someone would read aloud from the keys in various books and papers that he had brought. Finally, a generic or rarely a species identification would be made and the cleaned specimen inserted in a glassine (transparent paper) envelope, labeled, and placed on the field dryer. Someone else

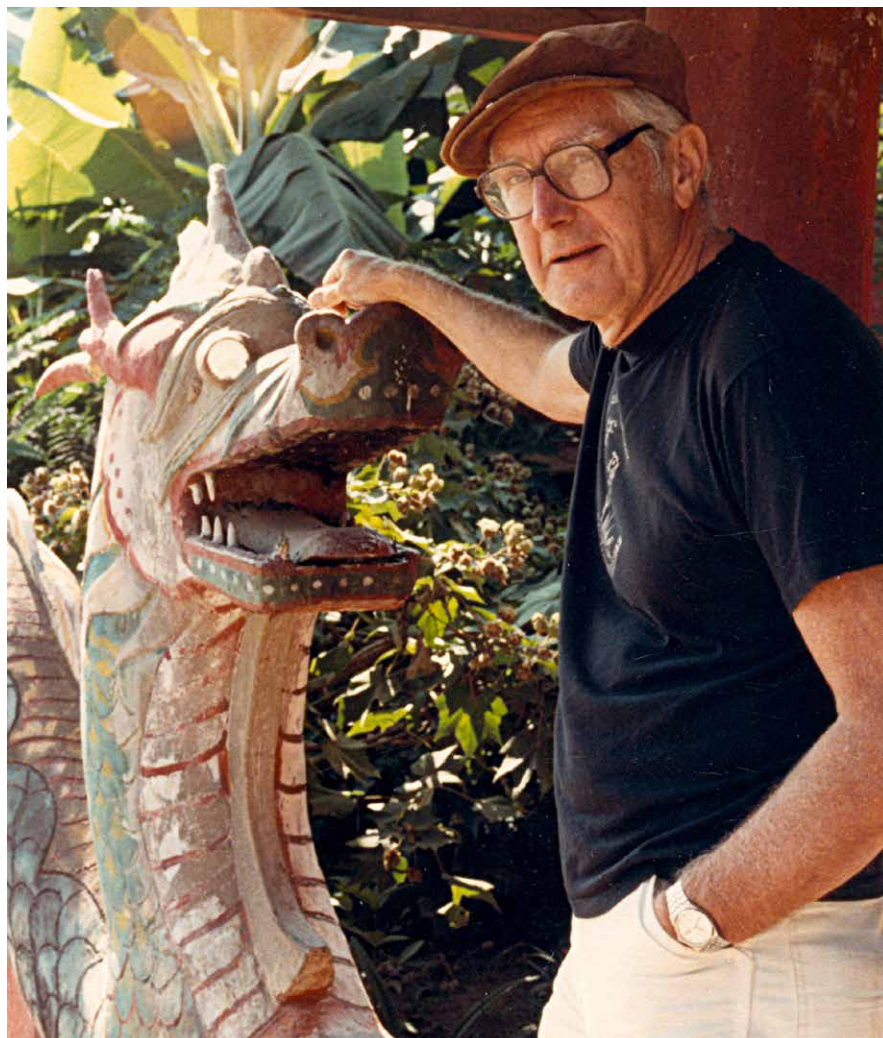


Fig. 5. Richard P. Korf at temple in Jing-Hong, China, 1988.

wrote in the field book giving CUP (Cornell University Plant Pathology Herbarium) numbers to each specimen and noting data for the collecting sites of the day. All present were listed as collectors. A few apothecia were glued to the top of a small Petri plate with media hopefully to obtain a culture from ascospores. The next morning the hundred or so crispy bags with their dried treasure were each carefully folded from the top, stapled shut and placed in a plastic bag that was sealed to keep them dry. Some of us learned the hard way that nothing stays dry for long in these tropical areas—that's why the fungi are so omnipresent!

Dick obviously enjoyed his students, believed in them, and wanted them to be successful. As such he encouraged them to attend scientific meetings doing whatever he could to ensure that they managed to get there. This included towing his own pop-up camper staying with his students in a campground near the meeting site. In his later years Dick arrived at a meeting with

a long gray ponytail beneath a red cap in the days when long hair for men, especially older men, was not common. There was a lot of tittering among the mycologists with comments both negative and positive about what a character Dick was. On the last day he casually removed his cap with the fake ponytail much to the relief of the more conservative members of the group. In 1994, at IMC5 in Vancouver, British Columbia, and on the occasion of the 200th birthday of Elias M. Fries (1794–1878), father of mycology, he dressed as Fries, complete with 19th century Swedish clothes and a wig (Fig. 3) expounding on the amazing changes in the study of fungi as observed by his 200 year old perspective with a Swedish accent. This occasion combined his sense of mycological history with his love of acting (Fig. 4).

Dick contributed in numerous ways to the Mycological Society of America, holding offices at all levels, including President in 1971, and receiving the most prestigious

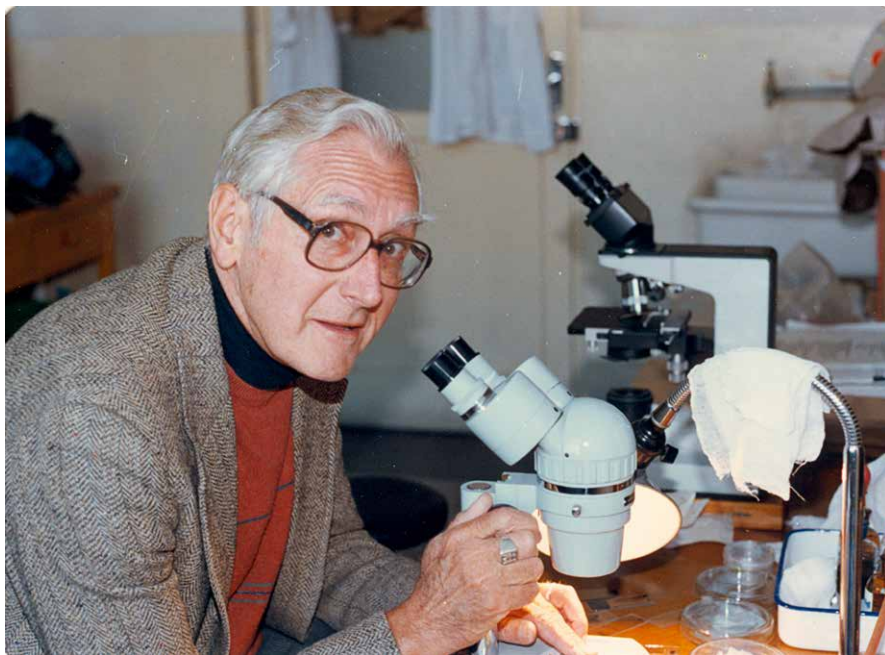


Fig. 6. Richard P. Korf, at the microscope as guest scientist at the National Key Laboratory of Mycology, Chinese Academy of Science, Beijing, China, 1988.

award of Distinguished Mycologist in 1991. Seeing the need for the rapid publication of systematics research, along with his good friend Grégoire L. Hennebert, he started the journal *Mycotaxon* in 1974 which has recently published volume 131. Initially issued as reproduction of camera-ready copy, the appearance has improved with technology such that it has achieved relative prestige in mycological circles. By requiring open review by peers, *Mycotaxon* has furthered the career of numerous young mycologists from less developed countries putting them in touch with more experienced scientists. Dick would

work hard improving articles by authors whose native language was not English, doing whatever it took to get their research published.

One of Dick's contributions was to the development of mycology outside the United States, especially through his students from other countries. He was helpful in the development of mycology in China. He generously repatriated fungal specimens that originated in China but had been rescued from destruction during time of war and housed in CUP. At the invitation of his doctoral student Wen-ying Zhuang,

he visited China twice, presenting lectures on fungal nomenclature at the Institute of Microbiology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and collecting discomycetes in Yunnan as well as working on collections in Beijing (Figs 5–6).

Many of us owe our mycological lives to Richard Korf and for that we greatly appreciate him. We will miss his outspoken opinions even as he became an avowed “curmudgeon” about the many changes taking place in mycology. He had an amazing knowledge of the history of mycology and a passion for the fungi that he shared with everyone. Bon voyage, Prof!

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[Note: A fuller account of Korf's life and contribution is being prepared for publication in *Mycologia* by Donald H Pfister, Harold H Burdsall, Teresa Iturrriaga, Linda M Kohn, and Amy Y Rossman. A list of his 340 publications from 1948–2011 is available on the *Mycotaxon* website (<http://www.mycotaxon.com/pubsRPK.html>). See also the citation for the Ainsworth Medal of the IMA presented at IMC9 in Edinburgh in 2010 in *IMA Fungus* 1(2): (15–16), 2010; on becoming Mi-shou in *IMA Fungus* 4(1): (15), 2013; and celebration of his 90th birthday in *IMA Fungus* 6(1): (20), 2015. – Ed.]

Janos Varga (1961–2016)

On 15 June 2016 Janos Varga passed away at the age of 54. He was borne in Dorog (Hungary) and took his academic degrees in the József Attila University, Faculty of Science, Szeged. In 2006 he received his Doctor of Science degree of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Janos spent postdoc positions in the Departments of Genetics in Birmingham and Wageningen. In 2006–2008 he did research at the CBS-KNAW Fungal Biodiversity Centre, Utrecht. In this last period he was very productive and wrote more than 50 peer reviewed papers and edited two books. Since 2011 he was an active member of the IUMS International Commission of *Penicillium* and *Aspergillus*. In the mycological community Janos was

respected for his knowledge of the phylogeny of *Aspergillus* and other hyphomycetous genera. In addition to various aspects of *Aspergillus*, his extensive publication list contains more than 175 papers on medical fungi and mycotoxins. Janos also initiated the discussion about the single nomenclature of *Aspergillus* and he provided phylogenetic evidence which was important for the decision made by the International Commission on Penicillium and Aspergillus (ICPA) in April 2011. The members of ICPA, but also many other mycologists will miss him as a colleague and friend.

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