

## **M. Nechama Ben-Eliahu, 4 January 1935 – 23 March 2014. Obituary and some personal reminiscences**

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*Nechama Ben-Eliahu was born in New York City in 1935. After a B.A. and M.A. at Indiana University she initially embarked on a teaching career. A lecture by David Ben-Gurion (Israel's prime minister at the time) that she attended in the early 1960s turned out to be a life-changing experience and she decided to emigrate to Israel. She arrived in Israel as a single mother with a young son on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 1962. Years later she would still celebrate that date as the most important day in the year, even more significant than her birthday. She initially settled in Haifa, first working as a teacher, but soon taking on a research position at the Sea Fisheries Research Station in Haifa, working on a major joint research project of the Smithsonian Institute and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem sorting invertebrate taxa from the Red Sea and the Mediterranean.*

Ariel: When Nechama would talk about her work on serpulids, she often told the story of how she came to work on this obscure taxon. When she first joined the staff of the Sea Fisheries Research Station, she was told she could choose between echinoderms and polychaetes. She asked to look at some samples to decide. An average sample included no more than five species of echinoderms, which could all be easily identified to species. Such a sample included over 20 species of polychaetes, none of which could be identified easily. It was immediately obvious to her which she should pursue.

Harry: My first – at the time still infrequent – contacts with Nechama must go back to the early 1970s when Por's publication about Lessepsian migration in *Systematic Zoology* caught my attention, and Nechama started to publish on that topic too. I forgot the exact year, but she still lived in Beersheba. We mainly exchanged reprints, an occasional piece of information or check on identification of serpulids. My first



M. Nechama Ben-Eliahu at the 10th International Polychaete Conference, Lecce, Italy, in June 2010 (photograph by Sergio I. Salazar Vallejo).

brush with the “peoples’ person” she was occurred during the 1st International Polychaete Conference in Sydney, 1983. Soon after that came the first of a couple of visits to the Netherlands, during which she generally was based at least some part in our home in Nieuwegein.

*Soon after arriving in Israel, Nechama remarried, adopting her husband's two sons from a previous marriage as her own. She moved to the southern city of Beersheba, continuing her work on polychaetes, now as part of her Ph.D. thesis on the diversity of polychaete cryptofauna, under the joint supervision of Profs. Dov Por and Uriel Safriel from the Hebrew University. Her life was split between Haifa, Beersheba (where she also worked as a teaching assistant at the University of the Negev) and Jerusalem. After a few years in Beersheba, she moved to Jerusalem on her own, single once again, and lived in a flat in Jerusalem, where she hosted many guests and visitors over the years.*

Harry: In 1990 Nechama invited me to her apartment for a six-week period in Israel, three weeks of fieldwork to sample the ongoing Lessepsian migration, three weeks of labwork. Jerusalem proved to be a small world. When we had dinner with friends of hers, I recognized the church on a painting as the one I was married in; her friend had lived in the town where I went to grammar school and had been a regular visitor to my wife's neighbours. When she introduced me to my prospective diving buddy, Shmuel Pisanty, I did not immediately recognize his face, but she was even more surprised than I when Shmuel and I realised that we had enjoyed each other's cooking in 1967, both doing research in the Zoological Station in Den Helder (nowadays NIOZ), the Netherlands. Of course Nechama showed me around in the Biblical Zoo in Jerusalem, of which she was a board member, where she proudly showed me her visualized idea: animal footprints in concrete to educate the younger generation. Nechama and I had long and sometimes heated discussions over material, interpretations, emerging texts, whatever. The result of the fieldwork and those discussions was published in 1992. On a later occasion in Nieuwegein, I heard her admit to my wife that she sometimes contradicted me just for the sake of the argument. She appreciated very much that I arranged a meeting with the director of the Royal Amsterdam Zoo, Artis Natura Magistra, whom I happened to know. That time, by the way, we again found out that it is a small world: visiting a mill-museum in Holland we stumbled across one of her political friends from Jerusalem!

Ariel: Nechama's life moved in many different circles, and she knew a huge number of people. There was the circle of zoologists (Polychaete lovers and others) – both in Israel and abroad – who all seemed to be her best friends. There was the circle of the American community in Jerusalem, where she was very active and apparently known by everyone. There was the circle of the Biblical Zoo, where she was an active board member. And, of course there was political activity. Nechama devoted almost every spare minute to politics. She was a regular demonstrator for peace, reconciliation and understanding with our Arab neighbors. She was constantly handing out flyers, standing at vigils or marching in protest. She became an active member of the liberal party Ratz, which later reformed to give rise to Meretz. Here also she was an active board member, knew all of the members of parliament and city council personally (and had all of their respect). She frequently said to me that she made a decision to devote a certain percentage of her time (I think she said 10%, but it was closer to 50%) to make this country a better place for her children and grandchildren. She lost a granddaughter to a terrorist attack, and this only made her resolve stronger to continue acting for Peace.

Harry: Amongst others we shared a passion for politics, she to the far left, we (my wife and I) to the right of the middle (we have a lot of political parties in the Netherlands, even more than in Israel). Being an active member of the "Peace Now" movement, she regularly demonstrated against the settlement policy and for solidarity between all inhabitants of Israel. She told us that she often had been abused by pedestrians during

those demonstrations. Nevertheless she persisted in these efforts even after her 17 year old granddaughter, whom we had visited together in 1990, was killed in a Hamas suicide attack in 2003. Another common trait was our love for animals, hers for cats, mine for dogs. I vividly remember the devastation in her face when, in our living room, she was informed by phone that her cat in Jerusalem had disappeared.

*Upon completing her Ph.D., Nechama remained at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, as the curator of aquatic invertebrates in the National Natural History Collection. Nechama's public and scientific activity earned her many accolades. She was chosen as an honorary citizen of Jerusalem for her work in the Zoo and other public activity. She was also made an honorary member of the Zoological Society of Israel for her work on Lessepsian migrants.*

Ariel: I first met Nechama as a graduate student. I had no interest in serpulids or any other worms at the time (my work was on amphibian development). Even though I knew nothing of her work, she had a very clear presence in the department. Her general liveliness and optimism were extremely contagious, and she was well-liked by everyone. She was the "older sister" of many of the graduate students in the department, and volunteered to do English editing for everyone's papers and presentations.

Harry: But of course we often talked shop, more and more calcareous tubeworms, though she kept an interest in other polychaetes as well. In 1986 she came to Amsterdam with an outline of a manuscript on some extremely small worms she had from the Red Sea and Cyprus, which she believed to be new to science and wanted to give the Arabic name *Hadiya* (gift). However, I had the feeling having seen a description (and drawing) of an operculum very similar, if not the same, in papers by Bush and Straughan, and advised her to have a good look at those papers. A year later I was sent a manuscript for review by a well-known journal. It was the same manuscript, finished but without what I thought were essential modifications. She dearly wanted to make the statement included in *Hadiya*. I phoned the editor and told him that I hardly could remain anonymous, since I could only give the same comments as a year before. He asked me to review the paper anyhow, so I bought a different daisy wheel for the printer (she would recognize my lettering from my frequent letters), asked my colleague to write some remarks in the margin of the manuscript, and sent off an "anonymous" review. After a couple of months Nechama sent me a letter asking my advice on two reviews she had received, one by Helmut Zibrowius and one a very long set of comments by an anonymous reviewer, almost as long as the original manuscript. I could only confess that I had been that anonymous reviewer, and she immediately asked me to come in as second author. Once interested, she could be very tenacious, and in this case even went to the USA again to find new material in Bush's dry coral collections. Mind you, the tubes are hair thin and the dry opercula slightly over 0.1 mm wide! The rest you can read in our 1989 publication.

Ariel: When I returned from my post-doc to a faculty position at the Hebrew University, I was made academic curator of the aquatic invertebrate collection – the same collection that Nechama was the (now retired) curator of. Not having a background in natural history collections, I was greatly helped into the new position by Nechama and her great experience and passion for natural history. We became very close in the last few years, talking almost daily, often over lunch. We talked about a wide range of subjects, as wide as Nechama's interests, from science and zoology, through university politics and, of course, frequently about national politics. I heard many stories from her about the Golden Years of the Collections; her field work in the Suez Canal weeks after the end of the 1967 war; the great collecting expedition in the Western Mediterranean on board the *Meteor*; wading in boots in the mud near Haifa Harbor; her trips around the world to the International Polychaete Conferences (I think she attended every one of them, except for the last one in Sydney). The last meeting she went to was the one in Lecce. She brought me the conference T-shirt as a gift, and I still wear it and think of her.

Harry: I mentioned her capacity for tenaciousness. My preferred animals are big and showy, or with nice and very distinctive opercula thought to be clear-cut species, such as the X-mas tree worms *Spirobranchus* and *Hydroides*. She nevertheless lured me into small to very small worms three times, with *Rhodopsis* (above), with the mistakes made in juvenile *Hydroides* (published 2005), and the taxonomic mess of *Salmacina*. Admittedly, we have not solved the last problematic taxon, one would need DNA for that, but found at least some useful characters, which I until then had thought impossible. Her Magnum Opus (with some help from my side) of course was *Serpulidae (Annelida: Polychaeta) from the Suez Canal—From a Lessepsian Migration Perspective (a Monograph)*, 2011. Her drive made us even search for additional data for this reconstruction in time – of serpulid settlement in the Suez Canal – in dry tubes attached to molluscs in Naturalis, painstaking work which in Dutch would be called “monks’ work”! With her impulsive continuous improvements, even when I was in the middle of editing parts, she made me mad and almost drove me crazy, but finally a lot of work came together in this paper.

Ariel: About 4 years ago she went into hospital for what supposed to be a routine operation, during which it was discovered she had cancer. A series of medical errors and complications led to the fact that for the last few years of her life she was in and out of hospitals. She didn't lose her optimism or her energy. She continued to come to work whenever she could (despite being retired for over 10 years). She would always apologize if she missed a day's work because of a doctor's appointment or because she wasn't feeling well. I had to argue with her to convince her that it perfectly legitimate not to come to work under these conditions, and we are all happy to see her, but nobody would be angry with her if she didn't come in. She made the last edits to her monograph and went over the final proofs, while in the hospital, much to the surprise (and respect) of the hospital staff. As a sign of gratitude, she invited the entire staff of the ward she was in to a guided visit to the Zoo.

Harry: The last years, especially after she had been diagnosed with cancer, we spoke (and sometimes saw) each other almost every two weeks by phone (or on Skype). Even then she remained a “peoples’ person”, worrying about others. In hospital November 2011 she called to inform me that her email account had been hacked and misused (which I had noticed an hour before) to solicit money from her contacts. She asked me to warn the annelid community. Unfortunately the begging proved to be successful with one of her local acquaintances. Nechama always was very reticent to talk about herself, notwithstanding the fact that she was perfectly aware that both my wife and I know cancer first hand, and as a straightforward Dutchman I can ask very direct questions. She always enquired about our health, and that of the children/grandchildren, and indeed kept us informed on the (family) situation in Israel. Summer 2013 she decided not to go to the 11th International Polychaete Conference in Sydney, she had not missed a single one before, sent me the presentation of her intended talk, but nevertheless told me she hoped to go to the next conference in three years time. Typical for her state of mind. After that her scientific communications dwindled to nil, although she tried, the effort proved to be too strenuous. However, even a few weeks before the end she still showed a student, interested in *Spirobranchus* and with whom I was exchanging information, specimens present in the Hebrew University Collections. When she was not on Skype any longer, nor answering mails, I knew that her situation was bad. Some 10 days before she died I last heard her voice over the phone, weak as the way she felt. Amongst my colleagues, Nechama ranked as a friend. I will miss her.

Ariel: In 2012 Nechama and I got a joint grant to look at Mediterranean serpulids, repeating the survey done by her and Harry 20 years earlier. Work on this project filled the last years of her life. She was not able to do sampling herself, so we hired a professional marine biologist to sample for us. I went with her to meet him on the Kibbutz where he lives on the Mediterranean coast, and she taught him how and where to sample. She waded into the water (frail as she was), and pulled specimens out with her hands. I think this was the last time she was “in the field”. About a week before her death a sample of serpulids arrived for her to go over. Sadly, she never had a chance to see them.

*Nechama Ben Eliahu passed away late in the evening of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 2014. Her funeral was attended by several hundred people. The eulogies lasted for over 45 minutes (very unusual for Jewish funerals), with acquaintances from all her different circles speaking in her memory. They all praised her kindness, her wonderful cheerfulness and her total dedication to everything she did. She will be sorely missed by all.*

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