

IN MEMORIAM: HELMUT SICK, 1910–1991

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Helmut Sick, one of the towering figures of Neotropical ornithology, affectionately called Helmuti SICK, or simply SICK, by Brazilians, died in Rio de Janeiro on 5 March 1991 at age 81. About a year earlier, he had written Jürgen Haffer and Claus König (*Journal für Ornithologie* 133:103, 1992) that he had celebrated his 80th birthday, completely alone, enjoying the sounds of the Brazilian rainforest. How characteristic of him! Even though he had spent much of his life in the bustling, polluted, noisy, and overcrowded city of Rio de Janeiro, Helmut Sick was the quintessential Neotropical *field* ornithologist. Two habitats and their feathered denizens had especially fascinated him: the dark and moist rainforest (which he called *hy-laea*) and its opposite, the dry and sun-drenched cerrado.

Helmut Sick joined the AOU in 1947 and was elected an Honorary Fellow in 1983. He was also an Honorary Fellow of the Deutsche Ornithologen-Gesellschaft (DOG), the British Ornithologists' Union, and the Asociación Ornitológica del Plata in Argentina. In 1990, Charles Sibley—President of the 20th International Ornithological Congress (IOC)—appointed Helmut Sick as Honorary Vice-President. Sadly, illness prevented Sick from attending and enjoying this honor, which crowned 28 years of service (1958 to 1986) as the Brazilian representative on the International Ornithological Committee of the IOCs and eight years (1978 to 1986) on the Permanent Executive Committee, of which he had been made Senior Member (*membre honoraire*) at the 1986 IOC in Ottawa.

Helmut Sick was born in Leipzig, Germany, on 10 January 1910. He became interested in birds at an early age, and as a teenager developed what became a lifelong passion for avian vocalizations, which was no doubt reinforced by his musical ability and his extraordinary ear. The success of his early ornithological career can be judged by the fact that he became a member of the "Verein sächsischer Ornithologen" at 18, joined the DOG at 21, and became

Secretary of the DOG at 28. In 1933, he moved to Berlin to become one of Erwin Stresemann's doctoral students. His dissertation, published in the *Journal für Ornithologie* in 1937, is a seminal study of the functional morphology of the fine structure of feathers. At the 9th IOC in Rouen, France, in 1938, Sick, then at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Medical Research in Heidelberg, gave a talk about how feathers reflect the mode of life of birds. This was his last major work on feathers. Shortly after Sick had become assistant in the Ornithology Department of the Zoological Museum in Berlin, Stresemann suggested to the Second President of the DOG, Adolf Schneider, who was organizing an expedition to Brazil, that he take Sick along. This recommendation dramatically changed the course of Sick's life. Instead of returning to Germany, Sick remained in Brazil, where he spent the rest of his life and became the foremost Brazilian ornithologist of this century. Years later, Sick named a new species of Rhinocryptidae, *Merulaxis stresemanni*, to honor his mentor and to remind Stresemann that he had come to Brazil in 1939 on Stresemann's behalf.

Schneider and Sick sailed to Brazil in mid-1939. After field work in Espírito Santo, Rio de Janeiro, and Mato Grosso, they were still in Brazil in early 1942 while the Second World War was raging in Europe. Schneider returned to Germany in May 1942 but Sick did not and lived, hidden, in Espírito Santo. After Brazil declared war on Germany in August 1942, Sick was arrested and jailed on Ilha Grande near Rio. Remarkably, after his release in 1945, three long years later, he decided to stay in Brazil. In spite of inauspicious beginnings, he had fallen under the spell of the amazingly rich Neotropical birdlife. The rest, as they say, is history.

Between 1946 and 1959, Helmut Sick was employed by the Fundação Brasil Central (FBC), the government-sponsored organization created in 1943, whose goals were to open up the still largely uncolonized interior of central Brazil and to find ways of exploiting the land south of the Amazon. Sick led the natural history part

of the expedition, "to obtain a synthesis of the fauna and the flora of the recently discovered regions in Mato Grosso and Pará." This quote is from the preface to his popular book *Tukaní*, published in German in 1957 (later translated into English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Japanese). Sick also was keen to meet the Indians of central Brazil, and worked with the well-known brothers Orlando and Claudio Vilas Boas, leaders of the FBC expedition and champions of the Brazilian Indians' cause, for whom he named a new species of manakin, *Pipra vilasboasi*. In *Tukaní*, a book that should be mandatory reading for students of tropical biology, Sick narrated in easy prose the pleasures and frustrations of the expedition, as well as the habitats of central Brazil before their despoliation by colonists, which he called the neo-Brazilians. But he also watched with great alarm the innumerable fires set up by the Xavante in the cerrado, and described their disastrous effects on the landscape. Some of the wild areas Sick explored about 50 years ago are now easily accessible thanks to Br 163, the partially paved highway linking Cuiabá to Santarém.

Sick became a Brazilian citizen in 1952. In 1960, after his employment with the FBC, he became affiliated with the Museu Nacional de Historia Natural, located in the King's former palace in Rio's Quinta da Boa Vista. In addition, Sick also became a Member of the Brazilian Academy of Sciences. He remained at the Museu Nacional until his retirement in 1981 at age 71, as director of the ornithology section. But "retirement" for Sick meant that he could now devote even more time to writing his magnum opus, the two-volume *Ornitologia Brasileira, Uma Introdução*, which quickly went through three editions after its publication in 1985 (a thoughtful review was written by David Oren; *Auk* 103:249–250, 1986). This unique and highly personal book is a testimonial to Sick's phenomenal knowledge of the Brazilian avifauna. Hard to obtain, even in Brazil, *Ornitologia Brasileira, Uma Introdução*, fortunately was translated into English by William Belton and published in 1993 under the title *Birds in Brazil, A Natural History*. Non-Portuguese-speaking ornithologists owe a huge debt of gratitude to Belton for having brought to the world the results of Sick's 50 years of work on Brazilian birds.

According to Dante Martins Teixeira (*Ibis*

134:90, 1992), Sick published about 200 papers. About half of these are listed in Raymond A. Paynter, Jr.'s *Ornithological Gazetteer of Brazil* (1991). Because Sick published in three languages, it is possible that some people are unaware of his productivity. Based on a sample of 80 of Sick's papers on Brazilian birds in the library of the Department of Ornithology at the American Museum of Natural History, 43% are in Portuguese, 41% in German, and 16% in English. Sick was especially interested in such topics as faunistics (at least 9 papers), migration (5), and conservation (3), and in groups like swifts (at least 8), Caprimulgiformes (6), Pipridae (6), and cuckoos (3).

Helmut Sick helped shape the careers of many ornithologists, especially in Brazil. Thus, I count myself among the fortunate persons who fell under his tutelage. Dante Martins Teixeira, who now occupies the position that Sick once held at the Museu Nacional in Rio, wrote that Sick's "main contribution must be regarded as the establishment of modern scientific ornithology in Brazil" and that "Those of us who had the rare opportunity of beginning our ornithological research under Helmut Sick's guidance could hardly have asked for a better start."

Even though the above enumeration of the most salient facts about Sick's career should be sufficient to demonstrate his stature, I wish to end this memorial by paying a personal homage to Helmut Sick, the man. Ever since I first met him in Rio in 1965, I was struck by his courage, his generosity, and his humility. Courage in the 1940s because it must have been hard for him to stay in Brazil after three years of prison. (Given these difficult beginnings, it is no wonder that Sick derived special pride when he was made an honorary citizen of Rio de Janeiro in 1973.) Courage in 1977 when his beloved wife Marga died after battling cancer for nearly four years and he found himself without a mate. Not generosity of money, for Sick was never well-off, but generosity of heart. Helmut gave freely of his time and shared freely his vast knowledge of and enthusiasm for Neotropical birds. When I once expressed an interest in studying the endemic furnariid *Oreophylax moreirae*, Helmut immediately organized an expedition so that he could "show" me the bird. Unfortunately, he developed a bad knee before my arrival in Rio and I did not think he would be able

to come along. Nevertheless, he wrote: "Although I have a knee injury (a cracked meniscus) I would like to accompany you to Itatiaia, as I am not sure that you can find the bird there without knowledge of its voice." Helmut Sick was humble in the best sense of this term. Between 1964 and 1970, we corresponded about the origins of cerrado birds. Sick, 28 years my senior, had a vast knowledge of cerrado birds (I had none whatsoever at that time). Yet, he was asking my advice about problems of evolution in the cerrado avifauna! Last year, while in the cerrado of Mato Grosso and Goiás, not a

moment went by, not a bird flew by or vocalized, that I did not hold an imaginary discussion with Helmut Sick about the birds of "his" cerrado.

William Belton wrote perceptively that Sick's "career was one of devotion and abnegation, for he persisted in the face of economic and professional difficulties that the average scientist in other parts of the world rarely faces." And Carlos Drummond de Andrade described Sick well in his preface to *Birds in Brazil*: "Despite his prestige as a scientist, he [lived] with extreme modesty and simplicity, far from the clarions of publicity."