

ZOO VIEW

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Why I Really Miss My Late Friend Jozsef (Joe) Laszlo

ONE MAN'S *CROTALUS WILLARDI* IS ANOTHER MAN'S *LAMPROPELTIS*
ALTERNA. NO MAN CAN BE TRULY RICH OR FREE UNTIL HE REPRODUCES
BOTH IN CAPTIVITY!

—JOSEPH LASZLO, 1986

Younger herpetologists and herpetoculturists are likely familiar with the name Joe Laszlo (Fig. 1) from attending the International Herpetological Symposium (IHS) annual meetings but might not be aware of his enormous contributions—mostly through publications—on keeping amphibians and reptiles in captivity. I first met Joe when I worked at Zoo Atlanta in 1965 and we remained friends until his premature death in 1987. I was captivated by his boundless enthusiasm about all things herpetological. He was a wonderful raconteur, and his stories, told with a thick Hungarian accent, were punctuated with a suite of facial expressions and astounding imagery. Virtually every sentence ended with the word “Mon” (= Man). To get a sense of the travails and hardships experienced during his formative years in Hungary, read my papers on his life and accomplishments (Murphy 1987; Card and Murphy 2000; Murphy 2007). He was born in 1935 and his early life in Budapest was filled with foreign occupations: the Nazis during WWII and the Russians in the 1950s. German soldiers appropriated virtually all food so the Hungarian people were left with nothing. Joe remembered finding a dead horse in the street, cutting it into pieces, and dragging this home as food for his family. At that moment, he vowed never to suffer hunger pangs again.

He was conscripted into the Red Hungarian Army and was charged with guarding an ammunition warehouse. During the Hungarian Revolution in 1957, the Freedom Fighters asked him to give them the keys and so he did, necessitating an immediate exit from his country. When he finally arrived in the US, he could understand very little English but he bought a Greyhound bus pass and traveled the whole of the country. He chose places to visit based on author addresses in the herpetological journals he had begun keeping in primary and high school. When he arrived in Gainesville, Florida to visit Walter Auffenberg, he complained about the occupiers back in Hungary living with pigs and insisted they were primitive. Just then, Walt's pet javelina came into the house from the back yard and walked slowly through the living room and exited out the front door—Joe was incredulous and embarrassed.

Joe started his career at Crandon Park Zoo in Key Biscayne, Florida, followed briefly and tumultuously at Columbus Zoo under Lou Pistoia (Fig. 2). Pistoia fired him after a few weeks because he refused to crawl into the king cobra display to begin

cleaning the exhibit. The specimen was monstrous and the cage equally so. Pistoia insisted Joe simply go in and clean the glass but Pistoia did not believe in shift cages or attaching warning labels for exhibits housing venomous herps. Joe was not about to do this unprotected from the big snake but Pistoia insisted. Finally, Pistoia grabbed the spray bottle and paper towels and went in and did it himself. The snake, to which Pistoia was accustomed (and vice versa) lifted its head and crawled slowly from its corner to Pistoia and inspected him top to bottom while Lou stood quietly with arm on the glass. Satisfied, the snake returned to its spot and Pistoia finished the job, thoroughly humiliating Joe in the process.

Joe next worked at Ft. Worth Zoo under John Mehrstens (Fig. 3). Mehrstens did not allow feeding of live food. Joe was keeping a small group of saw-scaled vipers (*Echis*) that only accepted living rodents. Joe waited until he thought that John had left the building and started feeding live prey; his boss was hiding in the public area watching Joe in the glass reflection in another exhibit and saw this unpardonable sin. Mehrstens ran into the rear section and pulled the mouse from the snake's mouth. When I visited the Zoo, Joe was on his hands and knees cleaning the concrete floor

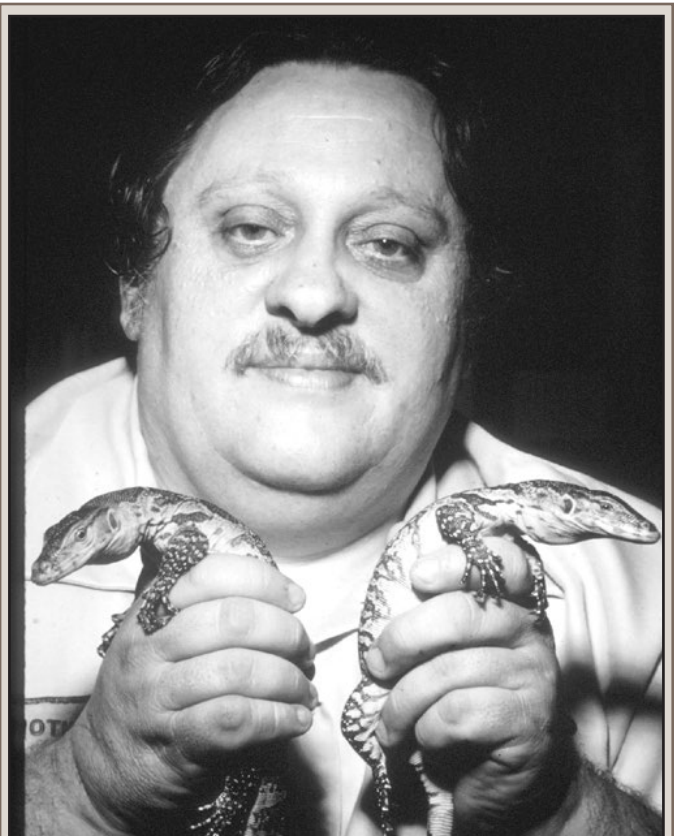


FIG. 1. Joe Laszlo holding newly-hatched Water Monitors (*Varanus niloticus*) at San Antonio Zoo in 1981.

PHOTO BY JOHN TASHJIAN

JAMES B. MURPHY

Division of Amphibians & Reptiles
Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History
10th and Constitution Ave NW, Washington, DC 20013, USA
e-mail: murphyjb@si.edu

PHOTO COURTESY OF COLUMBUS ZOOLOGICAL PARK ASSOCIATION



FIG. 2. Undated photograph of Louis Pistoia (at right).

PHOTO COURTESY OF STEVE DOBBS

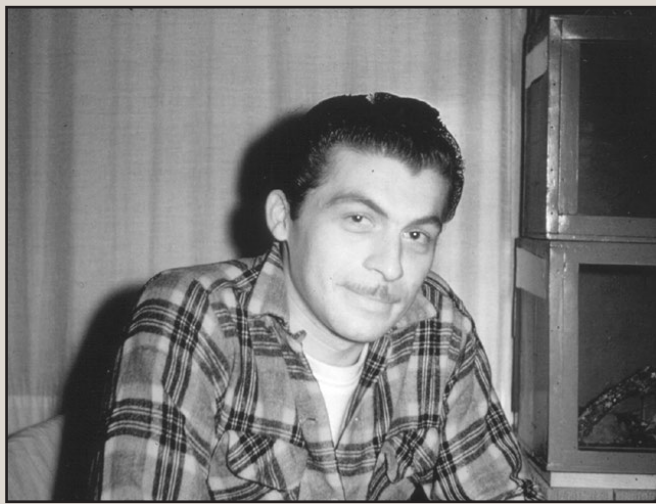


FIG. 3. John M. Mehrtens in the early 1960s in Dallas, Texas.

of the rear section with a toothbrush as punishment and loudly exclaiming that Mehrtens was a “Moniac.”

Colima, Mexico had several reptile dealers who often offered interesting reptiles from the region. Joe was proud of his newly acquired BMW sports car and decided to take it to Colima on its maiden voyage. When Joe visited the dealers, he purchased several gravid Mexican West Coast Rattlesnakes and Cantils to bring back to Fort Worth, Texas. As he started toward home, his new car shuddered a few times and expired. Since he was completely isolated in a remote region and replacement parts were unavailable, Joe worried that he would be forced to abandon his car. Amazingly, a fellow herper from Texas drove by in his pickup truck and noticed the stranded owner and vehicle. He offered to tow the vehicle back to Fort Worth but the only line available was a very short rope. They attached the rope to the vehicles and Joe steered the rear car as they set off for home. Since the herper was an avid road collector and speedy driver, every time a snake was seen on the road, he would slam on the brakes and retrieve it. Unfortunately, Joe’s reflexes were not keen enough to respond and he slammed into the reinforced bumper of the pickup truck during each sighting. Snakes were plentiful



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN WERLER

FIG. 4. John E. Werler (right) as Director of Houston Zoo with Tommy Logan (left, Curator of Reptiles) during the mid-1960s. See Werler obit (Herpetol. Rev. 2004, 35:313–315).

on the road and this catastrophe occurred rather frequently. When he reached Fort Worth, the front of his car was completely demolished and looked like a metal accordion. Furthermore, the recently purchased snakes had given birth during the return trip and the baby snakes escaped into his car where they had located every suitable hiding place. Although Joe tried to capture them when they were visible, he was mostly unsuccessful for there were many avenues of escape. Every morning, he searched for young snakes in his ravaged car, finding over 50 during a two-week period. He also discovered an adult Rock Rattlesnake (*Crotalus lepidus*) that had escaped months earlier; he told me that he had completely forgotten about that snake. I reminded him that it is always nice to have a driving companion.

Louis Porras recalls his time with Joe in Costa Rica in 1973. Much time was spent in the Atlantic drainage, where they found a lot of herps. Joe was insistent that he had to collect the beautiful Black-speckled Palm Pitviper (*Bothrops* [now *Bothriechis*] *nigroviridis*). They left San José—then to Escazú—and headed to Cartago. From Cartago these intrepid travelers kept driving on the Pan American Highway for about 50 km to the turnoff to Providencia, then followed a jeep trail for some time until finally reaching Providencia, which was more of an outpost in those days. The rains had started—so the window of time to search for the rare *nigroviridis* was very short. Joe was so enthusiastic to search for this snake that he immediately started trotting uphill on a trail—huffing and puffing—and Louie was trying his best to keep up with him. After Joe had gone about 300–400 yards, with Louie about 25 yards behind, Joe stopped, raised an arm and pointed, and began to jump up-and-down—as his face had turned purple and



FIG. 5. Crocodile wranglers with Joe Laszlo in center wearing dark coveralls at Houston Zoo in late 1960s.



FIG. 6. Andrew Smith published *Illustrations of the Zoology of South Africa* in 1838–9...Horned Viper (*Bitis caudalis*).

the veins on his neck looked like they were about to pop! Louie rushed to catch up with him, and sure enough, coiled on a thatch of leafless brambles growing on the edge of a steep ravine was a gorgeous “BO-TROPS NI-GRO-VI- RI-DIS”!

How to collect the snake was another matter, because if they started it, the snake might quickly drop down the ravine and disappear so they plotted a strategy. The best bet was for Louie to work his way down the ravine to a point directly underneath the snake, and climb back up and hold the bag open so Joe could use his hook to drop it into the bag. This took many minutes and Louie was a bloody mess from the thorns, but finally positioned himself under the snake and said, “Okay, I’m ready.” What he saw next was a sight never to be forgotten—instead of using a hook to maneuver the snake, Joe grabbed it, held it for a few seconds, before reaching down and gently dropping it into the bag. Not a minute later they were drenched in rain.

Joe moved on to Houston Zoo under Tommy Logan (Figs. 4, 5). His days in Houston were notable. Joe was holding a young Black Mamba and attempting to remove a dried, stuck shed skin. The snake twisted out of his grasp and tried to escape into the zoo through a gap beneath the door. Joe attempted to grab the snake, which bit him but fortunately the fang glanced off his thumbnail. The snake was discovered shortly thereafter in the zoo’s outdoor giant tortoise exhibit. Joe had a difficult time distinguishing venomous coral snakes (*Micrurus*) from false coral snakes (*Erythrolamprus*) since the enclosures were not



FIG. 7. Common Viper (*Vipera berus*) in A. E. Brehm’s *Les Merveilles de la Nature. Les Reptiles et les Batraciens* in 1883.

labeled. His solution was to free-handle both snakes to see if one attempted to bite him; if one did so, it was identified as a coral snake. Another task was to clean the Habu (*Trimeresurus* (now *Protobothrops*) *flavoviridis*) exhibit. To do this, he was required to remove the snake from the exhibit and place it in a garbage can while servicing the cage. To save time, he placed the snake on the rim of the can a few feet behind him, and then bent over to begin the cleaning. The habu, poised to strike, focused on the only target within reach—a human derriere. During the course of his duties, it just so happened that he backed up several times and pushed the snake’s head back with his rather substantial buttocks, disorienting the snake completely; there was simply too much area to strike!

Joe was casual about handling venomous snakes and his friends worried about his safety. When I went to Houston, I watched him hold a pan of dead mice in the Boomslang exhibit. The snakes shot down from the branches, crawled rapidly through the pan, wiggled through Joe’s fingers and started consuming the food; fortunately no accident occurred. On the same trip, I watched him flick a coiled Wagler’s Viper with his fingers to demonstrate how phlegmatic this species was when disturbed. Curator Tommy Logan asked Joe on many occasions to be careful and was exasperated that his advice was ignored. Since Joe was so sensitive, Tommy worried about hurting his feelings—the previous experiences with Pistoia and Mehrtens

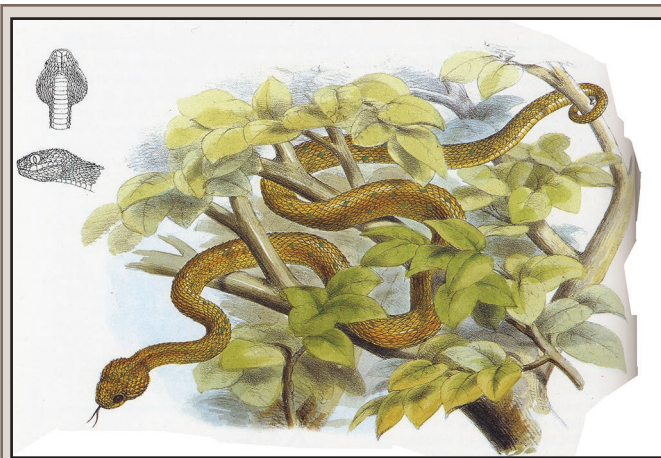


FIG. 8. Publications of London Zoological Society often included spectacular drawings between 1861–1921. This example is the Green Bush Viper (*Atheris squamigera*).

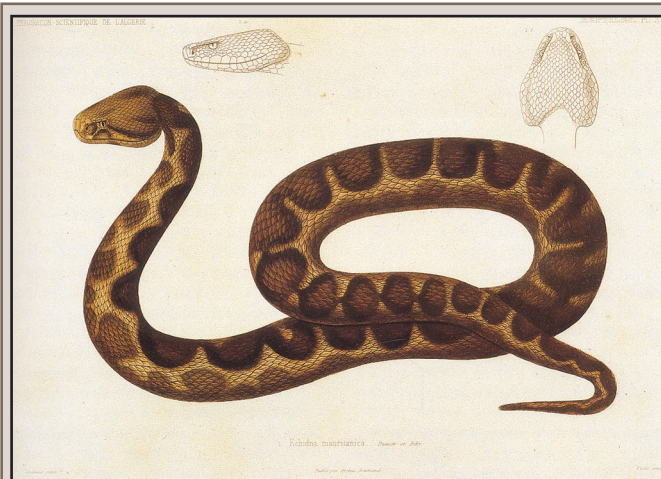


FIG. 9. African Viper (*Vipera mauritanica*) from Alphonse Guichenot, 1845–51.

had been so traumatic. When his boss saw Joe put his arm into the Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake (*Crotalus adamanteus*) display, housing three adult snakes which remained in resting coils, and take out the water dish, he asked me in desperation seeking advice. I suggested that he could change the composition of Joe's section to only exhibit non-venomous snakes.

In 1953, Roger Conant described a new subspecies of the Diamondback Watersnake, the Tabasco Watersnake (*Nerodia rhombifer werleri*) from Mexico, naming it in honor of his colleague, John Werler, Director of the Houston Zoo. The more common nominate form was the snake used to feed several King Cobras, so periodic shipments of the watersnakes arrived at the zoo from an animal dealer. Joe was told to feed several of the food snakes to the cobras. After the cobras had dined, Joe was told by another keeper that the snakes that he had used were, in fact, the very rare namesake of the Director and this serious transgression was grounds for immediate termination. Werler continued the ruse and berated poor Joe forcefully for his oversight and carelessness. Eventually, Joe was told the truth but some anxious moments preceded the confession.

When I traveled to Houston to see the rapidly expanding viper collection, Joe assured me that he had solved all of the

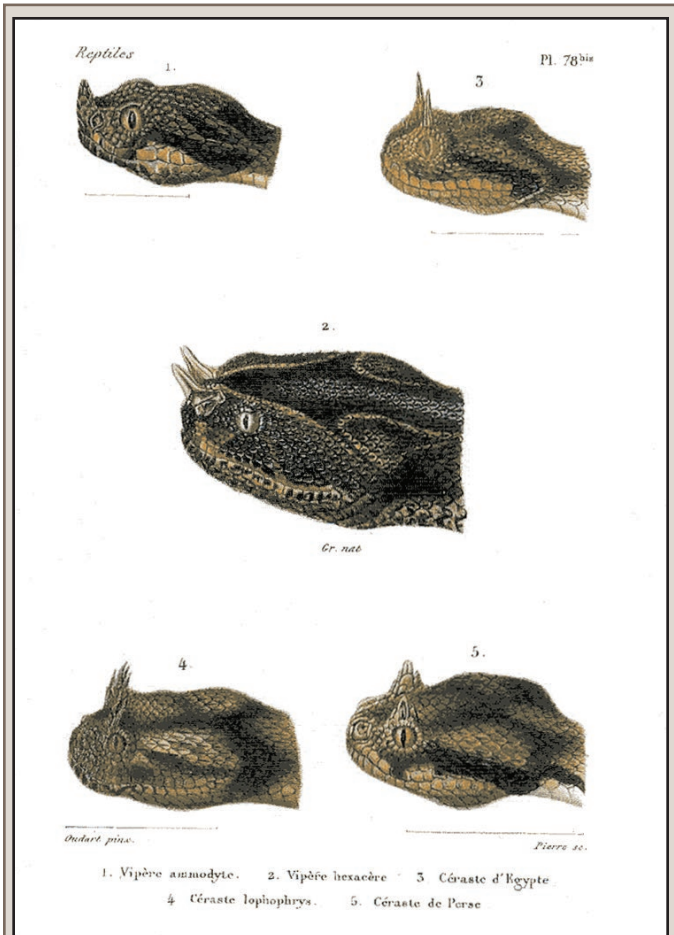


FIG. 10. Illustration of viper heads from *Erpétologie Générale ou Histoire Naturelle Complète des Reptiles* by Constant Duméril, Auguste-Henri-André Duméril, and Gabriel Bibron in 1834–1854. Current common and scientific names are #1 Sand Viper (*Vipera ammodytes*); #2 Rhinoceros Viper (*Bitis nasicornis*); #3 possibly Sahara Sand Viper (*Cerastes vipera*); #4 Many-Horned Adder (*Bitis cornuta*); #5 Persian Horned Viper (*Pseudocerastes persicus*).

issues for keeping them successfully—temperature, humidity, light, water, cage furniture, diseases, security, and so on. He finished by saying that there was only one problem that he had not solved but it was unimportant; when I asked what it was, he said “They DIE, Mon!” On that trip, when I asked how one should keep dinosaurs, Joe said, “You have got to keep them cool, Mon.” With that statement, he deftly solved the controversy surrounding dinosaur thermoregulation. When I was leaving for home, Joe walked to my car, talking non-stop through the open window about his discovery of new gadgetry for keeping reptiles. I wanted to see if he would move away from the car so I accelerated at a slow speed with Joe following along to continue his discussion on the merits of one device or another. I encircled an entire city block, returning to our starting point as he still was talking.

When I announced that I was to be married, Joe was concerned about what he perceived to be my limited lovemaking skills. He bought a paperback book called *The Joy of Sex* and insisted that I pay particular attention to the underlined sections in red ink and important notes in the margins. When I opened the book, all of the sentences were underlined with many notes in the margins written in the Hungarian language. Director John Werler

kept his substantial herpetological library in the reptile building office. When I picked up a copy of the rare *Thanatophidia of India* by Joseph Fayrer, sentences were underlined in ink with Joe's comments in the Hungarian language in the margins. I checked other rare books and some were defaced. When Werler discovered this he was, as to be expected, furious with Joe and did not speak to him for many weeks.

Herpetoculture flourished at the San Antonio Zoological Gardens where Laszlo had become superintendent of reptiles in 1970. The Zoo became recognized as a place where the tradition of captive management reached new heights with studies on critical husbandry parameters necessary to keep reptiles and amphibians successfully. Laszlo was certainly a pioneer in focusing on husbandry issues, and the IHS now issues an annual award in Joe's name to a person who significantly contributes to captive management. At IHS or other herpetological meetings, Joe would be seated in a comfortable chair, surrounded by a bevy of captivated admirers. Since he retained his native Hungarian accent and struggled a bit with English, these sessions occasionally were filled with malapropisms but they were always lively and often hilarious.

In San Antonio Zoo, he started a series of projects related to lighting, heating, cooling, and exhibition of reptiles and amphibians. A visit to view his collection was always exciting. Joe, with stupefying energy, opened virtually every enclosure, gave a detailed history of the inhabitant, recaptured those few creatures—some venomous—which had exited their cages as he was speaking, and presented detailed taxonomic information and literature citations for each. On one occasion, he asked if I knew where to find a cooling chip for a small aquarium. I suggested an alternative. Use an air conditioner to cool the whole rear section. During my next visit, I noticed an air conditioner hanging and running from the ceiling in the middle of the section. Joe was upset that the temperature still remained the same until I noticed that there was no exhaust duct to the outside. See Laszlo (1975 a,b; 1977; 1979 a,b,c; 1980; 1984) for his publications.

During our early years in the profession, a group of herpers from zoos mostly in Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana formed Zoo Fauna Association. We held monthly meetings at various zoos. When we came to San Antonio, Joe rounded us up into the keeper area to show his group of three adult False Water Cobras (*Hydrodynastes gigas*). He was struck by their ravenous feeding behavior so he wanted to demonstrate this to the assembled crowd. He threw a live gerbil into the exhibit whereupon it immediately bounded back out and dashed madly through our feet, followed by the snakes striking madly at anything that moved. It was remindful of a "mosh pit" at a rock concert where the attendees leap over each other in frenzy. Fortunately, no one was bitten but the risk was real—the Duvernoy's gland produces a secretion with high proteolytic activity. Besides the ability of this snake to inflict mechanical trauma, numerous cases of local envenomation have been recorded.

Joe's signature dish at these meetings was Chicken Paprikash accompanied by a special Cucumber Salad, using a traditional Hungarian recipe. He greatly enjoyed cooking for all of us and the final product was delicious, although a trip to the supermarket for ingredients could be unique. At the store, he peeled onions, crushed tomatoes in his hand to see if they were too ripe, broke off and ate cucumber ends and peppers to assess taste, unwrapped chicken packages covered with plastic wrap and pinched each piece, shook paprika from plastic containers into



FIG. 11. Rhinoceros Viper (*Bitis nasicornis*) from *Snakes* by Catherine Hopley in 1882.

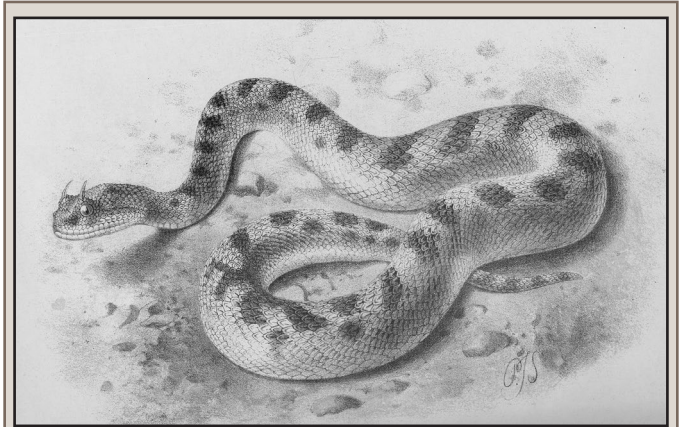


FIG. 12. Horned Viper (*Cerastes cerastes*) from John Anderson's *Zoology of Egypt* in 1898.

his hand and licked it clean, and tasted all covered containers of sour cream. He piled a mound of chicken pieces from various packages on one unwrapped Styrofoam tray and carried it to the checkout line, causing confusion as to how much Joe should be charged. When I asked why he did this, especially since we were drawing a crowd of onlookers, he said that was the way people shopped in Hungary and he was not about to change his ways. He finished by saying that he detested pre-packaged food, so common in U.S. stores. He explained in detail the secret of his feasting extravaganza—remindful of the movie *Fellini Satyricon*—as he was preparing and cooking; always follow each step religiously in sequence—peeling, trimming, slicing, dicing, cutting, and seasoning.

When Joe's daughter Melissa and my son James were born around the same time, we agreed to call one another when each said his or her first words. Some months later, Joe called and said his wonderful daughter had uttered her first words. When I asked what they were, Joe said "Burger King!"

Joe's mother still lived in Budapest and they had remained apart for decades. She visited Houston when travel restrictions were lifted to see her son. Someone alerted the local TV stations and she was met at the airport by a large group of reporters and cameramen, which was unnerving to her. Joe took her to the Galleria, boutiques, and supermarkets and she had a sensory

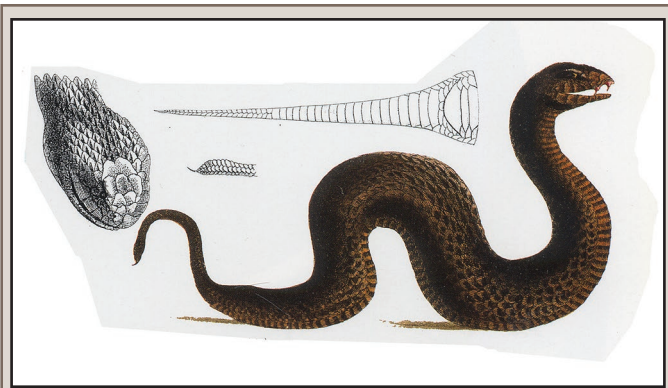


FIG. 13. William Elford Leach illustration of Common Death Adder (*Acanthophis antarcticus*) in *The Zoological Miscellany...* in 1814–17.

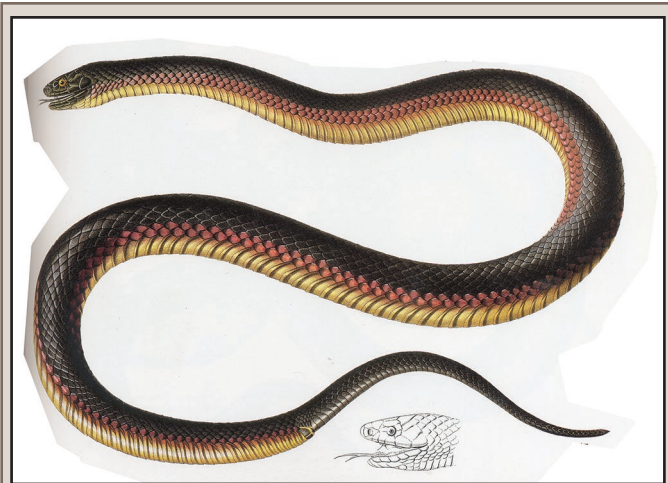


FIG. 14. Northern Death Adder (*Acanthophis praelongus*) in *Verhandelingen over de natuurlijke geschiedenis der Nederlandsche overzeesche bezittingen...* by Salomon Müller in 1839–44.

overload seeing all that “Stuff.” She was used to some empty shelves in smaller stores in Hungary. It was so traumatic that she insisted on returning home immediately and so she did.

Although interested in anything ophidian, Joe’s passion was directed toward reproduction in the Old World vipers (*Vipera*, *Bitis*, *Eristicophis*, *Cerastes*, *Pseudocerastes*, *Montivipera*, *Atheris*, etc.); he often said that he wanted to reproduce vipers in such numbers that...“The snakes would cover the world like Sherwin Williams paint, Mon.”

In 1987, I was doing research in South America. When I returned home and heard the news of his demise due to an aneurysm, I realized that he was my first herpetological friend to leave the planet. His loss cast an unbelievable gloom within the zoo community, as he was truly beloved. I wrote to dozens of colleagues asking them to share remembrances and outline his contributions to bind into a folder for daughter Melissa. Not surprisingly, about 100 replied and they all said roughly the same things—generous, enthusiastic, loveable, important, creative, and a wonderful storyteller.

Years later at IHS, I invited Melissa and her mother to give the Laszlo Award at the San Antonio meeting. Her thank you letter brought tears to my eyes for her handwriting was exactly like her father’s flamboyant and oversized script.

As an aside, the San Antonio Zoo has an impressive history of natural history research. John Werler was herpetological curator

in 1946 (see Kawata and Murphy 2004), then Bob Dellis followed by Laszlo, Curator John McLain, herpetologist Craig Pelke, and General Curator Alan Kardon. Danté Fenolio is the current Vice President of Conservation and Research. He has just published a spectacular book called *Life in the Dark: Illuminating Biodiversity in the Shadowy Haunts of Planet Earth* (Johns Hopkins University Press). What is truly remarkable is that all photos were taken by Fenolio, ranging from invertebrates to marine angler fish, and all of these images are awesome.

In honor of Joe’s memory, I have included images of some of his favorite vipers, including his particular love for death adders (*Acanthophis*), an interesting elapid radiation comprised of species that use their tail to lure prey (Carpenter et al. 1978; Chiszar et al. 1990) (Figs. 6–14). I still miss him.

Acknowledgments.—This paper is dedicated to Louis W. Porras, who worked with Joe Laszlo at Houston Zoo and shared many stories about their early days. He was the one who recommended creating the IHS Laszlo Award for excellence in captive management, and that organization later created the Porras Award in his honor. His herpetological contributions include managing editor of *Mesoamerican Herpetology*, a peer-reviewed, open-access, electronic journal dedicated to the study of the herpetofauna of Mexico and Central America, books and papers mostly on Neotropical herpetology, invasive species composition and ranges in the U.S., and a major player in IHS for many years. In 2002, he established Eagle Mountain Publishing, which specializes in the production of high-quality books in the biological sciences—(*Biology of the Vipers* [2002], *Rigor Vitae: Life Unyielding — The Art of Carel Pieter Brest van Kempen* [2006], *Biology of the Boas and Pythons* [2007], *Amphibians, Reptiles, and Turtles in Kansas* [2010], *Conservation of Mesoamerican Amphibians and Reptiles* [2010]), and *Amphibians and Reptiles of San Luis Potosi* (2013). Porras presently is involved with the color layout and design of *Herpetological Review*. A native of Costa Rica, in 2004 he translated *Serpientes de Costa Rica /Snakes of Costa Rica* (by Alejandro Solórzano) from Spanish to English. Two reptiles, a gecko from the Ragged Islands (*Sphaerodactylus nigropunctatus porrasi*), and a pitviper (*Porthidium porrasi*) from Costa Rica have been named in his honor.

Judith Block, Jon Campbell, Bill Lamar, and Porras read an early draft.

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