

A personal tribute to Vadim Alexandrovich Mel'nik (*16 March 1937, †10 April 2017)

Uwe BRAUN

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A few days ago the sad news reached me that Vadim Alexandrovich Mel'nik, an internationally well-known, highly respected Russian mycologist and good old friend passed away. I would like to pay tribute to this great mycologist with a few thoughts on his life and career.

Zusammenfassung: Braun, U. 2017: Eine persönliche Hommage an Vadim Alexandrovich Mel'nik (*16. März 1937, †10. April 2017). *Schlechtendalia* **32**: 29–34.

Vor wenigen Tagen erreichte mich die traurige Nachricht, dass Vadim Alexandrovich Mel'nik, ein international bekannter, hoch geschätzter Russischer Mykologe und guter alter Freund verstorben ist. Ich möchte diesen großen Mykologen mit einigen persönlichen Gedanken zu seinen Leben und beruflichen Werdegang würdigen.

Key words: Russian mycologist, Komarov Botanical Institute, St. Petersburg, deceased

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Vadim Alexandrovich Mel'nik was born on 16 March 1937 in Daugavpils, Latvia, a region influenced by the Baltic and Slavic culture and language. In the final phase of his life he was plagued by serious illness. In 2012, when his colleague and old friend Ovidiu Constantinescu passed away in Uppsala, Sweden, at the age of 80, he mentioned to Hyeon-Dong Shin that he would like to become 80 like Ovidiu, and he succeeded in reaching this goal. In March of this year he celebrated his 80th birthday, and he died on the morning of 10 April 2017 in St. Petersburg.

In 1960, Vadim Mel'nik graduated at the Leningrad Forestry Academy with the degree “forestry engineer” based on a graduate thesis dealing with spruce cancer in forests of the Kaliningrad region (former East Prussia). Between 1960 and 1962 he worked as forest pathology engineer tasked with activities in forest tree protection in forestry enterprises in the Leningrad region. In December 1962, he began to take part in a postgraduate course of the Department of Inferior Plants at the Komarov Botanical Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences (BIN RAS) in St. Petersburg, passed it successfully and continued his career as post-doctoral researcher (junior research fellow) studying anamorphic fungi. In 1977, he successfully took part in a competition for the position as senior research fellow, and later in 1988 he became a leading researcher at the Laboratory of Systematics and Geography of Fungi of the Komarov Botanical Institute. His thesis (PhD, 1966) focussed on phytopathogenic asexual fungi of the Leningrad region. In 1986, he successfully defended his doctoral dissertation, equivalent to the German habilitation, focussed on coelomycetes of the former USSR. For 15 years, he acted as curator of the fungal herbarium LE.

My own positive attitude and high affinity to Russia, to the magnificent nature and biodiversity of this huge country and, above all, to the kind, hospitable people evolved during my first stays in Bashkortostan (at that time Bashkir ASSR) as student in the second half of the 1970's and later as leader of a student's excursion to this area at the border between Europe and Asia with its endless Taiga forests, based on an agreement for cooperation and exchange between Halle University and the Bashkir State University. This special relationship was connected with a deep understanding of the Russian mentality and soul, which was later significantly stepped up by becoming acquainted with Vadim Mel'nik.

My first contacts with Vadim Mel'nik happened several decades ago, mainly based on the exchange of letters, referring to inquiries and loan requests concerning types and other collections deposited at LE. In August 1994, he attended the VII. International Mycological Congress in Vancouver, Canada, where I met him for the first time personally. This was the

spontaneous beginning of a long-lasting scientific collaboration and friendship, carried by deep sympathy and mutual appreciation, only comparable with my first meeting with Pedro Crous during the International Mycological Congress in Regensburg, Germany, between 28th August and 3rd September 1990.



Fig. 1: Vadim Mel'nik during his first visit in Halle (Saale), Germany, Herbarium of the Martin Luther University, in 1996 (background, together with Uwe Braun sitting in the foreground).

During our first meeting in Vancouver, the idea came up to apply for a joint project supported by the Germany “Volkswagen-Stiftung”, and we were successful. In 1996, he visited me in Halle (Saale) and spent some weeks in the herbarium of the Martin Luther University (Fig. 1). The subject of our first project focussed on the treatment of cercosporoid fungi of the former Soviet Union, reaching from the European part in the west to the Russian Far East as well as the Central Asian Republics and the Caucasus region in the south. The results of this project were later published in a booklet (Braun & Mel'nik 1997). His research stay was connected with a joint visit of the International Mycological Institute (since 1998 CABI International) and the Herbarium IMI at Egham, UK (Fig. 2). During this stay, David Minter invited us for a travel to Oxford, on the way back some delicious Indian food was bought for dinner, and we spent an unforgettable evening in David's house.

A second project sponsored by the Germany “Volkswagen-Stiftung” followed and led to a translation of Vadim Mel'nik's basic monograph of the genus *Ascochyta* published in 1977. This was Vadim's first comprehensive taxonomic publication in book form and the result of about 10 years of hard and profound work after his PhD thesis. The publication of the English translation of this important basic book dealing with the phytopathologically relevant genus *Ascochyta* was generously supported by the “Biologische Bundesanstalt für Land- und Forstwirtschaft Berlin-Dahlem”, above all by Gregor Hagedorn (Mel'nik 2000).



Fig. 2: Vadim Mel'nik during his first visit at Egham, UK (in front of the main building of the International Mycological Institute), together with David Minter, Uwe Braun and John David (from left to right).

In the course of a second stay in Halle, Vadim met Pedro Crous who came to visit me simultaneously. This contact led to a later invitation and stay of Vadim in 2002 in Stellenbosch, South Africa, where he helped the Department of Plant Pathology with the identification of microfungi occurring on Restionaceae and Proteaceae. I visited Vadim Mel'nik several times in St. Petersburg. He introduced me to his old friend Academician Prof. Dr. A.A. Levitin and organised visits of the All-Russian Institute of Plant Protection (VIZR), St. Petersburg, Pushkin, including access to the important herbarium LEP which houses the famous mycological collections of A. A. Jaczewski. An annotated list of type collections of cercosporoid hyphomycetes deposited at LEP was one result later published in the Russian journal *Mikologiya i Fitopatologiya* (Braun & Mel'nik 1996). I remember my last visit in 2007 very well. It was connected with a participation in the XV. Congress of European Mycologist held in St. Petersburg.

Vadim Mel'nik travelled to almost all parts of the former Soviet Union, besides the European part of Russia also to Central Asia, the Caucasian region, Siberia, and the Russian Far East, carried out mycological field research and collected huge quantities of specimens that are now deposited at LE. This part of his research was mainly focussed on fungi in nature reserves and other protected areas. But he was also highly esteemed as specialist for hyphomycetes and coelomycetes and examined and identified countless fungal samples collected by colleagues in different parts of the world, e.g. from the Pacific Ocean region, Cuba, Costa Rica, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and New Zealand, and he was a sought-after guest scientist and travelled upon invitation of numerous colleagues to different countries, e.g. to Austria (2000, 2002), Turkey (2001), Sweden (2003), South Korea (2003, 2004), and China (2004 [see Fig. 3], 2005). He maintained close contacts to many colleagues worldwide, such as, for instance, R.F. Castañeda Ruiz, P.W. Crous, C. Denchev, K.D. Hyde, T.R. Nag Raj, Ch. Scheuer, H.D. Shin, B.C. Sutton,

K. Tanaka, and D. Triebel. Vadim Mel'nik continuously reviewed manuscripts for numerous mycological journals, including *Mycotaxon*, and was member of the editorial boards of "Mycologia Balcanica/Mycobiota", "Mycosphere", "Fungal Diversity", and "Fungal Diversity Research Series", he contributed numerous fungal collections to "Mycotheca Petropolitana" issued by the Botanical Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences and added Russian and Vietnamese specimens to various issues of fungal exsiccatae, including U. Braun's "Fungi selecti exsiccati", D. Triebel's "Microfungi exsiccati" and the Austrian "Mycotheca Graecensis".



Fig. 3: Vadim Mel'nik during a stay in 2004 in Shaanxi, China, amongst poinsettia plants in a greenhouse.

In the last phase of his life, Vadim Mel'nik focussed his mycological activities on the treatment and identification of microfungi collected by colleagues in the course of a research program of the Vietnam-Russian Tropical Research and Technology Centre. He published a long series of papers with results, including numerous new records for Vietnam and several new species, some in collaboration with me, e.g., Mel'nik & Braun (2013), Mel'nik et al. (2013, 2014, 2015, 2016a,b).

Vadim was a gifted editor and proof-reader (Fig. 4). He described himself as "eagle eye". From the very beginning in 1967, he supported the Russian journal "Mikologiya i Fitopatologiya", he was active as responsible editor and editor-in-chief for numerous Russian book project and series, e.g. D.N. Teterevnikova-Babayan's "Fungi of the Genus *Septoria* in the USSR" (1987) and various volumes of "Fungi of Russia" among other things, and he subedited countless manuscripts for candidates and colleagues. His proof-reading based on his thorough, focussed functioning accompanied by his profound knowledge of the Russian literature and geography was extremely useful and indispensable for several of my own book projects and helped to avoid doing mistakes in transliterations of Cyrillic terms, to allocate Russian localities correctly, and to find "cryptic" old Russian publications. This applied, for instance, to the "Taxonomic Manual of the Erysiphales (Powdery Mildews)" (Braun & Cook 2012) and the "*Cladosporium* Monograph" (Bensch et al. 2012). He also helped to correct and improve the book "Phytopathogenic fungi from South Africa" (Crous et al. 2000). I remember very well how Vadim helped to disentangle the complicated nomenclature around *Alternaria malorum* (Rühle) U. Braun, Crous & Dugan (= *Chalastospora gossypii* (Jacz.) U. Braun & Crous, *Cladosporium gossypii* Jacz.), including his support in tracing type material of the latter species in LEP.



Fig. 4: Vadim Mel'nik at his workplace (Komarov Botanical Institute) in 2010.

A long-standing friendship, over decades, defying all kinds of social and political changes, has been suddenly interrupted. I will painfully miss him, his unselfish generosity, always ready to help, his open-minded character, and his regular phone calls, in some phases of joint projects and planned publications several times per week, which also included personal concerns and talks about “all the world and his wife”. If there would be a “Walk of Fame” for mycologists, he undoubtedly deserved his own star. Only a few Russian mycologists have hitherto been honoured with the Russian “A.A. Yachevsky medal”, and Vadim Mel'nik was one of them. He obtained this high award in 2012. Several genera and species of fungi have been named in honour of Vadim Mel'nik: *Melnikomyces* Crous & U. Braun, 2014; *Melnikia* Wijayaw., Goonas., D.J. Bhat & K.D. Hyde, 2016; *Septoria melnikii* D.N. Babajan & Savinceva, 1972; *Anthostomella melnikii* Lar.N. Vassiljeva, 1990, and *Cytospora melnikii* Norphanphoun, Bulgakov, T.C. Wen & K.D. Hyde, 2017. He himself published more than 220 scientific contributions, ranging from short notes to books, and introduced 123 taxonomic novelties, most of them new species, including three new families and three new genera. His most important and largest publications encompass the *Ascochyta* monograph (Mel'nik 1977) and its translation into English (Mel'nik 2000a), the book “Imperfect fungi on species of trees and shrubs” (Mel'nik & Popushoi 1992), and he published two volumes dealing with coelomycetes and dematiaceous hyphomycetes of Russia (Mel'nik 1997, 2000b). He will be remembered by all as not only a gifted mycologist, but someone who was always prepared to help and train others. Vadim Mel'nik lost his wife early to cancer. He is survived by his daughter, Irina, and grandchildren.

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Address of the author

Uwe Braun, Martin Luther University, Institute of Biology, Geobotany and Botanical Garden, Herbarium, Neuwerk 21, 06099 Halle (Saale), Germany.
(E-mail: uwe.braun@botanik.uni-halle.de)