VICTOR GRUSCHKA SPRINGER

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VICTOR GRUSCHKA SPRINGER was born in Jacksonville, Florida on 2 June 1928. His father was Leon Gruschka (1896–1968), an Austrian immigrant who came to the United States in 1913. His mother, Rae Dayan (1899–1992), was born in what is now Lebanon and came to the United States with her family in 1912. Leon joined the army the same year he immigrated and served with General John J. Pershing during the Mexican campaign, in France in World War I, and in the U.S. Coast Guard in Key West after WWI. On being discharged from the army in 1919, he became a citizen and changed his name to Springer, his mother’s maiden name. Leon and Rae met in Jacksonville and were married in 1923.

Vic and his older sister, Cecelia, grew up in Jacksonville, where Leon worked in a variety of businesses, with differing degrees of success. The family lived through hard times during the Depression, with Leon away much of the time traveling or looking for work. “The first house I can remember,” Vic recalls, “was an old wooden bungalow badly in need of repairs and whose roof leaked in several places when it rained. We put buckets around the house to collect the leakage. I suppose until about 1940 things were pretty tough, but I don’t recall ever thinking about that.” Vic worked at a number of part-time jobs. He delivered newspapers early in the morning; he worked in a mixed pawn shop/sporting goods/clothing store for a number of years, on weekends and holidays; he sold magazines door to door.

Jacksonville was a good place to grow up and had an important influence on Vic’s life. The house was located near the St. John’s River, a natural playground for a boy to explore and develop his interest in nature. Directly behind the house was an old World War I shipyard that had become an overgrown jungle housing a wide variety of animals: birds, snakes, lizards, mammals, amphibians. He enjoyed fishing in the river and on nearby beaches, and here he first became acquainted with the fishes that he would spend his life studying. The family occasionally visited Miami, where they had close friends. Vic remembers fishing there and visiting the old Miami Aquarium, where he saw many colorful tropical fishes. Later, he visited Marineland, the first of the commercial oceanariums; he watched the many varieties of fishes and recalls envying the hard-hat diver who went into the big tank to feed them.

In spite of his developing interests, the thought of becoming an ichthyologist—or a natural scientist of any kind—never occurred to him. “I didn’t know that such professions existed,” he says. If one was interested in biology, the natural course was to go into medicine. So, with his father’s encouragement, he entered Emory University in Atlanta as a pre-med student.

Vic soon learned, however, that he was not cut out to be a doctor. In his sophomore year, he attended some autopsies at a local hospital with a friend in the medical school and made rounds with him as the friend patched up injured patients who were brought into the emergency room. “That did it,” he says. The blood and gore thoroughly turned him off.

By his senior year, he was at loose ends, not