Jørgen G. Nielsen

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

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David G. Smith

The American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists has always been an outward-looking organization. After all, neither the animals we study nor the people who study them are bound by lines drawn on a map. We are as likely to find a fellow enthusiast on the other side of the world as in the next town. The Society recognized its international colleagues as early as 1936 when it established the category of Honorary Foreign Member. In the years since, technology and globalization have proceeded apace, and the need for this special category has largely disappeared. Today members can easily join the Society from anywhere in the world. A recent issue of Copeia contained papers by authors from 11 different countries on five continents. It is appropriate, then, for the Historical Perspectives series to profile from time to time some of our colleagues from outside North America. The subject of this essay comes from a small country that nevertheless has a long and distinguished tradition in ocean science and ichthyology.

Jørgen G. Nielsen was born on 2 April 1932 in Copenhagen, Denmark, the oldest of three brothers. His father, Sigurd Nielsen (1901–1990) was a dairyman, a profession in which he followed his own father, who was the manager of a cooperative dairy. His mother, Ane Kirstine Villumsen Nielsen (1903–2002), was a full-time housewife, who also had a family background in agriculture. After their marriage in 1928, they were invited to the United States by Berea College in North Carolina to establish a dairy. After two years, they decided to return to Denmark, where Sigurd became a teacher at a dairy school in Copenhagen. Had they stayed a little longer, Jørgen might have been an American citizen. They lived in the Copenhagen suburb of Lyngby until 1941, when Sigurd took a job as a dairy advisor in Århus, on the Jutland peninsula. There Jørgen lived until graduating from high school in 1951. His brothers Gunnar Gissel Nielsen and Mogens Gissel Nielsen were born in 1935 and 1943, respectively.

Jørgen’s interest in science and nature began early, and he gives much of the credit for this to his parents. In addition to reading many books to their sons, they frequently took them on outings to a nearby forest. They must have been influential teachers, as all three of the boys went on to become professional biologists. In Jørgen’s case, his interests were reinforced in school by a particularly inspiring biology teacher, who was happy to have a student as interested in nature as he himself was. Jørgen also joined the Boy Scouts, with whom he often went camping. He was never particularly interested in fishing, but he did maintain aquaria in which he kept many local freshwater animals. He also spent time at a nearby zoo, to which he had season tickets.

Shortly after his eighth birthday, the wider world descended on Jørgen and his family. World War II, which until then had been limited to a tense standoff between France and Britain on one side and Germany on the other, exploded as Germany invaded Norway and Denmark. Denmark, small and geographically vulnerable, was in no position to resist her powerful southern neighbor. On 9 April 1940, German forces occupied Copenhagen with scarcely a shot fired. Jørgen remembers German planes flying over that day, dropping not bombs but leaflets, telling the Danish people what was expected of them. Later, German soldiers arrived, accompanied by stirring martial music. At first, it all seemed like an adventure to an eight-year-old boy. The Germans were relatively lenient toward their Nordic cousins, certainly in comparison with some of their other victims, and even the Jews were spared for a time.

As the war ground on, however, and the tide began to turn, the Danish resistance became increasingly active and effective, provoking an escalating German response. Then, things became distinctly less pleasant. “You were scared when the doorbell rang after dark,” Jørgen recalls, never knowing who might be there.

Shortages of all kinds made everyday life difficult. It created a mindset that continues to this day among people of Jørgen’s generation. “People my age,” he reflects, “. . . if [they] see a nice nail lying on the street, [they] pick it up and take it home.” In wartime, if one wanted nails, one went to a lumberyard, gathered used, bent nails and took them home and straightened them out. Even matches were so scarce that they were bought individually instead of by the box. Denmark was fortunately spared from most of the actual combat. Jørgen recalls a few Allied air raids targeting German facilities. When the siren sounded, the family had to scurry to the shelter. The main source of danger was not from the bombs, but from anti-aircraft shells that missed their target and came back to earth. The Allied armies bypassed Denmark on their way to Germany, and the German occupation lasted until the final collapse of the Third Reich. On 5 May 1945, the war officially ended, to the great joy and relief of everyone in the country.

It is impossible for most Americans today to appreciate the devastation caused by World War II to the nations and people who lived through the worst of it. Even Jørgen did not appreciate it until some time after the war. During his summer vacations from high school in 1949 and 1950, he went to an international summer camp in England with about 100 students from ten different countries. “Here I

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