

The eccentric Adder man: a note on the life and works of Albert Franz Theodor Reuss (1879–1958)

LÁSZLÓ KRECSÁK¹ AND DANIEL BOHLE²

¹ Eötvös Loránd University, Department of Systematic Zoology and Ecology, Pázmány Péter s. 1/C, H-1117, Budapest, Hungary. [corresponding author]

² Furtwänglerstraße 20, D-14193 Berlin, Germany.

ABSTRACT – The paper gives a short overview of the life and publicist activity of one of the most debated personalities in the history of Viperidae systematics and nomenclature, the amateur German herpetologist Albert Franz Theodor Reuss, who became rather notorious for the unusual names given to the dozens of new, scientifically ungrounded taxa he described during the period 1923–1939. We present a short biography of Reuss, and discuss his entomological activity (both the scientific one especially focused on Lepidoptera, and his activity as a butterfly dealer) and give a short description of his entomological works and other publications on entomological topics published in aquarist and terrarium keeping journals. Reuss's activity in the Group *Lacerta-Gesellschaft für Terrarienkunde*, based in Berlin, is discussed and remarks are made on his habit of presenting live vipers at the group meetings, as well his eccentric lifestyle. We comment on the names of Reuss, his strange ideas about systematics in the light of the numerous published critiques, and give an account of papers with herpetological content.

ONE of the most debated personalities in Viperidae systematics and nomenclature is the amateur German herpetologist Albert Franz Theodor Reuss (Fig. 1). He is known for the unusual names given to the dozens of new, scientifically unfounded taxa he described in the period 1923–1939. For a complete list of the names and type specimens by designated by Reuss see Krechsák (2007).

Despite the fact that he published many papers, held several presentations and was actively engaged in terrarium keeping, all that is known about Reuss are the few works, which have been included in lists of synonymy (e.g. Schwarz, 1936) as they contained descriptions of numerous taxa of Viperidae. The recent monographic publication “*Die Geschichte der Herpetologie und Terrarienkunde im deutschsprachigen Raum...*” dealing with the history of German herpetology and terrarium keeping contains only a few sentences about him by Günther (2001).

The purpose of this note is to fulfill this gap, and contribute some further details about the life and activities of Reuss. We also give an account of his papers with herpetological content, together with a short description of his entomological publications and works on entomological topics published in aquarist and terrarium keeping journals.

Biography

Reuss was born on 23rd May 1879 in Munich, as the son of Delphina Garbois from Dublin, and the famous tantric occultist and head of Ordo Templi Orientis Albert Karl Theodor Reuss (1855–1923). His parents married in Ireland in 1876. His father was 21 at that time, and his bigamist mother 31 (Hergemöller, 1998). In 1878 Delphina Garbois settled in München. Their marriage was annulled in the same year by the German court (Hergemöller, 1998), most probably due to the bigamy. Hergemöller (1998) mentioned that their son was born, and named “Franz Albrecht Theodor”. Albrecht is most probably a misspelling, as according to tradition the son received the name of the father (i.e. Albert).

Reuss lived and worked in Berlin. It is not known whether he ever had a stable position at an institution or company. All we have been able to ascertain is that he earned money by selling snake venom (Anonymous, 1949; Schnurre, 1948, 1956) and butterflies. Additional income may have perhaps been received from his presentations given at different group meetings dealing with terrarium and aquarium keeping. We should note that Reuss was also a talented painter. Probably his snakes were the subjects of most of his works (Fig.



Figure 1. "The snake researcher during work. The zoologist Th. Reuss by the study of one of his captive bred snakes (sand viper)." Cover of nr. 18 of the journal *Die Weite Welt, Verlag Scherl, Berlin* published on 29. April 1928 (source Museum für Naturkunde der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin Historische Bild- u. Schriftgutsammlungen B I/328).

2). He never attended a university, but was – as he himself declared – "self-educated" (Anonymous, 1949; Schnurre, 1956; Günther, 2001).

Certain details of his life and eccentric habits (see discussion below) are known from two newspaper articles published by Wolf-Dietrich Schnurre, who referred to him either as "Mr. T." (Schnurre, 1948) or "Mr. Webb" (Schnurre, 1956). Schnurre knew Reuss through his father. From the accounts related by his father, Schnurre found out that Reuss had to change apartments very often, as the landlords always sent him away as soon as they found out that he keeps numerous venomous snakes.

Schnurre (1956) wrote that Reuss committed suicide after the second World War, after his apartment was bombed and his snakes were killed. He was misinformed, as after this incident Reuss built up a new collection with various reptiles (Anonymous 1949). He died on 24th December 1958 in Berlin.

Publications and entomological activity

Reuss was firstly an amateur interested in Lepidoptera (see Fig. 3 showing him with an insect net) and only dealt with vipers afterwards. His first entomological paper was published most probably in 1919, whereas the first paper about Adders was printed in 1923. Reuss published almost as much about different groups of Lepidoptera as about Viperidae, both in German and English. A quick survey of the Zoological Record covering the period 1919–1939 showed that he published 34 papers in various small, German, entomological journals. The number of entomological papers written is most probably much higher as Zoological Record did not contain all printed journals. The general working method with Lepidoptera was similar to the one used on reptiles (or most probably the working method used with Lepidoptera was adapted later to his works on Viperidae), describing as many new genera, species, subspecies and forms as possible. For a small extract from his entomological papers with selected titles see Appendix 1. His works on entomological topics published in terrarium keeping journals are listed in Appendix 2.

We should note that Reuss was a butterfly dealer as well and probably sold butterflies collected in Germany, mostly to museums. The Zoological Museum of the Humboldt University, Berlin houses several butterfly drawers with specimens supplied by him, with purchases documented by letters in the archive of the institution as well (pers. obs.).

At the beginning of the 1900's many small groups dealing with terrarium and aquarium keeping had been established in Germany, with participation of mostly amateur pet keepers (Rieck, 2001a, 2001b). This resulted in an increase in the number of journals that were published, and proved to be a good opportunity for Reuss, who was able to publish all of his doubtful results and long papers containing his strange ideas about systematics and nomenclature (e.g. Reuss, 1937). During his publishing activity he produced at least 121 papers, short notes and reviews on herpetological topics. A complete list of his publications dealing with different herpetological questions can be found in Appendix 3. For an unknown reason he also published using the pseudonym S.A. Sure (e.g. Sure, 1926).

Participation in terrarium keeping

As noted above, in the 1900's the number of German groups dealing with terraria and aquaria was high. Reuss was especially active in the Group *Lacerta-Gesellschaft für Terrarienkunde*, based in Berlin, where he held most of his presentations and also first showed his captive animals, most of which he described later as new. He also visited other Berlin-based groups, such as: *Ludwigia*, *Nymphaea alba*, *Humboldtrose*, *Triton* and *Salamandra*. In addition to presenting the newest specimens of his snake collection at these meetings, he was famous for handling vipers with his bare hands. Due to this strange behaviour he was banned from the group "Triton" in Berlin (Rieck, pers. comm.).

However, he became the leader of *Lacerta* in the summer or autumn of 1935. Reuss changed the business address of the group to his home and also its name, to *Lacerta-Interessengemeinschaft für Vivographie* (Reuss, 1935b). The name *Vivographie* (description of the life in words and figures, but especially figures) was promoted by the journal "*Das Aquarium-Eine Zeitschrift mit Bildern für Liebhaber, Schulen und Naturfreunde*" edited by Dr. Ernst Ahl, curator of the herpetological collection in the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, much appreciated and admired by Reuss. It seems that his enthusiasm for this name did not last long. After one month, in Nr. 37 of the *Nachrichtenblatt für Aquarien- und Terrarien-Vereine*, published on 28th November, he wrote that this imperfect name will be used only until 1st January 1936 (Reuss, 1935c). But in December 1935 the newsletter of the group was published under the name *IFB. (Lacerta)-Interessengemeinschaft für Biographie* (Reuss, 1935d), and from 1936 under a new name *IFB. (Lacerta)-Interessengemeinschaft für Biologie und biologische Berichterstattung* (Reuss, 1936).

Reuss probably remained the leader of the group until it was dissolved in the late 1930's due to the enforced conformity of all groups to the *RDA (Reichsbund Deutscher Aquarien- und Terrarienvereine)* which they obviously did not want to be a part of (Rieck, 2001b).

Strange habits

In the following discussion we list certain incidents to illustrate the eccentric lifestyle of Reuss. Generally he seems to have been careless



Figure 2. Aquarelle depicting two adders probably from Serbia (source Ralph Graubaum).

whilst handling snakes. Already in 1929 (Reuss, 1929a) had been bitten 12 times, and probably suffered other accidents after this year. Even these incidents did not stop him from handling very poisonous snakes, like *Daboia russelli*, with bare hands (Fig. 4). According to Schnurre (1948, 1956), he was never seriously injured; the first aid he applied when in the field with no supply of antiserum was to cut the bitten area with a knife and additionally consume huge amounts of alcohol. We also know from Schnurre's (1956) description that he used to carry his captured vipers in paper bags. These careless behaviours lead to long documented denunciations, summons, arrests and delinquency procedures.

One of the well known incidents involving an Adder was on 1st July 1928, in the Restaurant

Figure 3. Postcard showing Reuss in the field, in the area of Munich (source Deutsches Entomologisches Institut Pslg. 3330).





Figure 4. Picture made in the post war years, showing Reuss posing with a *Daboia russelli* (source Werner Rieck).

“Rotkäppchen” in Heiligensee, Berlin, when a fourteen year-old girl was bitten and severely injured (Schnurre, 1948; Anonymous, 2002). Reuss carried two Serbian Adders (*Vipera berus*) with him in a paper bag, and put one of the snakes on the girl’s lap to photograph her (Fig. 5), which later lead to the accident.

Reuss spent three months in jail after another incident, similar to the previous, in another restaurant in Berlin. At this time he had a Black mamba (*Dendroaspis polylepis*) with him, which escaped from the paper bag in which Reuss left it together with his coat in the cloakroom (Schnurre, 1948, 1956). Luckily no-one was bitten.

Schnurre (1948) reports, that during a visit to Reuss’ apartment, he was told that snakes often escape from the insecure terraria. One morning Reuss woke up with a Sand viper (*Vipera ammodytes*) under his stomach, and he had to lie motionless for hours until the snake crawled away. Interestingly, he did not repair the doors of the terraria, but learned to sleep on one side and motionless.

His captive venomous snakes did not only escape in the apartment, but some managed to find their way outside into the streets. In 1949 one of the local newspapers (*Berliner Zeitung*) reports of a Adder bite (Anonymous, 1949): a child got bitten by an individual that escaped from Reuss’ home. After the incident all of his snakes were taken away by a film company. The letter featured

in Figure 6 was issued by the local police department 25 days after the incident. The police warn Reuss that for the keeping of venomous snakes he needs approval from the police, which he did not have, and is expected from his to keep away from such troubles, or he will be arrested.



Figure 5. The girl who suffered the accident. Photograph taken before the bite (source Ralph Graubaum).

The Reuss names and his ideas about systematics

Reuss, who was named (or named himself) the well known viper (or snake) researcher and specialist (e.g. Randow, 1924; Reuss, 1935a; Reuss, 1937), had some really strange ideas about systematics and nomenclature. He was especially interested in the local variation of the Adder (*Vipera berus*) and dealt with “elementary species” (Reuss, 1925). We can define his species concept as the individual species concept, according to which each individual is a new taxon. A good example represents the nine forms (*Vipera (Pelias) berus brunneomarcata* Reuss, 1923 (nomen corrugendum Krecsák, 2007), *Vipera (Pelias) berus ochraceaasymmetrica* Reuss, 1923 (nomen corrugendum Krecsák, 2007), *Vipera (Pelias) berus luteoalba* Reuss, 1923 (nomen corrugendum Krecsák, 2007), *Vipera (Pelias) berus luteachersea* Reuss, 1923 (nomen corrugendum Krecsák, 2007), *Vipera (Pelias) berus rudolphimarchica* Reuss, 1924 (nomen corrugendum Krecsák, 2007), *Vipera (Pelias) berus cherasplendens* Reuss, 1925 (nomen corrugendum Krecsák, 2007), *Vipera (Pelias) berus rutila* Reuss, 1925 (nomen corrugendum Krecsák, 2007), *Pelias marchici* Reuss, 1930, *Pelias flavescens* Reuss, 1938), all in the synonymy of *Vipera berus*, he described just from the area of Berlin (Krecsák, 2007).

We can state without any doubt that his system was really chaotic. Being 'self-educated' from Berlin (Günther, 2001) he did not care about the general rules of nomenclature, thus he used names from works unvalidated by the *International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature*, or did not follow binomial nomenclature when naming new taxa.

His names are also one of a kind. Reuss was actually a pet keeper and probably named all of his animals, names that he later used when describing these individuals as new taxa. A good example of it can be found in Reuss (1924): "Reddish ♀, captured in Mark Brandenburg IV.1923, Name: "Ruthela"...., Reddish ♀ captured in Mark Brandenburg VIII.1923, Name: "Chersea splendens....". The two specimens were described by Reuss as *Vipera (Pelias) berus rutila* Reuss, 1925 (nomen corrugendum Krecsák, 2007) respectively *Vipera (Pelias) berus cherseasplendens* Reuss, 1925 (nomen corrugendum Krecsák, 2007).

The unusual working methods and strange names were criticized ever since his first papers were published (Anonymous, 1925; Lankes, 1925a, 1925b). One of his most criticized papers was "*Canis familiaris* var. *catus* Linné" (Reuss, 1929b) (Müller, 1929a, 1929b, 1930a, 1930b, 1930c; Werner, 1930), especially because he used the well known, old name *Vipera berus bosniensis* Boettger, 1889 (in the text *Mesocoronis bosniensis*) with the indication to the descriptor "(Boettger, 1888) Werner & T. Reuss", and additionally for the criticism written of Schreiber's *Herpetologia europaea* (Schreiber 1912). In 1929 Müller (1929a: 355) wrote: "Such a venture is almost childish and we believe that neither a scientist nor another serious amateur will contradict us, if we give expression to the conviction that the name Schreiber will still be mentioned for a long time with reverence, when Mr. Reuss will long be forgotten.". It seems that Müller was wrong; the name Reuss is still known but mainly for the chaos

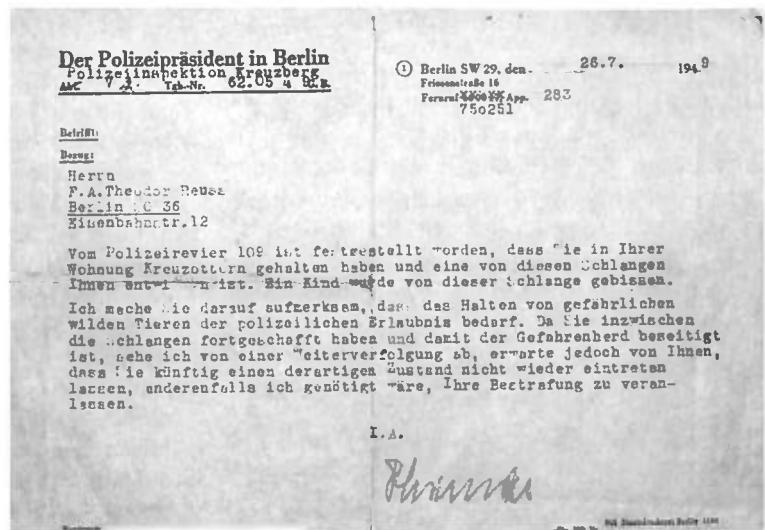


Figure 6. Summons issued by the Berlin police department following the accident from 1949 (source Ralph Graubaum).

and introduction of new names leading to page-long lists of synonyms (eg. Schwarz, 1936; McDiarmid *et al.*, 1999; Krecsák, 2007). Another paper, "*Europäische Giftschlangen...*" (Reuss, 1935a), raised severe criticism as well (Stucken, 1935; Werner, 1937), especially for the *Vipera berus bosniensis* name as mentioned above. Stuchen (1935) even pointed out that an editor of journals of the Third Reich has the duty to publish true and correct information and thus not to accept papers like this one by Reuss.

Only three names by Reuss have been resurrected, *Macrovipera* Reuss, 1927, *Acridophaga* Reuss, 1927 and *Vipera eriwanensis* Reuss, 1933. Krecsák (2007) pointed out that most of his names are taxonomically unfounded and thus should be used with caution. However, the true identity of some names were to be ascertained with confidence; these are available and have a nomenclatural existence (Krecsák, 2007).

Probably Reuss could have been a talented and perhaps even appreciated zoologist if he had followed the rules of nomenclature and adopted a different attitude towards the publications of other researchers. He was well informed, and read probably most of the papers published, but for an unknown reason, he never or very rarely accepted their results.

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Appendix 3. Herpetological works by Reuss.
(Abbreviations: *BATK* = *Blätter für Aquarien- und Terrarienkunde, Winnenden-Stuttgart*, *DA* = *Das Aquarium, Die Fachzeitschrift des Naturfreundes, Berlin*, *DAAT* = *Deutscher Almanach für Aquarien- und Terrarienfreunde, Verlag "Das Aquarium", Berlin*, *DK* = *Die Koralle. Magazin für alle Freunde von Natur und Technik, Berlin*, *DN* = *Der Naturforscher, Berlin-Lichterfelde*, *LZV* = *Lacerta. Zeitschrift für Vivarienkunde, Berlin*, *NATV* = *Nachrichtenblatt für Aquarien- und Terrarien-Vereine, Berlin*, *WATK* = *Wochenschrift für Aquarien- und Terrarienkunde, Braunschweig*, *ZATV* = *Zeitschrift für Aquarien- und Terrarien- Vereine, Berlin*).

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