

## Reminiscences of Shimon Tzabar, Mycologist

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I met Shimon when he first started attending the fungus forays organised by the British Mycological Society, back in the 1970s. My first impressions were that he was undoubtedly a 'character', he was very keen and he did not like rules!

He could be irascible and did not necessarily respect the opinions of the experts of the day – no bad thing! He was also quite unpredictable and could cause some anguish for meeting organisers by turning up without having booked and expecting to be found working space, a bed and food! When I was Foray Secretary I tried to oblige .... not all my predecessors or successors had the same happy relationship!

Shimon often arrived at our forays in what appeared to be a home-made motor caravan. It was called a chicken shed on wheels by some of my younger colleagues. He was often accompanied by attractive young ladies and there was a considerable amount of envy... His appearance, which never changed with age, was bohemian, with his bomber jacket, tevy cap and home-made walking stick, with a doorknob for a handle. His nickname was 'Captain Pugwash' from the childrens' TV cartoon!

There was, however, no doubt as to the seriousness with which he followed his studies, especially in *Inocybe* and *Cortinarius*, which are genera usually only adopted by masochists! He made meticulous descriptions and attractive and accurate paintings of his material. With the advent of good computers he set about building computer keys, no mean feat. As may have been expected, because it happens to many of us rebels, he fell foul of the mycological establishment and received insufficient support for his keys. So he produced and marketed them himself with typical Shimon panache, but little financial return. He discovered what he thought was a new species of *Cortinarius* but this was not widely accepted by his peers and does not appear to have been formally published. This is a difficult genus in which there is little general agreement across Europe. Not deterred, Shimon continued to attend meetings on the continent, especially on the problems in *Cortinarius*, and was probably received better in France than he was used to in Britain. Many of his discussion with fellow enthusiasts would become heated and accompanied by dramatic gesticulations – things were never dull with Shimon – and he stood his ground when he thought he was right but was not ungracious when the evidence went against him. I admired his determination and his obstinacy.

There are a few stories from forays which, I think, encapsulate our experience of Shimon the mycologist. In 1980 we met in Glasgow and one evening lecture was by a Belgian authority on puffballs. Instead of the usual three-quarters of an hour, the lecture went on for two and a half hours. Most of the party were asleep but Shimon was wide awake with a beatific smile on his face – he has been popping magic mushrooms the whole time! In 1985 when the B.M.S organised a joint meeting with the Catalan Mycological Society based in Barcelona, I stood in as UK organiser as my predecessor was ill and Dr Henry Descals of Barcelona University was our contact in Spain. Shimon arrived at Barcelona airport on an Israeli passport, which required a visa. He did not *have* a visa so was promptly arrested! He was able to telephone Henry Descals who arrived by taxi to see what could be done. After frantic phone calls between Barcelona and Madrid, and a few favours called in, Shimon was issued with a temporary visa which would expire on the departure of his flight home two weeks later. After this anxious start to the meeting everything went well and we all enjoyed a

scientifically and socially successful foray. We returned to Barcelona from the mountains to fly home, but Shimon decided to go shopping in a mall on the way to the airport. He missed his flight and was promptly arrested again as an undesirable alien! He was, however, allowed to leave the country on the next flight but had to buy a new ticket. Henry vowed never to have him on a Spanish foray again. He went to Siberia with Russian mycologists about this time and lived in rather primitive conditions but his joie de vivre was infectious and the trip was a great success. He went to Israel with another old friend, Maurice Rotheroe. It was too dry for fungi but, once again, a great experience for all concerned.

In 1995, the foray for the European Congress of Mycologists was held in the Maastricht area of Holland and was to be followed by a joint meeting in the forests of north-west Poland of the Polish and British Mycological Societies. While in the Limburg province Shimon bought a large piece, about a kilogram, of ripe Limburger cheese. I had agreed to drive Shimon and some other colleagues from Holland to Poland. We set off, Shimon, Amanda Waterfield, myself, and the cheese, and had a couple of days to amuse ourselves before meeting two more mycologist in Berlin, then heading for Poland. We aimed for the Harz mountains and ended up in a small ski and health resort not far from Hamelin – by now I was feeling a bit like the Pied Piper! We could only find rooms at a health hotel and Shimon and I not only shared a room we shared a double bed! We talked a great deal – surprise, surprise - and I learned more about him in those two days than I had in twenty years. I was enthralled by his stories, moved by his decisions and shared his anger at the political system he so detested. There was plenty of humour, too, and he read me some of his poems, of which I had been completely unaware. The cheese was festering in the wardrobe, unseen but not un-noticed! We had a pleasant visit to the mountain and Shimon told me that it was his first ride in a cable car. We continued our journey, collected our colleagues and eventually arrived in Poland.

While there, Shimon learned that a Polish friend, who had organised the Polish end of the meeting, was from Lodz, where his parents had lived. Maria had to return to her University and took Shimon with her for two days. He was able to walk the streets of the quarter in which his family lived and see the house. He was clearly much moved at this discovery of his Polish roots and I was so pleased to have helped him on this personal journey. I was not returning directly to England so Shimon, and his cheese, travelled back in another car, with Steve and Margaret Kelly. They arrived at a hotel at midnight and the only accommodation available was the honeymoon suite, so Shimon slept in the spare room! But before he could retire he had to have a coffee, so he went out to find some. On his return he could not remember where the room was and woke up the whole corridor before Steve rescued him, and the other guests! The memory of the cheese lasted for several months in both cars but the memory of Shimon on his return from Lodz will last for ever. He was able to go back to visit Lodz, and Maria, with Judit later.

In 1999 we had a foray near Keswick and Shimon put in a short appearance, looking frail after his major surgery. He was staying with friends nearby and, after a dinner including wild mushrooms collected and cooked by himself, he produced, instead of after-dinner brandy, magic mushrooms! In his last years ill health prevented him from attending residential forays and I missed his unique personality. It was always a pleasure, and a revelation, to talk with him and I shall remember him with great respect and much affection.