



Didier Chardez
(1924 - 2000)

In the morning of 9 September 2000 Didier Chardez died from a cardiac stroke. He was widely known as a protozoologist working on testate amoebae, and to a lesser degree on ciliates. He was a striking example of what non-professional scientists can perform in a field where basic skills as microscopic observation and identification are still important. Didier was born in Paris on 2 October 1924 from Belgian elders. He came to Belgium at the age of six, and obtained a degree as technical designer at the Ecole Technique Provinciale in Verviers. This was in 1943. At that time, Belgium was occupied by the German troops, and Didier experienced this bitter reality when he was a Nazi's prisoner. But he survived and took up an employment as technical designer, first in an electricity company, later in the Belgian army. After the office hours, he immersed himself in the microscopic world in the laboratory he had installed at his home at Omal.

He was an autodidact, and his interest for protists cumulated in a general note in a regional journal on natural history, the *Revue Verviétoise d'Histoire Naturelle*. This was the first of many to appear in this journal. Maybe one would wish he had chosen a more international orientated journal, which is more readily available in libraries. But on the other hand, here he could submit all kinds of observations, even very short ones, which otherwise would not have been communicated. Luckily he had the habit of sending a copy of his works to colleague protozoologist. In 1959 he became a scientific collaborator in the "Faculté Universitaire des Sciences Agronomiques de Gembloux". He was much solicited by the agronomy researchers for analyzing soil samples coming from all over the world. This led to a real proliferation of his articles, which also began to appear in the *Bulletin de Recherches Agronomiques de Gembloux*. His preference for the soil habitat was intensified that way, and expressed in two survey papers on the testate amoebae from soils in Belgium (1959 and 1960). It is no surprise that his devotion to testate amoebae drew the attention of another well known Belgian rhizopod specialist, Dr. Paul van Oye, who included Didier Chardez in his monograph on the history and development of hydrobiology in Belgium (1967). Didier was always keen to try some techniques, and so he rigged up a micro-separation device to concentrate and isolate

shells of testate amoebae from the soil substratum. It must be said that he knew the tricks, since some other researchers, including myself, did not readily get away with it. From 1977 on he became involved in forensic science, which led to a paper in *Forensic Science International* (1985), describing different ciliate protozoa observed in immersed dead human bodies. In another note (*Thecamoebologie et expertises juridiques*, 1990) he explained the use of testate amoebae in forensic expertise. A good knowledge of the habitat preferences of testate amoebae is in such studies of more than academic interest. In this article he demonstrated his habitat approach to the ecology of testate amoebae. Looking at so many samples from different habitats had provided him a good view on the relation between taxa and the environment. This knowledge is reflected in a paper (1981) on the use of testate amoebae as bio-indicators.

As a result of acquiring samples from all over the world, he compiled many protistological lists. In most cases these lists include many “first records” from that region. Another consequence is that he described a lot of new taxa. Of course we are heading now in muddy waters, since the species concept in testate amoebae is at the moment almost solely based on the pseudopodia shape and on morphological considerations of the shell. It could be expected that Didier with his detailed knowledge made a lot of lower rank taxa. Later in discussions he questioned himself the validity of some of these. From his experiments he knew that some morphological traits could change when the protist is kept in a culture, e.g. he thus reported a reduced shell size and number of spines in *Centropyxis discoides*. But maybe it is better to split up than ignoring characteristic traits. Among his major works I would reckon “Histoire naturelle des Protozoaires Thecamoebiens”, a general introduction to the systematic of the testate amoebae with a list of taxa known in 1967, and most taxa illustrated with a drawing. For such a work it is a pity that most of these drawings were strongly reduced in size. In recording his observations, he indeed made generously use of his drawing skills. Another important list was published twenty years later: “Catalogue des thecamoebiens de Belgique”. Since biodiversity became a hot topic, such lists are now urgently needed, and his latest paper, which appeared after his death, is related to protist diversity in the Polar Regions. His final list of publications goes well above 150 titles, mostly on testate amoebae, and a lot of them in a range of international journals.

To those who knew him personally, Didier was a warm and humoristic individual. On a note he recently send me, he had written: “I expect to see you with some testate amoebae”. This characterizes his never-ending enthusiasm, albeit a bit tempered last years by his illness. He is survived by the companion of his life Maggy Heuschen. He will be remembered.

Louis Beyens

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