THAI FOR. BULL. (BOT.) 29: 188–192. 2001.

OBITUARY: Gunnar Seidenfaden (1908–2001)

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Gunnar Seidenfaden was born on 24 February 1908 in South Jutland, Denmark. He studied biology, with botany as his main subject, at Copenhagen University from 1926–34. From 1928–1934 he participated in several expeditions to Greenland and published on its flora. One of his more important contributions is *The Vascular Plants of South-East Greenland* (129 pages), published in 1933. He was also interested in marine science, and with J. Gröntved published *The Phytoplankton of the Waters West of Greenland* (380 pages) in 1938.

In 1934 he failed his final M. Sc. examination. Later that year he went to Thailand to visit his uncle, the ethnographer and archeologist Major Erik Seidenfaden. During his stay he collected some 400 specimens which he deposited in the Botanical Museum, in Copenhagen. On his return he took up political science and graduated as a Cand. polit. 1940 and was immediately appointed to a position in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 1937 he published his first paper on orchids, *Plant Hunting on Kao Sabab* (*Siam*). This comprised two pages written in Danish.

After World War II he went into the diplomatic service. In 1955, 20 years after his first visit to Thailand, he became the first Danish Ambassador to Thailand. Having settled in the Embassy building with its magnificent garden, designed by his wife Alix ("Lullu"), he came into contact with a young Thai forestry officer, Tem Smitinand. They shared one passion: orchids. It became a life-long friendship with important scientific publications. Their first joint work on the Thai orchid flora was *The Orchids of Thailand – A Preliminary List*. This was published by the Siam Society between 1959–65.

Though he left Thailand in 1958 to take up posts as Ambassador in Moscow and later as counsellor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Copenhagen, Seidenfaden continued his work on Thai orchids. He undertook several collecting expeditions to Thailand and turned his beautiful Danish home, Borsholmgaard Manor, into a centre for orchid research. After his retirement he was able to devote all of his time to scientific work. Among his numerous publications the most important is *Orchid Genera in Thailand* 1–14, published from 1975–1988, covering all ca. 1200 orchid species of Thailand with excellent line drawings and colour photographs. The work totals over 2500 pages.

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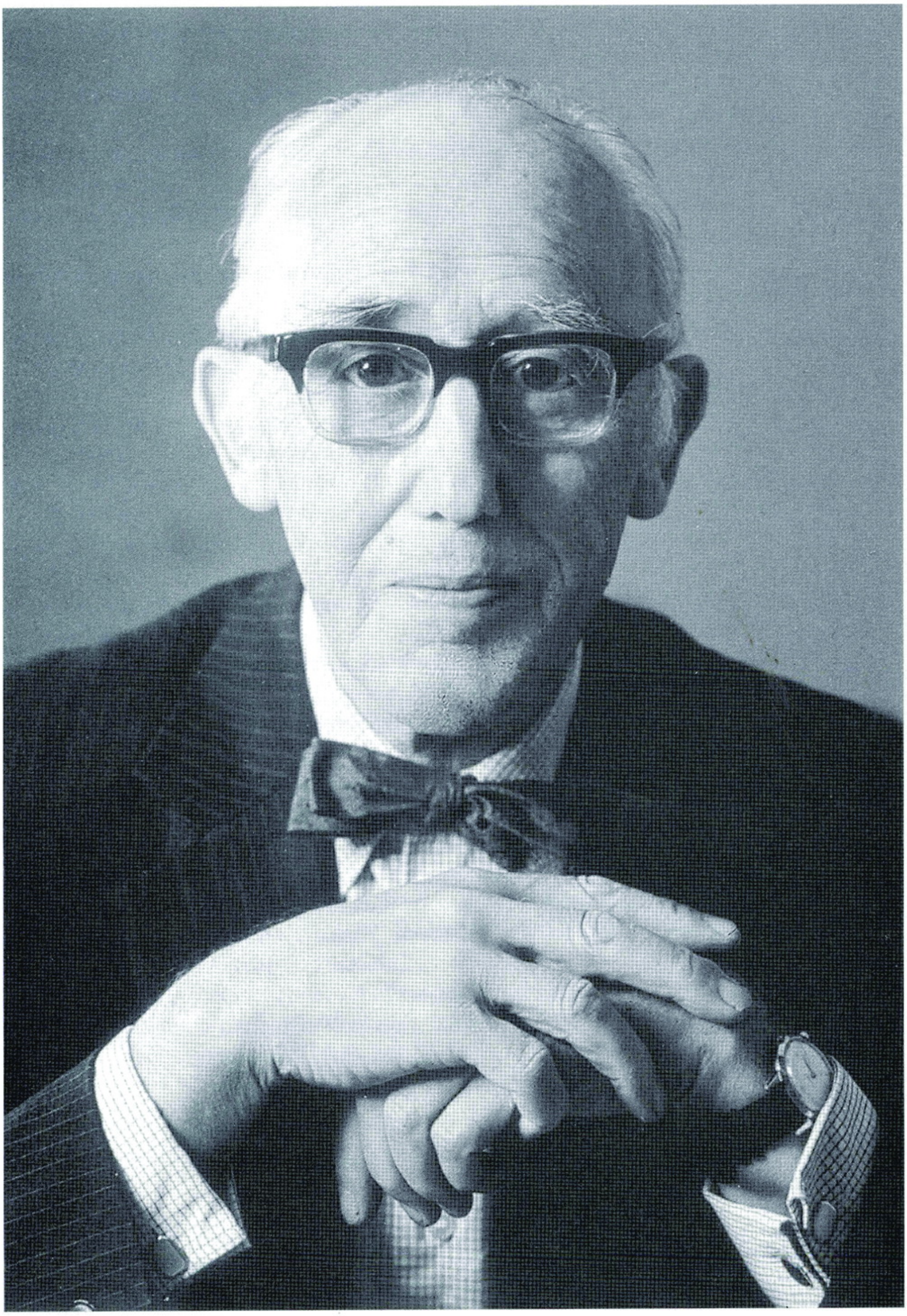
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Updates were published in the equally impressive *series Contributions to the Orchid Flora of Thailand* 1–12 published between 1969–1995. In 1992 he published *Orchids of Indochina*, and in the same year he collaborated with J. J. Wood of the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew on *The Orchids of Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore*.

Seidenfaden based his work on living material brought to the Botanical Garden in Copenhagen, where his specimens were and still are cultivated. Since 2000 they have been housed in a special glasshouse built with the sole purpose of harbouring this important collection. At his home he had over 12,000 collections of material in spirit, mainly Thai orchids. This unique collection, together with thousands of colour slides and a large botanical library, has been donated to the Botanical Museum, Copenhagen.

Seidenfaden was not only a scholar and an orchid systematist; he was deeply engaged in nature conservation. He took part in several conferences on pollution and environmental issues. He held honorary doctorates from the University of Copenhagen and several Thai Universities, was a member of the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, and was Honorary Research Associate at Harvard University and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

Gunnar Seidenfaden was a classical taxonomist; he was not impressed by cladistics and DNA analysis. He admitted that modern methods might be able to support relationships and that they were an excellent tool for young people to obtain their doctorates. But he also insisted that what we need most of all is further exploration of what is left of tropical nature and descriptions of the many unknown organisms. Besides being a great scholar and an enormously productive scientist, he was also a very kind man, always ready to help any hard-working young botanist who wanted to take up orchid studies in Southeast Asia. He was also totally unaffected by all the honours bestowed on him. I will deeply miss him as a personal friend over more that 40 years. The international botanical community has lost one of its most remarkable personalities. His memory will never fade.



Professor Gunnar Seidenfaden