

DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

**REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR
ALEXANDER CYRIL FABERGÉ**

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Alexander Cyril Fabergé, professor, zoology, has filed with the Secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

John R. Durbin, Secretary
The General Faculty

**IN MEMORIAM
ALEXANDER CYRIL FABERGÉ**

Alexander Cyril Fabergé was born on February 26, 1912, in Moscow. He died in Austin on January 25, 1988. The nearly 76 years of his life were filled with most interesting events, both historical and academic. He was the only son of Alexander Julius Fabergé and Johanna Tammerman Fabergé and was the grandson of Peter Carl Fabergé, famous jeweler to the Tsar. As the Russian revolution approached, the family dispersed, Alex and his parents going to France, where Alex spent much of his childhood. Family relationships became fragmented, and Alex stayed with his mother until her death in 1930. At that time, and for many years, Fabergé apparently had little or no contact with any of his relatives.

Fabergé's university education was in England, where he received a BSc degree from Reading in 1933 and a PhD from the John Innes Institution and University College London in 1936. The DSc was awarded by University College in 1945. From 1937 to 1945, he was on the staff of University College London, though on leave beginning in 1940 when he entered the British Army. In 1941, he was assigned to Rothamstead Experimental Station to work on crop pollination, and from 1942 to 1945 he worked on military research projects in the British Ministry of Supply.

Fabergé received his British citizenship in 1936. In 1945, he immigrated to the United States, eventually receiving his U.S. citizenship in 1953. His first appointment in the U.S. was as a research associate in the Department of Botany, the University of Wisconsin, working with Leonard Huskins. In 1947, he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, which he turned down in order to accept an offer as associate professor at the University of Missouri (Columbus). He resigned from this position in 1955, subsequently accepting a research position in the Genetics Foundation at UT Austin, where he also taught the course in evolution for a number of years. At the time of his retirement in 1982, he was a lecturer in the zoology department.

Fabergé's early scientific studies dealt with chromosome mechanics and the physiological effects of chromosomal imbalance. In 1940, he published the first of a series of papers on mutations induced in *Tradescantia* and other plants by x-rays and ultraviolet radiation. These earlier studies were based on optical microscopy. Eventually he switched to electron microscopy as a primary tool and became quite expert in that field. He especially contributed to the development of the use of replica processes in electron microscopy. These depend only on the form of the target and not the composition. Thus they are useful in analyzing structures that would ordinarily not be amenable to electron microscopy. At the time of his death, Fabergé was working on a method to visualize DNA molecules.

Fabergé was a perfectionist, and this was probably why he did not make as great an impact on his chosen fields as might have been expected of a man with so many talents. For example, in the famous "Christmas tree" demonstration of the synthesis of ribosomal RNA from DNA, he was disturbed by the paucity of "trees" in a typical preparation. Therefore, he argued, they might be artifacts. With much effort, he eventually convinced himself that the observations were valid, but by that time the field had moved on to other issues.

Fabergé was well grounded in materials and in electronics, unusual for one whose formal training was in genetic analysis and statistics. He was clever in applying this knowledge to invent gadgets and to modify

electronic equipment to solve some problem that faced him. Among his publications are a number that reflect his cleverness in finding simple solutions to practical problems: an electrically-heated needle for paraffin embedding (1936), a simple torsion balance (1938), apparatus for recording the number of bees leaving and entering a hive (1942), measuring the thickness of very thin microtome sections (1949), a pump and metering device for filling vials (1957), polishing laps out of teflon (1968), and improvements in the fabrication of thin foil apertures for electron microscopy (1987). He expressed disdain for those persons who could not repair their own (pre-electronic) watches.

Fabergé was a brilliant eccentric. Everyone who knew him has a favorite story to illustrate his eccentricity. Most stories have to do with his habit, when alone, of carrying out loud conversations with himself. Mostly he appeared to berate himself for having done something incredibly stupid, expressed in whatever language best matched the occasion. He was somewhat reclusive, though this was probably due to shyness. In fact, he was an acute observer of those around him.

Fabergé was a person of strong beliefs and rigid principles. This is best illustrated by his 1955 resignation from a tenured position at the University of Missouri. In response to promotion of someone whom Fabergé considered incompetent, he wrote to the president, "I can only conclude that [the university] is deliberately seeking, in the field of genetics, a quite unique combination of stupidity and ignorance. These elements I feel quite unable to provide, and have no choice but to resign." In 1953, he resigned from the American Association for the Advancement of Science because he believed it improper for a scientific organization to take stands on political issues. In 1969, he resigned from the Genetics Society of America because the membership had adopted a resolution urging persons who had traveled abroad not to respond to questions that might be put to them by the CIA.

Given his early history, it is not surprising perhaps that Fabergé was staunchly anticommunist. He supported politically conservative causes, both with money and with letters to editors. He generated a considerable file of correspondence with *The National Review* and with its editor, William F. Buckley, Jr., as well as with the *Wall Street Journal*. Many exchanges dealt with errors of fact or analysis that Fabergé encountered in these publications.

Fabergé was a lifelong avid mountain climber. He liked classical music and attended many of the performances on campus. He was widely read, preferring in general the original language. He had a sharp, sometimes wicked sense of humor, generally not visible except to those who knew him well.

Fabergé was one of those persons of whom there are too few, even on university campuses. He followed his own path, ignoring diversions presented by others. He set his own agenda. Even in a culture that champions diversity, that is a rare talent.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors H. Eldon Sutton (chair), Hugh S. Forrest, and Robert P. Wagner.

Distributed to the Dean of the College of Natural Sciences, the Executive Vice President and Provost, and the President on May 16, 2001. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, FAC 22, F9500. This resolution is posted under "Memorials" at: <http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/>

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