



Memorabilia

Remembering Alexei K. Skvortsov – A *Flora of China* Author and Visiting Botanist

Anthony R. Brach

Harvard University Herbaria, 22 Divinity Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA

Email: abrach@oeb.harvard.edu

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As an editor for the *Flora of China* (www.foc.org; www.efloras.org), I had the opportunity to assist Dr. Alexei K. Skvortsov with his Betulaceae and Salicaceae manuscripts. When he visited the Harvard University Herbaria (16 April to 7 May 1996, 5 August to 6 September 1996, 27 January to 27 February 1997, and 10 November to 25 December 1997), I recall each of his arrivals with a suitcase and an equally heavy “tote bag” for his studies. He was always friendly and appreciative of our help. He stayed at our home in Melrose and commuted via the “T” (Boston’s subway system) to and from the herbaria, observing the landscape and plants along the way.

In addition to his own specialties of the Betulaceae and Salicaceae, Dr. Skvortsov was curious about native and introduced plants of Boston and the surrounding area. During his visits, he collected a variety of plant specimens along the route to the subway station (one particular *Salix* more than once, as he said, “still I collect”), in New Hampshire with David Boufford of the Harvard University Herbaria, and from the living collections at the Arnold Arboretum.

Alexei understood the range of natural variability in plants and the challenges in delimiting little-known species, so he preferred not to recognize varieties (Skvortsov, 1999). He studied herbarium collections all day, asked for copies of selected specimens and papers (before high-resolution scanning and digital photography were readily available) and carried the photocopies in his ever-expanding “tote bag” to and from home each day, to review each night. Of course, Alexei was “ahead of his time” using the available Xerox technology to review images – imagine what a similar mindset could do today with new and emerging tools for taxonomy (see Brach & Boufford, 2011).

Alexei liked my wife Ying’s home-cooking, especially homemade breads, potatoes and meat, and desserts with ice cream. He carried cheese sandwiches for his lunch each day. Even though my wife is from China, she has always enjoyed trying recipes from different cultures.

After finding a Russian cookbook, my wife cooked a few selected dishes for Alexei, who was always appreciative.

Having visited China, Dr. Skvortsov had a great respect for his country's Chinese neighbors. In order to address differences in taxonomic viewpoints, he kindly suggested improvements and future considerations for study.

During the course of revision of the Betulaceae, Alexei wrote, "Here in generic descriptions and keys are used characters of the male inflorescences. For routine determination of specimens, it is very cumbersome to rely upon such characters: male aments are very ephemeral and thus absent from most routinely collected specimens. But if they are, so they are very brittle and very inconvenient to investigate in detail. Thus it would be very nice not to use male characters *in the keys*. In generic *descriptions*, they are inevitable, so I recommend to check all generic descriptions against the most reliable, primary sources like Engler's *Pflanzenfam.*, or Bentham and Hooker's *Genera*, or the like" (26 February 1997).

Regarding *Populus*, he noted "Evidently, the stage of our reconnaissance here is yet in a juvenile stage. Everything we meet seems to us to be something quite new. Evidently, this stage cannot be simply surpassed in the course of the *Flora of China*. But I would strongly suggest whenever possible to transfer the description of infraspecific variability just into the morphologic characteristics of the species. Several remarks I made regarding synonymy or otherwise, I hope, also should be considered. But of course, I do not propose any enforcement. In proper time in the future, all synonymy will be cleared up" (25 February 1997).

About *Salix*, he added "About varieties in *Salix*, I can say the same what I said about *Populus* or *Betula*: creation of numerous varieties as formal taxonomic entities reflects mainly our uncertainty regarding species circumscription and much less (or not at all) better understanding of the species. I believe that instead of creating, for example, a var. *pubescens*, we should mention in the species description that capsules (or whatever else) may be glabrous or pubescent." Regarding keys to *Salix* species, "Many species are totally unknown to me, so I cannot judge regarding the correctness of the key. And then, it is a simple matter of fact that a perfect key can hardly be constructed at all, and changes, if necessary, should be done just by the author of the key; any intervening from outside may bring in not correction but destruction" (27 February 1997).

Wherever the authors still disagreed, comments were added to indicate Alexei's opinions about the concerned taxa throughout the published *Flora of China* treatments. For example, in the Betulaceae, "A. K. Skvortsov indicates that the endangered species *Betula*

rhombracteata is very similar to *B. cylindrostachya*, and further studies may show that they are conspecific.” (Li and Skvortsov, 1999: 306). And for example in *Populus*, “A. K. Skvortsov believes that this species (*P. iliensis* Drobow) is synonymous with *Populus afghanica* (Fang *et al.*, 1999: 155), and in *Salix*, “A. K. Skvortsov postulates that this species (*S. pseudolasiogyne*) may be an individual clone of *Salix babylonica*.” (Fang *et al.*, 1999: 187).

Although he did not use computers for email, we corresponded with Alexei via email to his colleague Ivan Schanzer, and relayed correspondence to and from his Chinese co-authors. Long after completing his manuscripts for the *Flora of China* (Fang *et al.*, 1999; Li & Skvortsov, 1999), Alexei regularly sent me Russian calendars depicting beautiful Orthodox churches. In a letter dated 22 March 2004, Alexei wrote, “I always retain warm feelings remembering my lodging at your house and a visit to your Church on behalf of Christmas.”

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