

Gunnar Seidenfaden 1908–2001

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

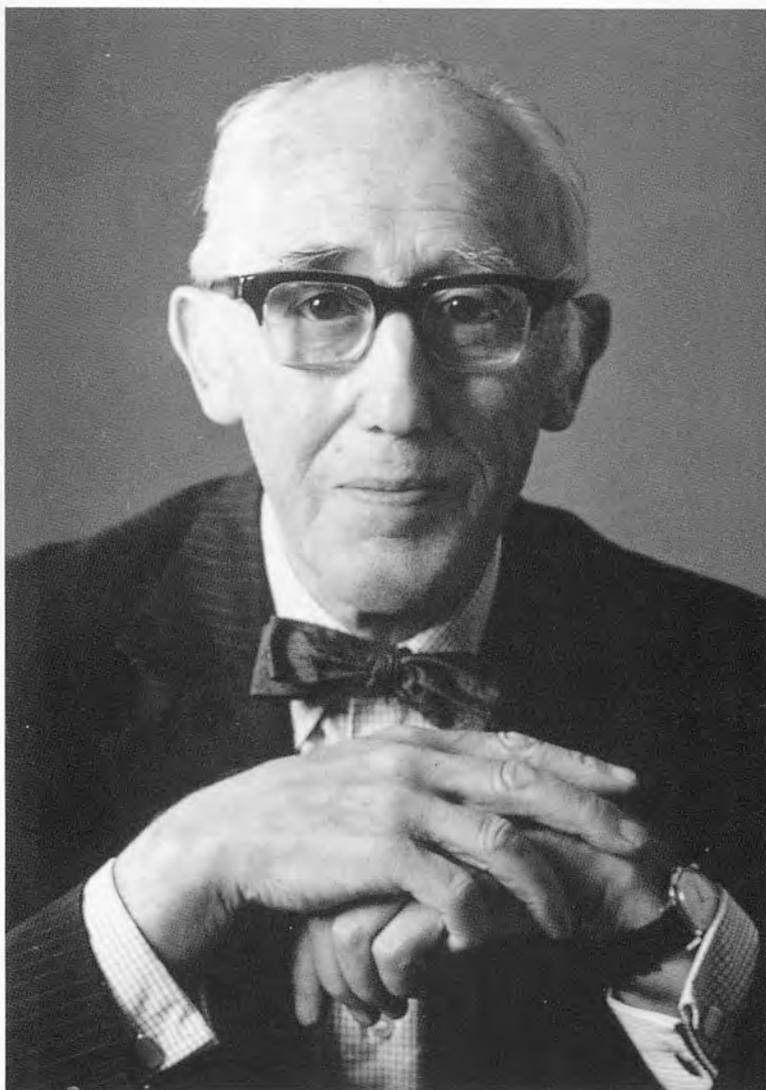
In 1934 he failed his final M.Sc. examination. Later that year he went to Thailand to visit his uncle, the ethnographer and archeologist Major Erik Seidenfaden. During his stay he collected some 400 specimens which he deposited in the Botanical Museum, in Copenhagen. On his return he took up political 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, two pages in Danish: *Plant Hunting on Kao Sabab (Siam)*. 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, 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*, published by the Siam Society 1959–65. In this journal he published reports on two of his expeditions and some contributions to his orchid studies.

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 the 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 could devote all his time to scientific work. Among his numerous publications the most important is: *Orchid Genera in Thailand 1–14*, published from 1975 to 1988, covering all c. 1200 orchid species of Thailand with excellent line drawings and colour photographs. The work covers over 2,500 pages. He currently updated it in the equally impressive series: *Contributions to the Orchid Flora of Thailand 1–12*, 1969–1995. In 1992 he published: *Orchids of Indochina, an Orchid Flora of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam*, and in the same year he collaborated with J. J. Wood, Kew, in *The Orchids of Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore*. Seidenfaden based his work on live material brought to the Botanical Garden in Copenhagen where his specimens were and still are cultivated. In 2000, a special glasshouse was built with the sole purpose of harbouring this important collection. In his home he had a collection in spirit of over 12,000 specimens of mainly Thailand orchids. This unique collection together with thousands of colour slides and a large botanical library is donated to the Botanical Museum, Copenhagen.

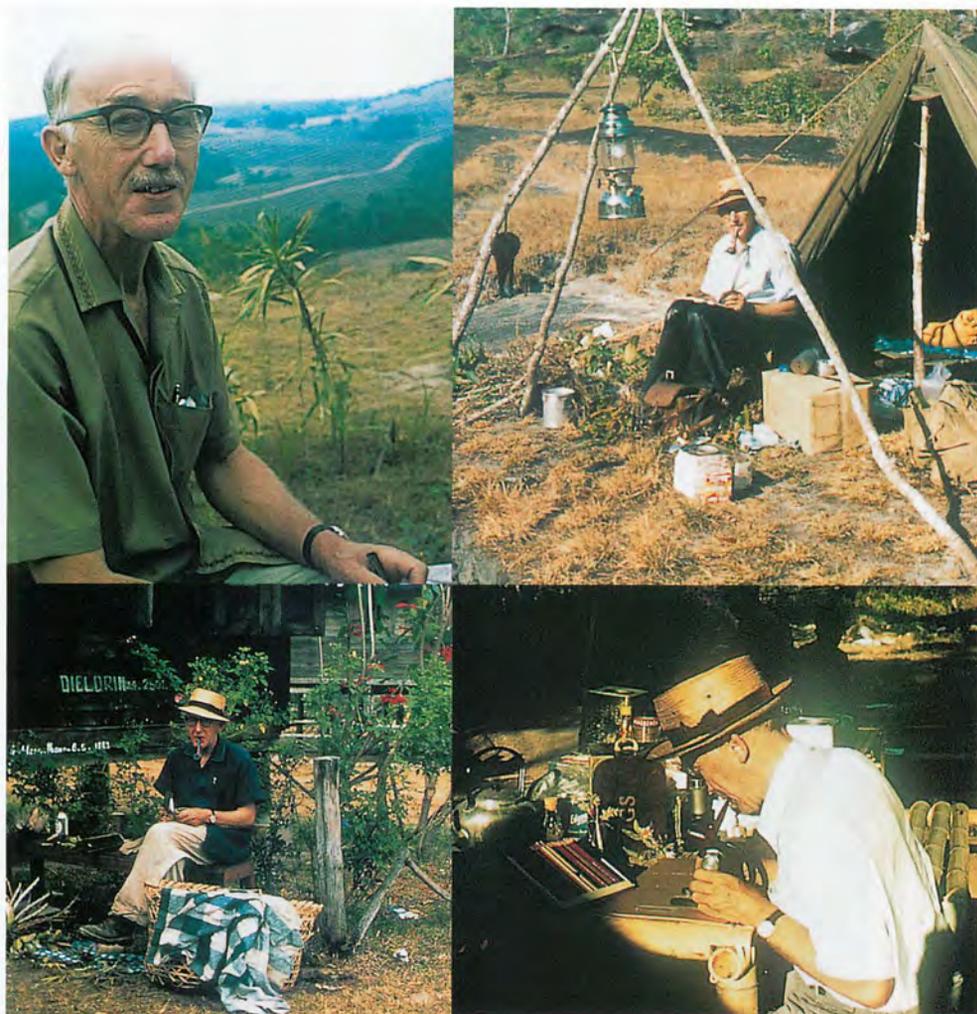
Seidenfaden was not only a scholar and an orchid systematist; he was deeply engaged in nature conservation. He took part in several conferences on pollution and environmental issues. He was an honorary doctor at the University of Copenhagen and several Thai Universities, Member of the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, and 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 it was an excellent tool for young people to obtain their doctorates. But he also insisted that what we most of all needed was more 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 would take up orchid studies in SE Asia. He was also totally unaffected by all the honours bestowed on him. I will deeply miss him as a personal friend over more than 40 years. The international botanical community has lost one of its most remarkable personalities. His memory will never fade.

Kai Larsen



Gunnar Seidenfaden in 1974 when he became a member of the Royal Danish Academy.



Gunnar Seidenfaden on collecting trips to northern Thailand during the 1960s.