

# Walter Wittmer (1915-1998), his life and work

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## Walter Wittmer (1915–1998), his life and work

by Robert Constantin

It is seven years since Walter Wittmer passed away. We miss him and feel that this is the right moment to put on record some of the details of his fascinating life. Each new city formed a landmark and initiated a new chapter in his life.

**Basel (1915–1930).** Walter Wittmer was born in Basel on 4 January 1915. His grandfather, a citizen of Basel, was the owner of an important printing house and had seven children. His father had been trained in the hotel business and was working in hospitality management. When he was four years old, the young Walter moved to Cairo, Egypt, where his parents were active in the budding luxury hotel business. Shortly after this, the young boy returned to Switzerland and to the care of his grand-parents in Basel and also in the nearby village of Bottmingen. When he was four years old, his parents moved for business reasons to Cairo, Egypt, leaving the young Walter in the care of his grandparents. There, in Basel, he followed his primary and secondary school education, seeing his parents only for short periods. His first contact with natural history may have been the angling he practised with his grandfather and his acquaintance with Professor Albert Huber in Basel's Natural History Museum.

**Cairo (1930–1933).** In 1930, his parents moved him to Cairo where he registered at the French Lyceum, completing his secondary course and beginning commercial studies. Fired with enthusiasm for the study of fossils, he had gone cycling one day to a fossiliferous site when he was noticed by Hermann Priesner, another passing naturalist. A professor teaching biology at Cairo University and a renowned expert on the Thysanoptera, Priesner took an immediate liking to the young Walter to whom he was able to communicate his passion for entomology. By attending the meetings of the Royal Entomological Society of Egypt in Cairo, he got to know the general secretary Anastase Alfieri and also A. Rabonovitch who joined him in the study of beetles.

At about this time, Prince Alessandro Carlo Della Torre e Tasso, a coleopterist who had founded the “Museo Pietro Rossi” in Duino in 1924, announced at the local entomological society his plans to visit Egypt and asked if a dynamic young entomologist could be engaged who would serve as a guide to the most productive sites. Alfieri recommended the young Walter. The expedition took place between January and April 1933, around Cairo, at Saloum, Assiout, Mariout and towards the Sinai Peninsula, to general satisfaction. The collections were so productive that the Prince invited Wittmer to become a paid collaborator within his technical team, which already included Arturo Schatzmayr, Karl Koch and Roseta Kadlec. Wittmer accepted this on 1 May 1933.

**Duino (1933–1935) and Zürich (1935–1939).** In the castle of Duino, on the Adriatic coast 5 km north of Trieste, Wittmer formed part of the Prince's team, and spent most of his time preparing the abundant material collected in Egypt and during other expeditions to Monte Pollino (South Italy) and to the Eastern Mediterranean on the island of Rhodes and at Castelrosso (now Megisti). He learned much with the Prince and his experienced collaborators, and began to study the Cantharidae and Malachiidae. His choice of these families was influenced by the extreme diversity of the species and also by the uneven quality of the papers of the leading specialist of the time and his predecessors. He described his first new species from the material of the "Museo Pietro Rossi", which was in fact the private collection of the Prince, and this appeared on 19 December 1934 in the *Bulletin de la Société Royale d'Entomologie d'Égypte*.

In March and April 1935, the Prince Della Torre e Tasso entrusted Wittmer with a new expedition to Sinai. Starting from Suez, he landed at Abu Rudeis, recruited a camel driver with two camels, and surveyed the area towards the monastery of Sainte-Catherine. Alone and still young, he brought this tough expedition to a successful conclusion and collected large numbers of insects. However, during this twenty nine month period with the Prince, he was poorly paid and was not left with many pleasant memories. He resigned on 30 September 1935, and was given a reference by Schatzmayr. The Prince died in March 1937 and his museum was dispersed. The collections were offered to any Italian natural history museum which would take care of them and which would employ the necessary staff. The town of Milan made the best offer but in the end it was decided that only persons with Italian nationality could be re-engaged: exit Koch, an Austrian, and Kadlec, a German. For the next four years, Wittmer lived in Basel, having obtained a small job as a technician from Professor Handschin at the Basel Museum, and in Zürich, where he was an accountant in various Swiss companies. The political situation was worrying, and Wittmer felt that war was not far off and that it would be a long one. He succeeded in obtaining a commercial post in South America, then quickly travelled to Genoa and took the first available place on a transatlantic liner. Leaving in November 1939, it was the last boat to depart as shortly afterwards the Atlantic liner traffic was interrupted by the war.

**Bolivia (1939–1940).** Under contract to work for the American firm "W. R. Grace & Co", which paid for his travelling expenses, he landed at Rio de Janeiro and made his first successful stroke with the sweep net on 28 December 1939 (*Silis gracilis* Wittmer, 1945). In January 1940, he was sent to the middle of Bolivia, first to La Paz, and then to Oruro in the Altiplano (200 km SE of La Paz). This was a small bleak town where he felt himself to be underemployed in his accountant's position and without much activity, and where he also found it difficult to cope with the altitude of 3,700 metres. On the entomological side, he made some collections in the nearby cordillera at Quime and also at Sorata with Alfred Buehrer. He worked on his notes and published supplementary lists to the existing catalogues. As his contract bound him for five years, he repaid his original travelling costs to the company with his first year's wages, resigned, and left for Buenos Aires, the climate and atmosphere of which suited him better. He had no more than the equivalent of fifty Swiss francs left in his pocket.

**Buenos Aires (1941–1955).** In February 1941, his first job in this city was hardly stimulating. Employed in refrigeration stores, his tasks also included checking that the female employees did not take out any meat concealed beneath their clothing. He stayed only a minimum time and then practised as an accountant for various firms. Taking advantage of a professional transfer, he was able to make some surveys in Cape Town (South Africa) in October 1943. In 1945, as soon as he had gathered sufficient funds, he founded his own import/export business and represented a Swiss transport company, the “Welti-Furrer AG.” Initially, he was dealing with the tobacco trade. He had to meet the growers in the settlers’ villages spread along the Parana river close to Posadas (Misiones province) and help them organize themselves into an agricultural cooperative and to obtain better prices. He also dealt with wool, but soon discontinued that in favour of the trade in animal hairs: horse hairs, cow hairs, pig bristles, which were increasingly in demand in Europe for the stuffing of car seats. He was also an importer of electric radiators. In 1947 in Buenos Aires, he met Miss Inge Heck who was then on holiday in the city. The daughter of a commercial executive in the German chemical industry, she had grown up in the midst of family peregrinations, as had Walter: Milan, Madrid, Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro. They fell in love, got married, and Inge remained at his

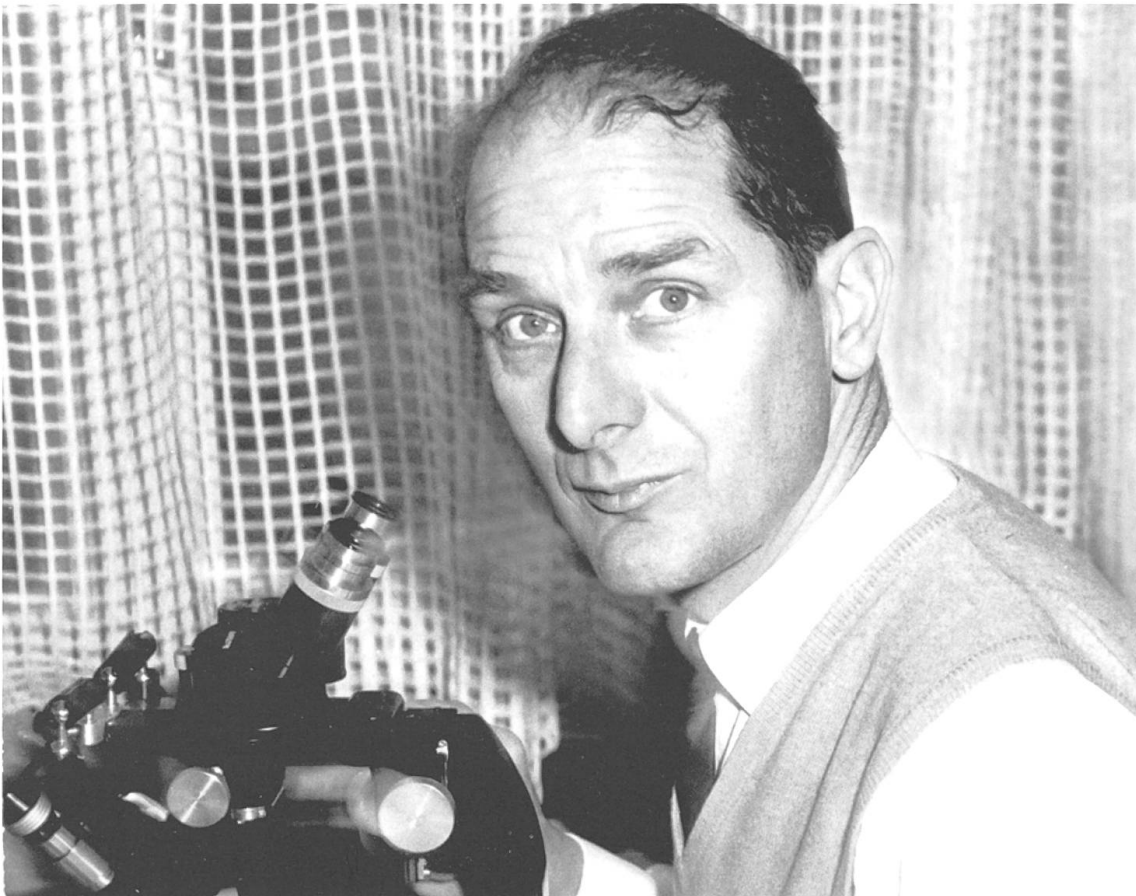


**W. Wittmer** in 1947, near Buenos Aires. (Private collection of Inge Wittmer.)

side for forty-five years, helping in the office, in the home, and on most of his travels. They had three children: Walter junior, Marianne and Alice. Meetings with Argentinian entomologists in Buenos Aires provided much new material for study, from Juan M. Bosq, Pierre Denier, José P. Duret, A. Martinez, Fritz Plaumann, Manuel I. Viana, and Padre Pio Buck of Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. In January 1948 they travelled to Chile to visit their old friend from the years in Buenos Aires, Guillermo (or rather Willy) Kuschel, who was then a student at the University of Chile and was working for his PhD thesis in biology. Together they made some collecting trips around Santiago and to Biobio province (Abanico, Laguna del Laja, Trapatrapa). Their close friendship continued right to the end, Walter passing on South American weevils (Curculionidea) and Willy sending him Cantharidae and related families from Chile, New Zealand and New Caledonia. Walter Wittmer also extended his commercial interests and activities, initially self-employed, later with associates. As restrictions were

imposed by the government of Domingo Perón that curtailed his commercial effectiveness, he sold his business in Argentina and returned to Switzerland, thereby switching from an exporter to an importer of animal hair.

**Zürich (1955–1968).** Settling in Zürich, where he reoccupied the family home in Herrliberg, Böhlstrasse 571, his business thrived. He was able to divide his life between business, family and entomology. He acquired the very important collection of the



**W. Wittmer** in 1964 in Zürich-Herrliberg. (Photograph by R. Constantin.)

Viennese coleopterist Richard Hicker (1872–1965?), a specialist in the Malacodermata, having also formed a splendid general collection of beetles. Wittmer kept the families Cantharidae, Malachiidae and Dasytidae (about 80,000 specimens, including types of 250 species), and sold the other material to the Bernice P. Bishop Museum of Honolulu (Hawaii), where his friend J. Linsley Gressitt had for a long time been searching for a comparative collection of European Coleoptera.

In 1966, now in financial comfort, he resold his company and decided to devote the rest of his life to entomology as an amateur. For many years he had been in

correspondence with Anselmo Pardo-Alcaide, and now he visited him in Melilla (North Africa) and together they made productive tours in that region. It was also at this time that he acquired the extensive samples collected by his German friend Johannes Klapperich, coleopterist and applied entomologist for the FAO, during missions in Afghanistan, Jordan, Turkey, and later in South Africa.

**Basel (1968–1992).** This period will be treated in more detail by Michel Brancucci.



**W. Wittmer** in the Paris Museum, 1980. (Photograph by R. Constantin.)

In 1968, after the retirement of Professor Fred Keiser, the city of Basel invited Wittmer to head the Coleoptera section of the Natural History Museum.

28 November 1969 was a day of celebration. In a solemn ceremony, the University of Basel named him Doctor Honoris Causa, thereby recognizing his thirty-five years of dedication to taxonomy, together with the publication at that time of 152 titles and the formation of a unique specialist collection of 120,000 specimens of 5,000 species.

Apart from his curatorial work, Wittmer made many collecting trips which produced an abundant material of Cantharidae and Malachiidae.

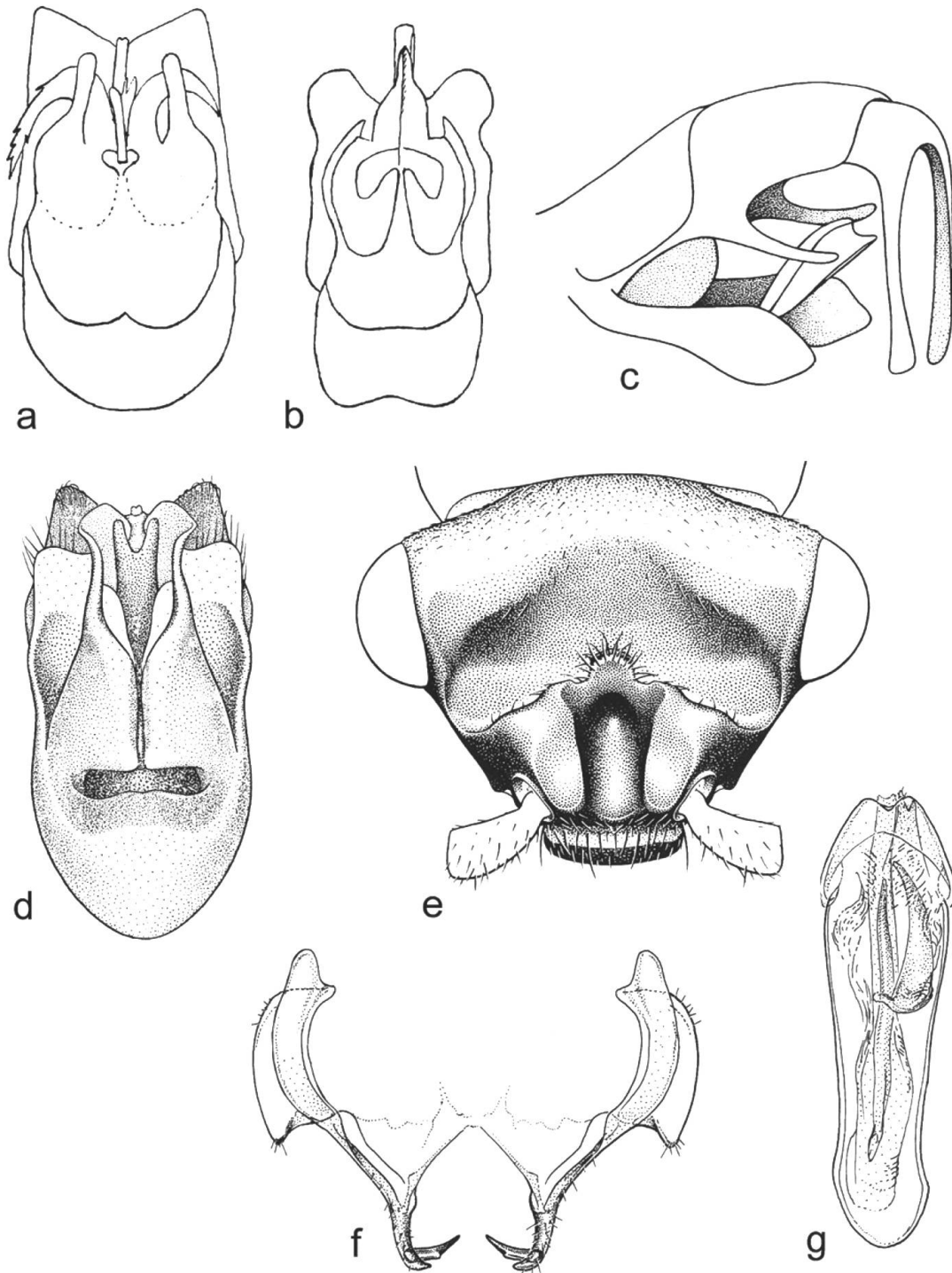
On 1 January 1980, he formally retired from his curator's position in the Basel Museum, and Michel Brancucci, his closest collaborator, took over his position. For many years, Wittmer continued to visit and work in his old department in the museum. He created the private foundation "Pro Entomologia", which was intended to support entomological studies and publications. In 1983, invited by his friend Sebastien Endrödy-Younga, curator at the Transvaal Museum of Pretoria and involved in a large-scale faunal survey, Wittmer rediscovered South Africa, the Malachiidae fauna of which inspired in him a real passion. He made eight field trips to South Africa with brief excursions into Namibia and Zimbabwe. These trips were usually of one month, mostly with South African colleagues, such as S. Endrödy-Younga, Miss MacPherson (now Mrs Maggie Cochrane), Rolf Oberprieler, Ruth Müller, and also Martin Brendell from London.

**Prague (1992–1998).** Towards the end of his life, Wittmer began a new life elsewhere, but soon began to show the symptoms of a slow, painful cancerous disease which forced him to seek medical care in Switzerland. Right up to the end, he worked to produce descriptions of the endless diversity of his favourite Malachiidae and Cantharidae, also completing revisions of some large South African Malachiidae genera Cantharidae, also completing revisions of some large South African Malachiidae genera, whilst taking time off to meet his Prague friends Svatopluk Bílý, Josef Jelinek and Vladimír Švihla in the National Museum. His last manuscript was a taxonomic note on a curious French *Metacantharis* which he thought to be a new species. He died in Prague on 29 June 1998 and is buried in the Wolf cemetery in Basel.

**Knowledge of the *Malacodermata*** group of families was in a poor state in the 1930s when Wittmer began the production of taxonomic papers on them. Work on these groups had begun among the leading coleopterists of the nineteenth century, namely Erichson, Mulsant and Rey, Marseul, Bourgeois, Abeille de Perrin, and the systematics of the Cantharidae and Malachiidae saw the activity of two prolific descriptors of exotic material, Léon Fairmaire and shortly afterwards Maurice Pic. The latter wanted to exceed the number of new species described by the former and churned out descriptions, hardly distinguishing between a new species and a variety. Such an attitude plunged the systematics of these groups into a prolonged chaos and may have discouraged the emergence of young taxonomists, a situation which lasted until the 1950s.

Wittmer's taxonomic work differs from that of his predecessors by its greater usefulness. The material at his disposal often consisted of fresh and cleanly mounted specimens. Each publication appears as a small revision of a species group, introducing the newly described taxa through comparison with the available museum material, which is also redefined, and the type material which was examined according to the possibilities at the time. If this method is now the usual one, it was still unusual in the 1940s. From the start, he used and gave illustrations of the male genitalia characters, an innovation for the Cantharidae.

Illustrations of quality seemed to him to be an obvious requirement, and considering himself to have too little talent for this he sought out collaboration with the



**Illustrations from Walter Wittmer's papers. a:** *Malthinus axillaris* Kiesenwetter. **b:** *Malthinus axillaroides* Wittmer 1936, both drawn by Walter Wittmer in 1936. **c:** *Malthodes hickeri* Wittmer 1958, drawn by Helen Wiederkehr. **d:** *Malthinus furcatus* Wittmer 1974, drawn by Marianne Hungerbühler. **e:** *Trogllops horridus* Escalera, drawn by Armin Coray in 1985. **f, g:** *Sphinginopalpus picticeps* Wittmer 1997, drawn by Karel Majer. (a,b,d,g: male aedeagus, dorsal view; c: male last abdominal segments, lateral view; e: head, front view; f: male sternite VIII, dorsal view).



best professional natural history artists. He himself made the figures illustrating new Spanish *Malthodes* (1935) and the first Cantharidae genitalia ever figured (*Malthinus axillaris*-group, 1936). The first illustration of professional quality appeared in 1954, prepared by an artist in the museum of his friend Georg Frey. During his Zürich period, Helen Wiederkehr was the first artist whose work was acknowledged, mainly as he obtained grants from the Swiss National Funds for the support of scientific research. She developed a simplified style of great clarity, close to the “clear line” of a certain Belgian. Marianne Hungerbühler took over and used a technique with stippled relief. Among other things, we are indebted to her for the illustrations of Malthininae in *Die Käfer Mitteleuropas* (volume 6, 1979) and in the preliminary papers for this work between 1970 and 1975. In Basel, Armin Coray developed an unrivalled drawing technique using a highly complex system of stipples to show the relief, close to the granulation of camera film, which was needed to illustrate the peculiar structures of *Troglops* heads. Wittmer took advantage of the newly-developed scanning electron microscope which became a regular feature in his papers from 1976.

Wittmer’s papers at the generic level are fewer. When he was not overloaded by new species descriptions, he devoted some time to this and, in particular, his revision of the Malachiidae of South Africa forms a coherent whole in which he redefined the generic divisions without over-multiplying them.

Considering his described taxa as a whole, very few will have to be synonymized, and the few names that have been sunk were described when type material could not be examined because of the war, the distances involved, or the lack of museum facilities.

### Several collaborations

Apart from occasional collaborations on a defined project, as was the case with Noël Magis, Adrieen Mayor, Takehiko Nakane, Sergei Kazantshev and many other colleagues, Wittmer took part in two long-standing collaborations.

In 1939 Kurt Delkeskamp published volume 165 of Junk’s *Coleopterorum Catalogus*, devoted to the family Cantharidae. This was such a useful resource that Wittmer had a bound interleaved copy that he kept updated all his life. In 1975, Delkeskamp retired from the Berlin museum, and as the number of described Cantharidae taxa had increased from 4738 to 6990, the time was right for a new edition. They both worked together for several weeks in Basel, and the 1977 *Coleopterorum Catalogus Supplementa* reflects both Wittmer’s personal contribution and his hard work.

Wittmer was not in full agreement with his German Malachiidae colleague, and the latter’s views in “Phylogeneese der Malachiidae (Col.) der Welt” (1989) left him very dubious, to say the least. In my opinion, this was the starting point of a collaboration with Karel Majer to establish the modern phylogenetic classification of this family. Funded by a Swiss State Foundation for Cooperation, Majer spent several months between 1991 and 1993, working “on Dr Wittmer’s gigantic collection” and analyzing all kinds of characters at the generic and subfamily levels. However, there was a generation “gap” between Wittmer, brought up with classical external characters, and Majer, who favoured holomorphology and groupings following a matrix. The result was a very fine work at the subfamily level, but also a serious disappointment to Wittmer

who saw his classical genera defined in unexpected ways following the discovery of unsuspected anatomical structures. What is really a genus? Wittmer questioned his friends, but none had the answer. A good part of this work on the subfamily classification of the Malachiidae was published in 2002, but the other parts are lost apart from a few fragments in my care. Collaboration with Karel Majer is continuing in other forms, and the latter will help Wittmer in producing major revisions of South African genera with fine dissections and quality illustrations.

### **Posterity**

All through his life, Walter Wittmer took great pains to help any young taxonomist working on his favourite groups. I can state that we, the present generation of systematists, received from him the best of help and were encouraged in many ways: the immediate sending of reprints or other documentation, the loan of any material, recommendations to friends and curators. Through his foundation "Pro Entomologia", he facilitated visits to the Basel Museum of several East European researchers. Nor should we forget him as a host at his home, where his wife Mrs Inge Wittmer welcomed all his colleagues.



**W. Wittmer** with Inge Wittmer in Basel, 1985. (Photograph by R. Constantin.)

### Acknowledgements

My best thanks are due to Mrs Inge Wittmer-Heck, who patiently agreed to talk about the past and was able to confirm many details. I am also indebted to the following colleagues for their help: Dr Michel Brancucci welcomed me into the Basel Museum on many occasions and put Wittmer's collections and library at my disposal; Dr Willy Kuschel provided many details about the Chileans trips; Dr Heinrich Schönmann searched for and provided the missing documentation on Richard Hicker; Dr Vladimír Švihla helped me to document the final years; finally, Dr Adrian C. Pont undertook the linguistic revision.

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