

**OBLETNICE  
ANNIVERSARI  
ANNIVERSARIES**

**ON THE OCCASION OF THE 90<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY  
OF DR MIROSLAV ZEI**

Dr Miroslav Zei was born on 25 July 1914, in the village of Nabrežina near Trieste. In 1920, when his hometown fell under Italy, his family moved to Slovenia owing to growing Fascism, and settled in the town of Maribor, where Dr Zei finished elementary and secondary school. After having taken his *matura* examination in 1932, he enrolled at the University of Ljubljana. As soon as he graduated in biology in 1936, he became active in the fields of ichthyology (the branch of zoology dealing with the systematics, morphology and biology of fishes), biology of fishes and biological oceanography, to which he has remained totally dedicated throughout the 70 years of his scientific and academic work. To him, the sea has presented not only a professional calling, but also one of the greatest loves of his life.

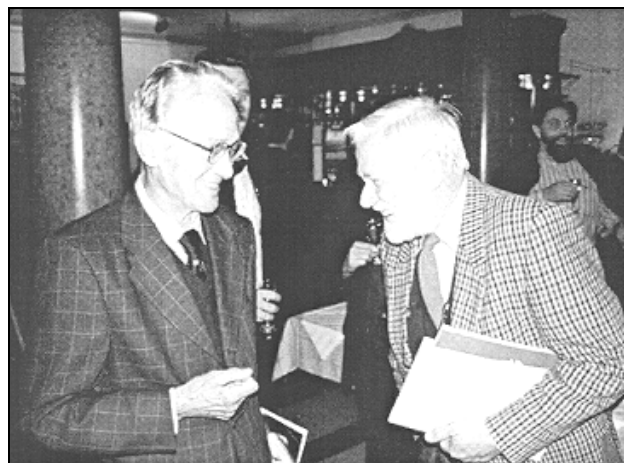
Naturally, it was as early as in his youth that the nostalgic sediment of his childhood recollections of the sea at Trieste, together with the daydreams about wide oceans stimulated by the tales of his father, a mechanic in the Austrian Navy, arose his deep interest for the sea and its secrets. But it was his tutor, Prof. Jovan Hadži, who himself was deeply attached to the sea and its organism, who played the decisive role in directing his career. Soon after his graduation in 1937, Prof. Hadži also helped him to get his first employment at the Institute of Oceanography and Fisheries of Split, where he worked as an assistant and researcher up to 1948.

This period – which could also be called the "Split round" – was of vital importance not only for his personal career as a scientist, but also for the branch of ichthyology. It was Dr Zei who introduced a new approach to research on the Adriatic Sea and its abundance of fish species, which led to the development of more reasonably managed fisheries exerting no harmful effects on the fish population. His then research and publication on benthic fish communities presented, as a matter of fact, pioneering steps in the introduction of modern biology of fishes not only to the Adriatic, but also to the wider Mediterranean area. There were two "by-products" of his work and the resulting comprehensive fish collection, both of great importance for basic ichthyology: the revision of the previously unclear classification of the Adriatic species of Maenidae (family Maenidae) and the discovery of sex inversion in the species of Maenidae and in other fish species, with the latter being such a breakthrough that it entered all reference books on ichthyology and zoophysiology.

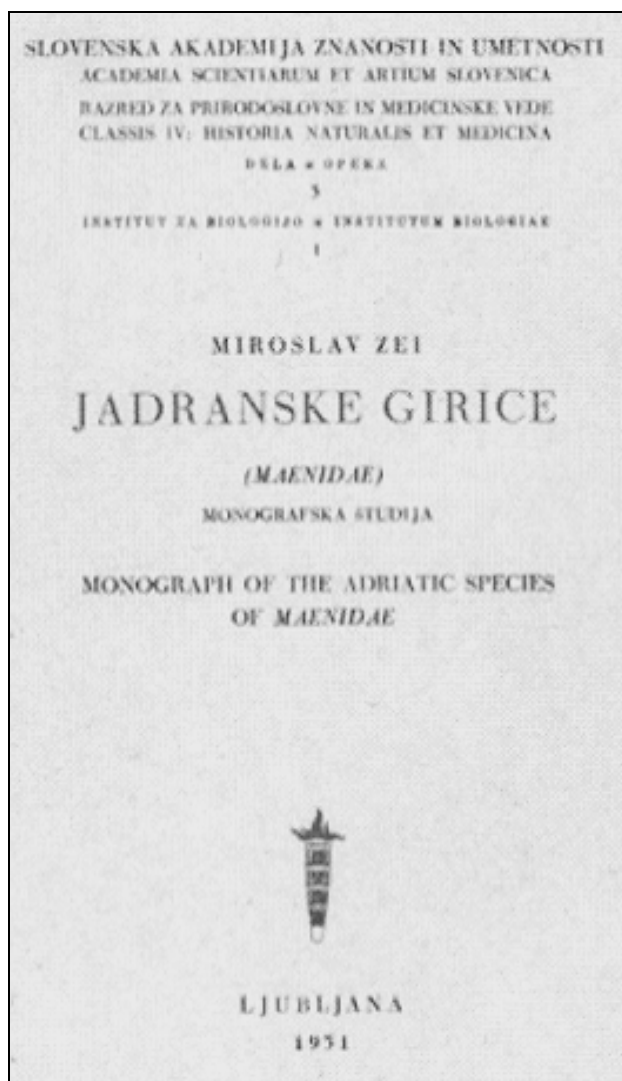
During the following period (1948–1962), Dr Zei was

employed at the Zoological Institute of the Faculty of Natural Sciences of the University of Ljubljana, first as an Associate and since 1954 as a Full Professor. When Prof. Hadži retired in 1956, he became the director of the Institute. In 1960, he was appointed first director of the newly established Institute of Biology, the aim of which was to join in one place all biological programmes of the University of Ljubljana. For two terms, he was also Dean of the Faculty of Natural Sciences. His term of office was marked by his efforts to prevent the relocation of the Department of Biology from the Faculty of Natural Sciences to that of Biotechnology. Unfortunately, his "subversive" action failed, but what he did manage to earn was resentment on the part of the Communist Party and the then Rector. On the other hand, it could be that the outcome of the affair made it easier for him to accept the placement offered to him by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

During the period, he was also very active in the field of education. He was a diligent lecturer of as many as four subjects: comparative anatomy of vertebrates, biology of chordates, evolution, and ecology of the sea. Though very concise and demanding, his lectures were energetic, witty, and interesting. The same goes for his summer courses in marine biology, which he held at the Institute of Marine Biology of the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts in Rovinj. While heading the Institute from 1951 to 1960 as part-time director, he made several attempts to internationalise its activities, which was far from easy in the times of the former Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, he managed to overcome initial resistance by organising biology courses for students from European universities.



***The jubilant Dr Miroslav Zei (left) with Prof. Jože Štirn on the occasion of 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Marine Biology Station of Piran. (Photo: B. Šuligoj)***  
***Slavljenec, dr. Miroslav Zei (levo) in prof. Jože Štirn na proslavi ob 30. obletnici Morske biološke postaje iz Pirana. (Foto: B. Šuligoj)***



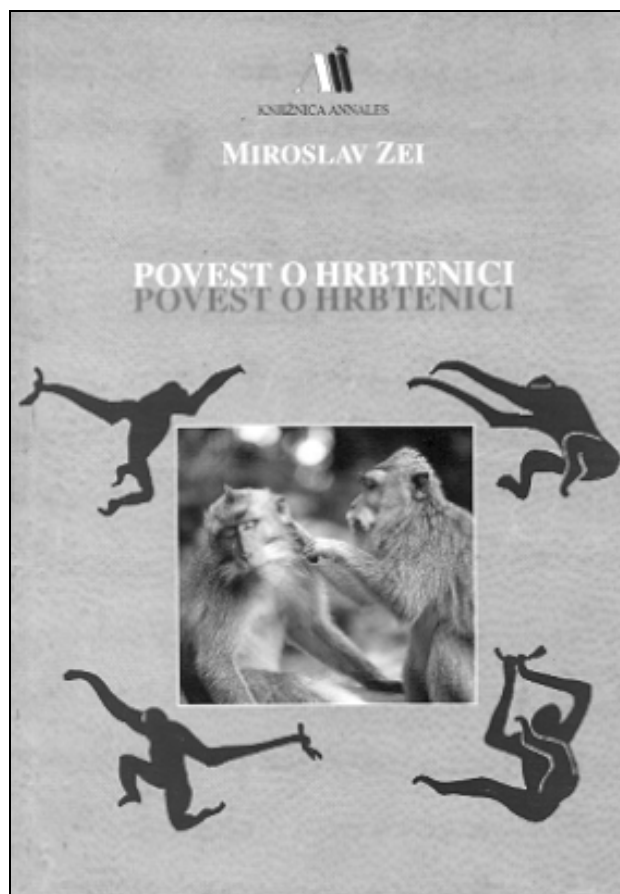
***The book of the Adriatic species of Maenidae is one of Zei's most important achievements (1951). Knjiga o jadranskih giricah je eno izmed Zejevih najpomembnejših dosežkov (1951).***

When describing the 1948–1962 period, one should also point out that from 1960 to 1962 Dr Zei headed the Society for Sea Research and Underwater Technology and that he showed no hesitation to use his influence in support of the allegedly venturesome plan of Slovene divers to carry out the first Yugoslav expedition to the Red Sea and Ethiopia, which, needless to say, turned out to be a great success. By promoting activities that complemented his work in higher education and research and by handing down his enthusiasm to his students, he made it possible that small Slovenia with only a patch of sea has raised a fairly great number of distinguished sea researchers, with four of them having worked for a long time for the UN as heads of important FAO or UNESCO projects conducted in the seas of four continents.

Naturally, it was he who had paved the way. As a FAO expert in fish biology and director of projects for the development of sea fisheries, he worked in Africa for the UN for an uninterrupted period of 13 years. From 1962 to 1970, he was employed on various projects in Ghana, later on (1970–1973) in Tunisia. From 1973 to 1975, he headed the CECAR project, based at the FAO seat in Rome, the aim of which was to provide guidelines to all national fishing organisations along the coast of West Africa, from Morocco to Zaire.

Despite the well-known fact that FAO's employees are in no way obliged to produce scientific publications and have to publish only those results of their work that can be of immediate and practical use for the development of a given national fishery, Dr Zei did not stop writing scholarly books during his "FAO round". Though he published fewer works, they were of great importance for the sea fishery of the whole central Atlantic on the one hand, and for the biology of anchovies and familiar fish species on the other.

In 1975, Dr Zei retired from the UN and moved from Rome to Portorož. Two years later, he started to work



***"The backbone story" is one of his latest books (1999). "Povest o hrbtnici" je ena njegovih novejših knjig (1999).***

part-time as the head of Marine Biology Station of Portorož (MBS), a unit of the National Institute of Biology of Ljubljana. It did not take him long to resolve the internal crisis that had affected the Station. His reputation helped the Station to finally gain the funds for the renovation and building of new premises located at Fornače near Piran, to which the MBS moved in 1980. Yet the edifice was also built in order to house the Regional Post-Graduate Centre for the Studies of the Mediterranean Ecology, the establishment of which had been entrusted by the UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanic Commission to the University of Ljubljana and the MBS. Unfortunately, the project has not been realised for several quite banal reasons.

While working at the MBS (1977–1983), Dr Zei also tried to introduce applied biological research on fishes that would facilitate the development of the mariculture of fishes and mussels. Unluckily, all his efforts were in vain as they met indifference and irrational opposition. At the same time, he remained extremely active in the academic field. He was re-appointed as Full Professor and between 1976–1985 lectured on ichthyology and biology of fishes at the University of Ljubljana. From 1980 to 1989, he was the principal lecturer at cyclical postgraduate courses on biology of fishes and oceanography held each summer at the Institute of Oceanography and Fisheries of Split and organised by the Yugoslav Institute for International Collaboration for students from African, Asian, and Latin-American countries.

After 1983, when he stopped working at the MBS,

his publishing activities increased. Currently, his body of work comprises 42 scientific and around 50 professional articles, 7 scientific books, not to mention as many as 12 titles for the general public, mostly on vertebrates (in particular on fishes), sea fishery, the Adriatic Sea and its flora and fauna. It is the popular science books that have made him well known and respected in the eyes of Slovene readers. Not surprisingly, Slovenes show an incredible love and interest not only for the Adriatic, but also for the sea in general. After all, much of the credit goes to Dr Zei.

In the article that I wrote on the occasion of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, the concluding lines ran as follows: "I would like to express deep gratitude to Dr Zei for sharing his unselfish humanness and enormous knowledge with all of us, as well as with his discipline, fisheries at the Adriatic, Mediterranean and Atlantic, and Slovene science. I sincerely hope that the new Republic of Slovenia will finally acknowledge his merits, thus remedying the disappointment that confirmed the truth of the ancient wisdom: *nemo propheta in patria*." Now, on the occasion of his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, I find it appropriate to repeat them. And if necessary, I will do it again when Dr Zei celebrates his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. Judging from his strength of character and his will to live, both typical of his Primorska origin, I am absolutely convinced that he will live to see it.

**Jože Štirn**