



**Pinhas (Pinye) Amitai
(1928—2023)**

Pinhas (Pinye) Amitai, a self-educated zoologist, was one of the most notable and popular naturalists in Israel, famous for his books, lectures, jokes, pranks and the characteristic enormous moustache. Amitai was born in Jerusalem, spent most of his life in Jerusalem and died in Jerusalem, full of years and good works. In general, he was primarily an entomologist and arachnologist, and his main scientific interest was in poisonous arthropods. However, Pinye's major contribution was the popularization of nature science and his love of nature among the general public. Overall, he authored or co-authored more than 270 publications, including 17 scientific articles in English or French, one scientific book in English, 17 popular scientific books in Hebrew, and numerous articles in Hebrew journals and newspapers.

Pinhas Amitai, better known by his Yiddish nickname 'Pinye', was born on 30 April 1928 in the Old City of Jerusalem, the eldest of seven children, to Moshe and Sara Werechson (Figs 1–3). Pinye and his siblings became the sixth generation in his family living in Jerusalem, after their distant ancestors arrived to the Land of Israel from Gomel (Homel, now Belarus).

In 1932 Pinye attended *heyder*, the traditional Hebrew school, in the yard of the Hurva Synagogue, in the Old City of Jerusalem, studying the alphabet and Tora. Pinye's grandfather Avraham Eliezer used to take him to the synagogue and on their



Figs 1–6. (1) Grandparents of Pinye, Avraham Eliezer (Leyzer) and Zlate Werechson, with two of their sons, the boy on the right is Moshe, Pinye's father, Jerusalem; (2) Parents of Pinye, Moshe and Sara Werechson, on the right is Pinye (the eldest), on the left is his younger brother Shelomo, Jerusalem; (3) Moshe Werechson, his six sons and daughter Leumit, Pinye is sitting on the right, Jerusalem; (4) Pinye and Yaffa at Sedom Camp, near the Dead Sea, 1 May 1946, soon after their acquaintance; (5) Pinye and Yaffa on their wedding day, Jerusalem, 1947; (6) Pinye and Yaffa, Noqdim, April 2020. Photographs are from the family archives, courtesy Eliyahu Werechson and Sigal Sochatzki-Amitai.

way back would walk through the fields to show him different animals. Pinye's grandfather instilled curiosity and love for nature in the little boy. In 1933–1938 Pinye studied at the Tahkemoni School, Jerusalem, and in 1939–1940 at the Merkaz haRav Yeshiva. This was the end of his official education, since then he educated himself, a true autodidact. In the future, some of his numerous disciples would receive high academic degrees.

Pinye's father Moshe earned his living as a delivery man for Dubek (an Israeli cigarette manufacturing company). He also loved animals and bequeathed this passion to his children. From his childhood Pinye was fond of nature and animals, particularly arthropods. The family moved from the Old City of Jerusalem to Mekor Hayyim, which was still a relatively new quarter of Jerusalem with many undeveloped areas where Pinye, followed by his younger brothers, was undertaking his first scientific expeditions looking for scorpions and chasing snakes. Curiously, Pinye's younger brother Shelomo also became an entomologist and worked for years for the Volcani Institute and Agricultural Research Center.

In 1940 the family moved to the 'Abu Bassel' (Ohel Shelomo) neighborhood, opposite the old Sha'are Zedek Hospital. Years later, Pinye wrote about his childhood memories from this neighborhood in his book *A Little Oath*.

Approximately at this period he became acquainted with Israel Aharoni (1882–1946), 'the first Hebrew zoologist', who turned out to be Pinye's first scientific mentor. Aharoni directed him to make observations on natural objects and write them down in a special diary. Later Pinye met Prof. Aharon Shulov (1907–1997) of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the founder of the Jerusalem Biblical Zoo, who also became his mentor and later a colleague and collaborator for many years. Pinye started his career working as an animal handler in the Biblical Zoo (1940–1941). Soon, he joined Shulov's working on scorpion antivenom, and they continued studying and publishing together on various aspects of the Israeli scorpion taxonomy, physiology, behavior, ecology and toxicology.

When Pinye turned 15 years old and having received permission from his father, he moved to the Dead Sea Potash Factory in Sedom Camp, on the south-western coast of the Dead Sea, where he was vocationally trained as an electrician and remained working there in 1943–1948. At the same time, he studied intensively the arthropods and reptiles of the Dead Sea area, keeping spiders, camel spiders, scorpions and snakes in jars in his hut. There Pinye met and fell in love with Yaffa (née Viner) (1928–2020). She visited the Potash Factory and impressed him greatly with her natural and fearless approach to a pair of Egyptian mastigures (*Uromastix aegyptia*) that he had tied at the entrance to his hut. The couple married in 1947 and stayed together for 74 years. They built a modest house in Jerusalem, in Bait vaGan quarter with a yard overgrown with thick vegetation. Their heartwarming dwelling turned into a place of pilgrimage for many young naturalists in the last 70 years.

In 1948–1950 Pinye served in the IDF as a paramedic, participating in the War of Independence and in battles defending Jerusalem. After the army service he returned



Figs 7–13. (7) Pinye with students of the David Yellin College of Education on excursion in the Judean Desert, near Arad, 1969 (photo D. Simon); (8) Pinye (right) with Prof. Gershom (Gerele) Levy (left), Jerusalem, 23 May 2008 (photo D. Simon); (9) Pinye in his yard, hanging a drinking device for sunbirds, Bait vaGan, Jerusalem, December 2017 (photo D. Simon); (10) Pinye in his lab, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; (11) Pinye (right) and Dany Simon (left), presenting their book on Israeli scorpions and spiders and celebrating Pinye's 90th birthday, Bait vaGan, Jerusalem, 2018 (courtesy D. Simon); (12) Pinye (right) telling stories, with Prof. Yael Lubin (left), May 2010 (photo D. Simon); (13) Pinye taking a photo of a scorpion, Sede Boqer (photo D. Simon).



Fig. 14. Pinye with children (including his grandchildren), Jerusalem, 7 May 2011. (Courtesy Sigal Sochatzki-Amitai)

to nature studies, and since 1951 he worked in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem as a laboratory assistant in the zoological lab (working with insects, arachnids and venomous reptiles) and teaching assistant for the courses of Arachnology and Faunistics. In 1955 Pinye published his first scientific paper (Shulov & Amitai 1955). Pinye invented a revolutionary method of extracting scorpion venom with the aid of electricity and without killing scorpions. This greatly speeded up the discovery of antivenom for the local species of scorpions and literally helped save many lives. Pinye studied various aspects of the natural history of scorpions and camel spiders unearthing a wealth of new information on their mating, reproduction and hunting habits. He worked shoulder to shoulder with many notable Israeli zoologists, e.g. parasitologists Prof. Rachel Galun (1926–2023) and Prof. Yoel Margalit (1933–2011), entomologists Prof. Meir Paul Pener (1930–2021) and Prof. Meir Broza (1940–2016) and an arachnologist Dr Gershon (Gerele) Levy (1937–2009). Pinye and Gerele worked together a lot, published ten articles on spiders and solifugids and a book on the scorpion fauna of Israel, and described 23 taxa of spiders and scorpions from Israel and adjacent countries. In 1960 Pinye also participated in the research on leishmaniasis in Israel and in Ethiopia. Altogether, Pinye authored and co-authored over 270 publications, including 17 peer-reviewed articles and a book in English, 16 popular scientific books and one book of his memoirs in Hebrew, some 50 popular scientific articles in Hebrew (all these are listed below), as well



Figs 15–21. (15) Pinye in his home lab, Bait vaGan, Jerusalem, ca. 2010 (photo D. Simon); (16) popular books in Hebrew on nature, animals, arthropods etc. by Pinye; (17–21) drawings by P. Amitai: (17) Southern banded newt (*Ommatotriton vittatus*), male during the breeding season; (18) the stable fly (*Stomoxys calcitrans*); (19) extinct fossil sea scorpion (Eurypterida); (20) scorpion (*Orthochirus scrobiculosus negebensis*), moving its 'tail'; (21) naturalist observing a weevil.

as numerous articles and notes in Hebrew journals and newspapers (not listed), mainly addressed to amateur naturalists and general public. Pinye's field guides to insects, spiders, arthropods etc. are essential references for most Israeli naturalists, young and old, and are pillars of modern Hebrew natural history literature. Pinye participated in a gargantuan project on *An illustrated encyclopedia of plants and animals of the Land of Israel*, the most fundamental book series on the flora and fauna of Israel in the last 40 years. Although Pinye only wrote a chapter on the assassin bugs, he contributed a lot of marvelous photographs of different animals.

Although photography was Pinye's favorite hobby and often an integral part of his studies and observations, he was also a talented artist and often illustrated his own and others' works, as well as humorous sketches (Figs 17–22).

Teaching was a kind of Pinye's inherent talent of. He knew how to impart both knowledge and a love of nature to his students. He had an extreme ability to charm the listener with fluent and rich speech, lightly seasoned with a very special sense of humor. Pinye taught numerous biological, zoological, entomological and faunistic courses at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, David Yellin College of Education in Jerusalem, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Be'er Sheva', Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan, and at the Jerusalem Biblical Zoo. He gave lectures to the IDF soldiers in the field, to school and preschool teachers, led excursions around Jerusalem and in the Judean Desert, talked on radio and appeared in the TV educational programs for the youth. His house was open for nature lovers of all ages. Pinye had a rare ability to arouse great interest in animals and to incite genuine curiosity in the nature around us in the hearts of thousands of his students and countless people who had been lucky to meet him. It was Pinye's unique faculty that that even many years after they met him, people remembered him with a smile and love of what they learned from him. Generations of children grew up on his books and field guides, written in an easy yet informative and rich language. Pinye proposed and put to wide use many new Hebrew names for arthropods, many of them widely accepted by the public. Of particular mention is 'Eyzo-feya shmanmonet' (literally "what a plump small fairy") for *Isophya*, a genus of plump wingless phytophagous bush-crickets.

Many years before the concept of 'urban wildlife' was introduced, Pinye enlightened our eyes with the ability to recognize and get to know the world of arthropods, especially spiders and insects, in gardens, yards and buildings. In his special style he kindled interest and empathy for them and put them at the front and the center. In doing so he turned to be a pioneer in a phenomenon that is now appreciated, nurtured and whose contribution became significant not only for nature conservation but mainly for the balance between the human well-being and enjoyment of the environment.

Pinye's distinctive moustache was his hallmark together with his exceptional sense of humor; if he could read this tribute he would definitely enjoyed it. Pinye enjoyed playing pranks on his students and colleagues. One time his students found 'electromagnetic' grasshoppers in their collections. When Pinye got a call from extremely frightened neighbors who found a snake in their house, he suggested he could bring a spouse for this snake, in order to pair them up. "Offspring is joy," he explained. Being on an expedition south to Elat, he told the respected professors from his department that there are salamanders in a deep and abandoned well (very unlikely!); when they rushed to peek into the well Pinye photographed the less academic part of their bodies. The first author of this note participated as Pinye's student in the faunistics course tour to the Judean Desert. At one of the stations, Pinye encouraged the students to turn over stones and within minutes a remarkable discovery was made – five snake eggs. "These are the eggs of the beautiful racer (*Platyceps elegantissimus*)," Pinye declared. "The species can be easily identified due to the high carbohydrate content in the shell." Excited by their encounter with

the rare snake eggs, all the students licked them and unanimously confirmed the finding. Only later did they realize that the taste was that of dragée (sugar-coated almonds, a well-known Jerusalem treat) that had been secretly placed by Pinye under the stone in advance.

Pinye received the following honorary prizes and titles for his achievements:

1997, Freund Prize for the promotion of education and scientific information to the general public.

2002, Honorary member of the Society for Zoology in Israel.

2011, Honorary prize of the Entomological Society in Israel.

2019, An annual citizenship prize Worthy Citizen of Jerusalem.

Pinye passed away peacefully at a ripe old age on 18 June 2023. He was survived by his two daughters Negba Navon and Sigal Sochatzki-Amitai, two sons-in law Kuti Navon and Kobi Sochatzki, as well as six grandchildren and six great-grandchildren. Kobi was like his own son to Pinye and provided him great and unique assistance in many of Pinye's affairs.

We thank Sigal Sochatzki-Amitai, Pinye's daughter, and Eliyahu (Eli) Werechson, Pinye's brother, for sharing important information, photographs from the family archive and drawings by Pinye. Some photos were taken by Sigal Sochatzki-Amitai, Netanel Duvletzky and Yoav Shur. We thank David G. Furth and Mike Mostovski for reviewing and improving the manuscript.

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CAIN, S., GEFFEN, E. & PRENDINI, L. 2021. Systematic revision of the sand scorpions, genus *Buthacus* Birula, 1908 (Buthidae C. L. Koch, 1837) of the Levant, with redescription of *Buthacus arenicola* (Simon, 1885) from Algeria and Tunisia. *Bulletin of the American Museum of Natural History* **450**: 1–137. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/304115#page/1>

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Taxa described by P. Amitai

Scorpiones: Family Buthidae

Compsobuthus arabicus Levy, Amitai & Shulov, 1973

Cosmobuthus carmelitis Levy, Amitai & Shulov, 1973

Compsobuthus jordanensis Levy, Amitai & Shulov, 1973

Cosmobuthus longipalpis Levy, Amitai & Shulov, 1973

Buthacus nigroaculeatus Levy, Amitai & Shulov, 1973

Vachoniolus Levy, Amitai & Shulov, 1973

Vachoniolus globimanus Levy, Amitai & Shulov, 1973

Araneae: Family Theridiidae

Crustulina hermonensis Levy & Amitai, 1979

Dipoena galilaea Levy & Amitai, 1981

Enoplognatha deserta Levy & Amitai, 1981

Enoplognatha giladensis (Levy & Amitai, 1982)

Enoplognatha macrochelis Levy & Amitai, 1981

Enoplognatha mediterranea Levy & Amitai, 1981

Enoplognatha parathoracica Levy & Amitai, 1981

Euryopsis hebraea Levy & Amitai, 1981

Simitidion agaricographum (Levy & Amitai, 1982)

Steatoda xerophila Levy & Amitai, 1982

Theridion dafnense Levy & Amitai, 1982

Theridion gekkonicum Levy & Amitai, 1982

Theridion hierichonticum Levy & Amitai, 1982

Theridion jordanense Levy & Amitai, 1982

Theridion negebense Levy & Amitai, 1982

Theridion ochreolum Levy & Amitai, 1982

Theridion vallisalinarum Levy & Amitai, 1982

Fig. 22. Humorous sketch by P. Amitai:
Don't talk to him, he is just a
worm.



Hebrew names of assassin and damsel bugs (Reduviidae, Nabidae) proposed by P. Amitai

Scientific name	Transcription of Hebrew name	Hebrew name
<i>Ploearia</i>	lulyanit	לולינית
<i>Empicoris</i>	duqotz	דוקוץ
<i>Gardena</i>	kehushit	כחושית
<i>Oncocephalus</i>	anqoli	אנקולי
<i>Holotrichius</i>	'afrur	עפרור
<i>Reduvius</i>	'afrurit	עפרורית
<i>Ectomocoris</i>	torpan	טורפן
<i>Rhinocoris</i>	ratz'an	רצען
<i>Sphedanolestes</i>	ratz'anit	רצענית
<i>Rhaphidosoma</i>	qeysam	קיסם
<i>Plocaria</i>	shavvar	שוור
<i>Pirates</i>	shoded	שוודד
<i>Prostema</i>	'armonit	ערמונית
<i>Deganya</i>	deganitit	דגניתית

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