

Henry Spira, 71, Animal Rights Crusader

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Henry Spira, the architect of the American animal rights movement's first successful campaigns to limit the use of animals in medical testing and a leading advocate of more humane treatment of farm animals, died early Saturday in his West Side apartment from esophageal cancer, according to Elinor Molbegott, his executor. He was 71.

Mr. Spira (pronounced SPEE-ra) brought half a lifetime of activism in the labor and civil rights movements to the animal rights world when he became involved at the age of 45. His interest in what he once called "the most defenseless of all the world's victims" was aroused when a friend left him with a cat around the time he first read "Animal Liberation," a 1973 essay by Peter Singer, an Australian bioethicist.

"I began to wonder why we cuddle some animals and put a fork in others," he often said.

Mr. Spira first gained notice in 1976 by leading a campaign seeking an end to the American Museum of Natural History's research on the impact of castration and other forms of mutilation on the sexual behavior of cats. When the research was

halted in 1977, animal rights activists hailed the campaign as the first in more than a century of antivivisection efforts in the United States and Europe actually to result in an end to any animal testing.

Two years later, Mr. Spira organized a coalition that eventually included 400 groups to pressure first Revlon and then the rest of the cosmetics industry to phase out its use of the Draize test, which involved blinding large numbers of rabbits to determine how irritating new cosmetics might be for human beings.

Mr. Spira soon took aim at a common animal test called LD/50, which had long been used to establish "safe" levels for human exposure to chemicals and drugs by determining what level of exposure provided a lethal dose to 50 percent of the animals in the test sample. Animal rights groups, supported by a growing number of toxicologists, argued that the tests often provided misleading or incomplete information and, even when helpful, used far more animals than necessary.

The animal testing campaigns played a major role in forcing hospitals, government laboratories and universities to establish review boards to make sure that experiments used alternatives to animals -- test-tube cultures, for example -- where possible and to make sure that animals were not unnecessarily abused when they were used. Mr. Spira also negotiated with the cosmetics industry to provide initial financing to create the Center for Alternatives to Animal Testing at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

During the 1980's, Mr. Spira shifted his emphasis to the treatment of farm animals. He was a committed vegetarian who believed that meat-rich Western diets were medically unsound and that the global environment was endangered by the growth of the meat industry in developing nations, but he regularly infuriated militant animal rights groups by advocating a gradualist approach, focusing on working with meat producers to reduce animal suffering. He led a successful campaign to end face branding of cattle and negotiated with McDonald's and other fast-food companies to get them to supervise the practices of their suppliers more closely.

Henry Spira was born June 19, 1927, in Antwerp, Belgium, the son of Maurice and Margit Spitzer Spira. The family emigrated to Germany, England, Panama and, finally, the United States in the years leading up to World War II. Henry Spira left home at 16, plunged into left-wing politics and joined the merchant marine. After two years in the Army, he worked on the assembly line at the General Motors factory in Linden, N.J., writing frequently for militant newspapers. He also became involved in the civil rights movement and in maritime union politics.

Mr. Spira graduated from Brooklyn College in 1958, spent most of the next few years back at sea and in 1966 began teaching English at a public high school in Manhattan. He quit to devote himself full time to animal rights in 1982.

Mr. Spira was coordinator of Animal Rights International, which, despite its sweeping name, rarely consisted of more than Mr. Spira himself and a part-time aide. He operated out of his West Side apartment, which was filled with files and office equipment, a climbing tree for the succession of cats he owned and tired furniture.

Mr. Spira was a careful assembler of facts, a cynical humorist, a devoted practitioner of thank-you notes and, above all, disarming in his dealings with both friends and adversaries. Though willing to put on a coat and tie if necessary to meet with business executives, he was never able to look comfortable in them. Perhaps it was his insistence on wearing sneakers. He drew a salary of \$15,000 from A.R.I., plus a few thousand dollars annually in expenses, and never wavered in his scorn for bureaucracies, including those of some of his allies.

But Mr. Spira was a master at building coalitions that melded the talents and resources of far wealthier organizations, like the Humane Society of the United States or Johns Hopkins, with scientists, advertising professionals and others who could contribute to his various campaigns.

Mr. Spira's penchant for bridge-building often extended to establishing working relationships with opponents in an effort to find common ground as a building block for progress. He contended that the destructive raids by the underground Animal Liberation Front on laboratories were counterproductive. And while he said that the

presence of more strident voices than his own was helpful to the movement, he never hesitated to part ways with groups like the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals by praising companies like Procter & Gamble when he saw them making progress on reducing their use of animal testing, even if he had been unable to extract commitments to end all such work.

"Of all the people in the movement, Henry understood best how companies change," said Simon Billings, an analyst at Franklin Research and Development, an investment adviser in Boston that had worked with Mr. Spira on the McDonald's campaign.

Mr. Spira is survived by his sister, Renee Bloch of Bellport, N.Y.

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