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Henry Spira: A Fighter Who Makes Things Happen for Animals

Interviewed by Robert Davey

It was a late spring morning, and the weather in New York City was hot and hazy. A sedate elevator ride provided delivery to the 12th floor of a Beaux Arts building on the corner of West 86th Street and Central Park West. Henry Spira, coordinator of Animal Rights International, opened the door of the rent-controlled apartment where he has lived for the past 27 years. Dressed in khaki shirt and shorts, the 67-year-old Spira was a GAP ad in the making--an idea which would probably have amused the resolutely un-trendy activist.

A cramped space between the front door and inner door in Spira's apartment was added as a security measure--not to keep intruders out, but to keep Spira's cat, Nina, in. He made sure the outer door was firmly shut before proceeding into the apartment, where the walls of every room except the bathroom are lined with files. Spira named Nina after a character in *Strange Interlude* by Eugene O'Neill, he says—"a woman who nobody could break."

The Belgian-born Spira, a veteran union and civil rights activist, guides a loose-knit group of helpers and scientists to success in campaigns which have raised public awareness about animal rights issues and brought about measurable change. His first campaign stopped a program which funded cruel and scientifically useless experiments on cats at the American Museum of Natural History. Spira's latest action successfully pressured the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to halt its practice of requiring the face branding of Mexican cattle imported into the U.S. Spira has chosen battles he believed were winnable, carrying out carefully modulated campaigns which always begin with attempts to establish dialogue with the opposing camp. If rebuffed, he is ready to move to the next stage, which usually means full-page newspaper ads designed to foment public outrage.

Spira has done this with virtually no organization ("Animal Rights International is essentially just a letterhead," he says), remaining focused strictly on the goal of each individual campaign, and avoiding the bureaucratic and fundraising distractions which preoccupy major not-for-profit groups.

Our interview ranged from the moral and philosophical underpinnings of Spira's activism to his thoughts on the relationship between the animal rights and environmental movements.

E: Was there anything in your background that led you to activism?

SPIRA: Several things. I was part of a very dysfunctional family. When I was young I was farmed out to various family members in different countries. I didn't get programmed into a particular value system. It's been good preparation for being an activist; you realize there are different ways of doing things, and you learn to rely on yourself.

E: How did you get into labor organizing?

SPIRA: I left home at 16 and joined the merchant marine at 17. There was a struggle going on, with the membership getting pushed around-and I guess if I want to define my life in general, the key element is I don't like to get pushed around, and I don't like to see others get pushed around.

So I became editor of an insurgent paper that called for maritime union democracy. We put that out for five years and got the union officials indicted. We also got people to understand they can organize in defense of their interests: If it's possible to organize, it's possible to make a dent.

That was also where I learned about strategy. Every campaign I've been in has had input from people in the opposing camp. It's interesting that without being connected to anyone influential, without the bucks or the apparatus, you can still make an impact. But in order to do that you have to be grounded in reality, and do a lot of planning. The important thing is to act; it's not enough to wear buttons.

E: How did you get involved in animal rights?

SPIRA: I read Peter Singer's essay on "animal liberation" in the *New York Review of Books* and took his course at NYU in 1974 and I decided that animal liberation was the logical extension of what my life was all about-identifying with the powerless and vulnerable. It seemed that in a hierarchy of exploitation and domination, animals are at the bottom of the heap.

E: So you looked around for a target?

SPIRA: After Singer's class, a few of us met and began to plan what we could do to make a difference. We looked for a clearly defined injustice and a winnable goal. After much searching, we found a series of cat-sex experiments performed at the American Museum of Natural History. For 17 years tax monies were used to surgically mutilate cats and then observe their sexual performance. When we contacted museum officials they refused to talk, so we moved on to a public awareness campaign with ads and demonstrations which hurt the museum's image and threatened their budget. After 18 months, the labs were dismantled.

E: You've written at length about your strategy, which is to not be confrontational or hostile, but to negotiate if possible.

SPIRA: I don't see "us" as saints and "them" as sinners; I see a universe of pain and suffering and ask what I can do. I don't have a problem talking with the adversary. On the contrary, I want to get them involved.

That strategy makes folks who prefer "all or nothing" uncomfortable. But that's not the way the world works. At the museum we saved 60 cats but also served notice that the public demands accountability: How much pain for how much gain?

E: One of your biggest victories was persuading Revlon to research alternatives to the Draize test, which entails exposing the eyes of rabbits to products ranging from mascara to household cleaners.

SPIRA: Again, we first tried to talk with them, and they talked-they just didn't act. We suggested alternative ways to test, and they just jerked us around. That's why we ran the full-page ads asking, "How many rabbits does Revlon blind for beauty's sake?"

The person we had dealt with got fired, another guy took over, and we settled the whole thing in a few weeks. Revlon contracted with Rockefeller University for \$500,000 over two years, to find alternatives to the Draize.

E: Has that test been eradicated now?

SPIRA: No, but our campaign did push the drive to find alternatives into the scientific mainstream. According to some figures, the number of animals used--in all lab tests, not just the Draize--has been cut by about half. Where animal testing hasn't been cut is where it's needed for regulatory acceptance, and also in academia. But as far as corporate uses of animals go, there have been enormous reductions. Drug companies that used to use a million animals a year now use 300,000.

E: How would you characterize the relationship between the animal rights movement and the environmental movement?

SPIRA: Logically, there should be enormous overlap; unfortunately there isn't. The place where I see real opportunity to work together is in the 95 percent of animal suffering which is factory farming, the very cruel—and environmentally-destructive—mass production of animals for food. At the American Association for the Advancement of Science annual meeting in Atlanta, a couple of months ago, experts said that, by 2050, we're going to have to reduce consumption of animal products by half because of increasing population and depletion of resources like water.

One of the concerns of the environmental movement is clean water, and that's being threatened by these mega-factory farms. Even the *Wall Street Journal* has run major stories about the environmental problems they cause, particularly the enormous manure lagoons built by corporations that don't give a damn about either the environment or animals.

The differences between the environmental and animal rights movements are minor relative to the overlap. Both are basically concerned with promoting non-violence toward the planet.

E: There seems to be a discomfort among some environmentalists with animal rights.

SPIRA: One reason could be that two big environmental victories were two Environmental Protection Agency acts which depend heavily on animal testing: The Toxic Substances Control Act and The Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act. These were passed about the time we were campaigning against traditional animal testing. Environmentalists may have misread our campaigns as attacks on a safe environment and safe food—but we believe in both. We're just saying we can find alternative methods of testing.

The other is that they feel the animal movement is emotional and irrational; that we hurt their cause. I disagree. I think the animal movement has tapped into public emotion with a solid rationale that it's wrong to harm others, period.

Traditional attitudes that the Earth and everything on it were made for Man to use as we please are now being challenged by both the environmental and animal rights communities, which recognize that our planet is not merely a quarry to exploit, nor just a pit to dump our garbage in.

E: So you see a kinship?

SPIRA: Many of us see the need to live lightly in order to protect our environment. The use of animals for food is profoundly destructive to our environment and is becoming ever more so. Corporate

animal factories poison the air, land and water. And they exhaust our resources. Isn't now the time for animal protectionists and environmentalists to get together and help the planet, people and animals by promoting a no-meat or less-meat lifestyle and thereby a sustainable agriculture system?

I've often wondered why the environmental movement is so reluctant to encourage vegetarianism. It occurred to me that they may be afraid to offend their largely carnivorous donor base. It is mind-boggling to see environmentalists campaign on fast-food packaging when it's the burger on the inside that causes the much-greater environmental damage. So, while top fast-food and environmental officials publicly laud each other, the environment and animals suffer.

E: How does all this relate to animals used in laboratory experiments?

SPIRA: Current traditional animal tests cannot assess the more than 60,000 chemicals in commercial use. Leading toxicologists are promoting alternatives because they tend to be faster, cheaper and more predictive of toxicity. The development and use of modern, sophisticated alternatives is a win-win situation in which the environment and human health will be more efficiently protected while protecting animals.

Environmental and animal activists already agree that nature in all its diversity was not created just for humans. Isn't that what Alice Walker had in mind when she wrote, "The animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than black people were made for whites, or women for men"? Looking at the big picture, it would seem that environmentalists and animal activists have much in common. By joining hands, we stand a much better chance of getting results across the broad spectrum.

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