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Barnaby J. Feder

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Pressuring Perdue

Henry Spira, a moderate among animal-rights activists, aims now at the barnyard

Barnaby J. Feder

Henry Spira works from home, a roomy rent-controlled apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side that looks like an office first, a cat playground second, and his residence only as an afterthought. One room is dominated by word-processing equipment. A second is filled with floor-to-ceiling shelves laden with files. And in the living room, where an immense worktable stretches along one wall, the furniture consists of an old couch and two chairs covered in Naugahyde (leather is not an option here). Pictures of Siamese cats hang over the fireplace and a cat jungle gym dominates the hall. From this Spartan dwelling Spira (pronounced SPEE-ra) has run a major command post in this country's rapidly growing animal-rights movement. The burly 62-year-old ex-seaman and former high school teacher says he first became interested in animal rights in the early 1970's, after a girlfriend left him with her cat: "I began to wonder about the appropriateness of cuddling one animal while sticking a knife and fork into another," recalls Spira, who since then has always had one or two cats in his house.

At the moment, though, chickens are on Henry Spira's mind. After four years of gathering material from animal-rights activists, government agencies and newspaper clippings, he has charged Frank Perdue, the nation's most famous chicken farmer, with grossly misrepresenting the conditions under which Perdue chickens are raised and slaughtered. In a grisly full-page ad in The New York Times, Spira has challenged Perdue's claims that his chickens grow up in "chicken heaven." Rather, the ad describes, among other things, poultry sheds so overcrowded that they encourage cannibalism, disease and mass hysteria; it cites the de-beaking of young chicks with a "hot knife," and working conditions for humans so stressful that they force "about 60 percent of workers to go to the nurse for pain killers and to have their hands bandaged."

Perdue Farms, through a public relations concern, described the attack as "vague and totally groundless." It said Perdue spends millions of dollars on research to minimize stress and disease in poultry and improve its chickens' housing, diet and environment. Perdue intends to ignore Spira's call for reforms.

Nonetheless, Spira is pushing ahead, scheduling meetings with other animal-rights activists in an effort to ignite a consumer boycott and working on having his newspaper ad run in other papers across the country. The campaign is, in his eyes, a bid to focus broader attention on the treatment of all farm animals. Perdue was picked as the first target, Spira says, because "he linked his image to the idea that his chickens are well treated." Any reformer, Spira says, must also be an opportunist. Indeed, he acknowledges that conditions are not necessarily worse on Perdue farms than on other chicken farms in the country. "Later, we will approach other poultry producers to see if they want to cooperate," Spira suggests. "In return for a quiet life, they may want to be part of the solution."

If a whiff of bravado can be detected in Spira's remarks, it is not surprising. In the last 10 years or so, crusaders for a wide range of causes involving the treatment of animals have successfully raised the consciousness of the American public, business and government, resulting in some dramatic reforms. Spira himself is generally credited with organizing a key victory for the animal-rights movement - a 1980

campaign attacking cosmetics companies for testing new products in the eyes of rabbits. It began with a full-page ad asking, "How many rabbits does Revlon blind for beauty's sake?"

Since then, the animal-rights movement has grown and expanded its targets and its tactics. Hundreds of thousands of people are members of groups ranging from the armed and radical to the simply noisy. Meanwhile, business and government researchers scramble to develop new ways to test the safety of products, procedures and medicines without the use of animals.

Spira's role in these changes is the subject of frequent debate in the animal-rights movement, which has become riddled with tactical disputes and personality clashes as it has grown. Because he is best known as a moderate within the movement, where radical voices have become increasingly prominent, Spira, through the Perdue campaign, will be testing his influence and leadership within the fractious animal-rights movement.

Discussion about animal rights began in the late 18th century during the debates about the rights of man. The first animal-welfare organization of note was the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which was founded in England 165 years ago. A number of animal-welfare societies later formed in the United States, including the well-organized American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, but the movement did not gather momentum until the publication of Peter Singer's "Animal Liberation," in 1975, a reasoned plea for the humane treatment of animals that galvanized the animal-rights movement the way Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring," published in 1962, drew activists to environmentalism.

Today, organizations regarded as the radical arm of the movement, such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, the International Society for Animal Rights, and Trans-Species Unlimited, endorse pressure tactics ranging from demonstrations and boycotts to shareholder petitions at corporate meetings, and they produce slick, widely circulated publications. More shadowy fringe groups, such as the Animal Liberation Front, advocate attacks on laboratories and contend violence in pursuit of their goals is justified.

What the leadership of these more radical groups have in common is the desire to protect all animals from what they consider abuses by humans, and they want immediate action. These broad-based organizations may oppose a number of things simultaneously - the fur industry, circuses, hunting and animal testing - but tend to focus their resources at any one time where they feel they can make an impact. There are also hundreds of small organizations that may concentrate on single issues, such as the killing of dolphins or the U.S. Surgical Corporation's use of dogs to demonstrate surgical stapling techniques.

"On this issue, you have to be an extremist," says Steve Siegel, director of the New York office of Trans-Species, which led recent demonstrations that forced a researcher at the Cornell Medical Center to abandon a 14-year research project studying the impact of barbiturates on cats.

Though polls show that the vast majority of the public does not agree with Siegel, especially when it comes to using animals in medical research or forcing farmers to adopt practices that might drive up consumer prices, there is no doubt that the membership and wealth of the more extremist groups is surging. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals alone has grown from 23,000 members in 1985 to more than 300,000. The group, based in Rockville, Md., now has an annual budget of over \$6 million, and 60 full-time employees.

Spira, on the other hand, has operated on about \$75,000 a year for the last two years. His major financial backers have been groups such as the Humane Society of the United States and the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals as well as wealthy individuals. Operating as a lone-wolf

(he has only one employee who works on a regular, nearly full-time basis), Spira uses an ad hoc melange of doctors, medical researchers, toxicologists, advertising executives, and public relations experts. He has the advantage of flexibility over groups with large paid staffs and is freer to do things that seem useful but may not attract financial support. For instance, he spends large amounts of time quietly circulating news about alternatives to Government officials he hopes will eventually implement helpful policy changes. But the drawbacks of Spira's organizational approach are becoming apparent. He must rely on a loose-knit network of supporters, each with an individual agenda, to add weight to his cause.

The mushrooming growth of more aggressive animal-rights groups challenges the influence of more moderate organizations, such as the Humane Society of the United States and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, as well as Spira and Animal Rights International, the non-profit umbrella organization for his activities. These groups tend to focus on improving the treatment of animals but not to publicly campaign for changes, such as vegetarianism or a ban on hunting. In general, they avoid confrontational tactics such as demonstrations and boycotts.

"Most of today's activists are new people who do not even know who Spira is," says Siegel, of Trans-Species.

The more radical groups are not only seizing the initiative from Spira by virtue of greater resources and more visible activities, they are challenging those who see value in his tactics, which include working with companies to figure out ways to reduce the exploitation of animals in industry, willingness to compromise with companies and even to publicly applaud those half measures.

"Industry knows very well that Spira doesn't represent the animal-rights movement but they try to pretend that he does," said Helen Jones, president of the International Society for Animal Rights, which is based in Clarks Summit, Pa. "He's really part of the old humane movement. We say no animals in labs. They say give them bigger cages."

Ingrid E. Newkirk, national director of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, said: "He is hobnobbing in the halls with our enemy. Six or seven years ago, we had a lot in common. Everything he did then was putting gravel down for other people to pave roads, which was crucial. But I think Henry was deceived by the industry response. Henry was unable to cut himself loose from the mire of having become an industry mediator. The search for alternatives is a quite transparent ploy to maintain the status quo."

But Spira also has many defenders, many of whom credit him with using the strategy that has paid off most in the long struggle. "Henry has been absolutely right to say that at the time he began, groups had been seeking total abolition for 100 years without saving one animal," says Peter Singer. "Through his work, there are millions of animals that have escaped acute pain and suffering because of the work already done on alternatives," he adds, referring to ways to test products without killing or maiming animals.

Frederick Davis, former president of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, one of Spira's biggest financial backers, adds: "There's no one like him who can talk with such credibility to either a toxicologist and or an activist. Henry's beyond knee-jerk emotionalism. He talks about parallel self-interest."

Not that Spira's longterm goals are less revolutionary than those of the most radical animal-rights advocates. If he has his way, synthetics will one day replace leather and the fur industry will disappear. Spira readily concedes he would like to see humans become vegetarian. "My dream is that people will come to view eating an animal as cannibalism," he says.

But Spira has repeatedly criticized the handful of visionary animal-rights advocates who destroy laboratories, spray paint on fur coats and threaten violence to researchers and their families.

"The people who burned flags in the antiwar movement didn't help it," Spira explains. He has shown no qualms about infuriating many animal-rights groups by praising companies that continue to test products on animals as long as he believes they are working to develop alternatives.

"I don't see the usefulness of pushing yourself into a corner where you are going to generate the most resistance," he says. "What's interesting is what can be done. People and institutions can only move so much at one time. The task is to move people far enough that they can see the next step."

A native of Belgium, Spira immigrated to the United States with his family via Germany, England and Panama during his childhood years. He held a variety of jobs before finishing his working career as a New York City high school English teacher. During that time he was almost constantly involved in various trade-union reform efforts and civil-rights movements. "My contribution has been to take the strategies of the human-rights movements and apply them here," he says.

Spira's first effort to publicize animal abuse came in 1976. Researchers at New York's American Museum of Natural History were blinding, deafening and mutilating the sex organs of cats to see how it affected their sexual performance. Spira wrote an expose in a neighborhood paper, which, along with the efforts of other activists, brought the experiments to the attention of Congress and the public. Finally, the museum was forced to scrap the program. Spira next organized lobbying to break a legislative logjam that had for 27 years prevented repeal of a New York law allowing researchers to use dogs and cats from public pounds.

"Those were victories, but we realized they were largely symbolic," says Spira, who noted that they affected, at most, thousands of animals in a nation that annually kills as many as 70 million, ranging from rats to primates, in research and testing, according to Government estimates. Thus, his next goal became abolition of the Draize test, named after John H. Draize, a Food and Drug Administration pharmacologist who, in the early 1940's, developed a method for categorizing the dangers to the eye of various chemicals used during World War II. His test, later adapted by the F.D.A., has been used by cosmetics and household-products companies for the last 40 years to measure how badly a product will irritate the human eye. The test uses white rabbits because their eyes do not tear, making it impossible for them to blink away whatever has been inserted in them, no matter how corrosive or blinding it may be.

The Draize test seemed to be begging for an attack. To start with, the results are subjective. What one lab assistant records as "major irritation" might be regarded as minor by another. In addition, scientists with no connection to the animal-rights movement had said it should be possible to find alternatives relatively easily. Finally, Draize users were vulnerable to bad publicity because the gruesome tests were being conducted in order to introduce new products that scarcely seemed essential given the thousands of cosmetics, cleaners, and similar products already available.

Spira and his allies spent most of 1979 gathering information and in fruitless private talks with Revlon. Using the Freedom of Information Act, Spira received reams of data from the Government on the number of animals used by different companies and graphic film of the distressing results for rabbits. Then he and Mark Graham, an advertising executive, went to the late Pegeen Fitzgerald, president of the Millenium Guild, a philanthropic organization involved with animal welfare, and immediately won her financial support for full-page newspaper ads. The ads were followed by demonstrations, letter-writing campaigns and eventually an international boycott.

By December 1980, Revlon announced it would offer \$250,000 a year for three years for research at Rockefeller University on alternatives to the Draize test; research that is now financed by Government grants. After that, it was a simple step to persuade Avon Products, the industry leader, and other cosmetics companies to also contribute to research. In 1981, their grants led to the founding of the Center for Alternatives to Animal Testing, at the Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health in Baltimore. By last year, the center had received more than \$4 million from the cosmetics industry and other businesses. Spira followed up with continual calls to companies about their research and internal programs to reduce animal usage.

"Over the years, we started seeing his point of view, and he saw our problems," says Janice Teal, director of product and package safety at Avon.

As the campaign against the Draize test gathered steam, Spira turned to a far more destructive test, the Lethal Dose 50. Throughout a wide range of industries, the LD50 has long been the standard measure of how toxic the chemicals in various products are. In tests, scores, and in some cases hundreds of animals - typically rats - are destroyed in labs doing research for manufacturers ranging from toy companies to pesticide makers, to find out what concentration of various substances would kill 50 percent of the animals exposed to them. "The issue shouldn't be how popular the animal is," says Spira, regarding the killing of rats. "Rodents have feeling. They try to avoid pain. That's the reason they are used in psychology experiments."

Often the tests are performed to satisfy labeling requirements even though it is known in advance that the substances are so toxic that warnings will be needed.

Prodded by Spira's campaign, leading toxicologists became more vocal about their long-held doubts about the test. "There's a vanishingly small number of people who believe the LD50 provides useful information," says Shayne C. Gad, the G. D. Searle & Company researcher who is chairman of the Society of Toxicology Animals in Research Committee. "Our society has said that the traditional Draize and LD50 tests are unwarranted except in special situations."

Nevertheless, both the LD50 and Draize battles continue because companies are reluctant to abandon the tests. Companies fear that they would be exposing themselves to charges of recklessness - and massive punitive damages - if they were to abandon such tests before Federal regulators unambiguously endorse a non-animal alternative.

Government agencies are being urged by a variety of industries and some members of Congress to change regulations that encourage, and in some cases require, tests many toxicologists say are frequently unnecessary. And research on alternatives is a hot topic in toxicology circles. Five different journals have sprung up in the last six years to report on such non-animal testing techniques as work with tissue cultures and computer simulation.

To be sure, progress is too slow for many animal-rights activists. "Habits and fixed ways of doing things, such as treating animals in laboratories as mere tools or objects, die very slowly," says a position paper on animal testing from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. Animal-rights activists say that continued over-reliance on animal testing actually harms humans also by absorbing tax dollars that could be better spent on preventive medicine and research using humans who have diseases.

Scientists respond that the protesters do not understand how long it takes to prove that new test methods are reliable.

"The animal-rights people have oversimplified some very complex issues," says Frankie Trull, president of the National Association for Biomedical Research, a Washington-based organization defending the use of some animal testing. "They tend to overestimate how much you can do with computer models and tissue samples."

Computers and automated lab equipment are continually lowering the costs of the alternatives and expanding the amount of information they offer to toxicologists. In-vitro tests, as test-tube procedures are called, can provide clues at the molecular level as to why something is happening. In-vivo, or animal tests, have often done no more than demonstrate that an animal is or is not affected by a certain level of chemical exposure or treatment.

In any event, scientists say, it is often essential to test on live animals because their complicated responses, such as the reaction of the immune system to a foreign substance, cannot be duplicated by any combination of test tube procedures.

"It's not likely that a single-cell animal in a petri dish is going to tell you much about learning disabilities," says Theodore Farber, a former health official of the Environmental Protection Administration. Nevertheless, even though tens of millions of animals are still maimed and killed annually in research and product testing, the animal-rights movement has come far enough that, in Spira's words, "It's no longer macho to use animals." Indeed, groups like the Foundation for Biomedical Research say medical research is already being hurt by restrictions put on animal use and the growing number of young researchers who dislike working with animals. In toxicology circles, the "three R's" stand for: reducing the number of animals used in testing, refining tests so that they are less painful, and, where possible, replacing animals altogether with other tests.

Today, scores of companies are reporting progress in reducing their reliance on animal testing. Colgate-Palmolive, which has developed a test to screen new substances on egg membranes instead of animals, reported to the United States Department of Agriculture that it used just 244 animals last year (the annual reports do not count mice and rats). The Noxell Corporation announced late last year that it would test the potential for all new cosmetics to irritate eyes on a mouse-tissue culture in a test tube instead of using rabbits' eyes, leading to a string of announcements last spring and summer from other cosmetics companies that they too were halting or suspending most or all of their rabbit tests in favor of various test tube alternatives or a policy of using previously proved formulations.

Spira remains involved in animal-testing issues. However, by starting the chicken campaign, he is adding his voice to those who want to shift the attention of animal-rights activists and the public to the 5 billion animals of the farm sector.

"The society makes a statement that all lives are not equal by eating animals," says Spira. "It's absurd in that context to think that you can eliminate laboratory tests before doing anything about farm animals."

Spira concedes, however, that for the immediate future the best he can hope for is more-humane killing.

"Clearly, animal rights and eating animals don't mesh," says Spira. "However, while it's going on you want to at least reduce pain and suffering. Once people think about it, they realize that it's not a thing under the cellophane, it's a living being."

In addition to the nascent Perdue campaign, for example, he is backing reforms on how veal calves are fed and shipped. He would also like to see importation of an Australian experiment in which livestock are sold at electronic auctions, on computer screens, like over-the-counter securities on Wall Street, instead of forcing the animals to undergo the stress of shipment to live auctions.

"An improvement in the lives of 1 percent of farm animals would do more to reduce animal suffering than eliminating all of the testing," says Spira. He sees the farm campaign as more difficult than the lab campaign not because of the greater number of animals, but because of the public's attitude.

"People who eat animals don't want to read about how they got to their plate," Spira says. "It's hard to do things that make consumers uncomfortable."

Or producers. In taking on farming, Spira and animal-rights activists are dealing with opponents who have a far greater economic stake in using animals than companies that test products on them. And most are dismissive. "Henry's much better at understanding what is achievable and what is a pipedream than most, but when it comes to farm animal production and care, he's out of his bailiwick," says Steven Kopperud, executive director of the Animal Industry Foundation, an educational organization based in Arlington, Va., and financed by farmers and agricultural corporations. "We can't afford, either economically or in terms of what is best for animals, to make changes based on what makes Henry sleep poorly."

Spira is not likely to be dissuaded by such opposition, though. He is not looking for quick victories. When asked what his epitaph should be, he ponders and suggests, "He pushed the peanut forward."

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