

The Humane Society Institute for Science and Policy
WBI Studies Repository

4-14-1985

One Man's Beef

William Severini Kowinski

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/henspro>



Part of the [Animal Experimentation and Research Commons](#), [Bioethics and Medical Ethics Commons](#), and the [Laboratory and Basic Science Research Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kowinski, W.S. (1985, April 14). One man's beef. Daily News Magazine, pp. 12-15.

This material is brought to you for free and open access by WellBeing International. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the WBI Studies Repository. For more information, please contact wbisr-info@wellbeingintl.org.



One Man's Beef

Henry Spira believes that animals have rights but now say. He speaks for all species.

William Severini Kowinski

There is a red sticker on Henry Spira's upper West Side apartment door: "In case of Emergency, please rescue the two cats inside." Spira figures that *he* can always fend, more or less; pets aren't so lucky.

Spira, 57, is a former seaman and New York City high-school teacher who looks like Joseph Heller after a bad review; he's the most self-effacing leader you're likely to run into in these modern, media-conscious times, but the fact is he's the only innovative, effective activist in the animal-rights movement. Before Spira turned his attention from fighting corruption in the Maritime Union and marching for peace and civil rights, the animal-rights movement hadn't enjoyed a single significant victory: for 20 years, the Museum of Natural History routinely maimed cats' brains and sense organs to test the effects of mutilation on sexual behavior; cosmetic companies tested hair sprays by squirting them into rabbits' eyes, and federal and private labs tested new products for toxicity by feeding them to rats, mice and dogs. Then Spira ringed the museum with pickets and controversy, began forging coalitions, and things changed.

"As an individual, Henry Spira has probably done more to reduce animal suffering than anybody else," says Holly Jensen, spokesperson for the Animal Liberation Front. "He's one of our foremost strategists, activists and leaders," says Jim Mason, editor of *The Animal Agenda*, a weekly news magazine.

Spira achieved these results and reputation without a big organization--just some dedicated friends. His headquarters is his rent-controlled apartment, in one of those prewar buildings whose cavernous lobby looks like the cave of some extinct Art Deco civilization. His rooms of files, photos and clippings are all overseen by his cats, both so inscrutably old, their skin is drawn tight like Egyptian statues.

It was his accelerating effectiveness over the past 10 years that gave Spira the credibility to bring together leaders of contending animal-rights groups from California, the Midwest and New England. However empathetic they are with animals, these groups are less than comfortable with each other. But on the first truly chilly day of 1985, Spira got the huge Humane Society to sit down with the reasonably radical Animal Liberation Front (talk about the lion lying down with the lamb) in the most unlikely location, the Plaza Hotel.

He also got them to agree to redirect their focus, from the more than 70 million animals reportedly used (and abused) each year in laboratory experiments to America's factory farms, which annually process some 4 billion animals as if they were engine parts for Mustangs and Firebirds.

Animal-rights issues have been in the news with increasing frequency of late. Last fall, militants in Britain pretended to have contaminated thousands of Mars candy bars to protest that company's experiments on animals. Over here, activists have broken into labs, stolen documents and videotapes, and freed animals destined for the scalpel. Some of the issues being raised are ethically complex and inspire extreme positions--as in the Baby Fae case in California, where protesters demonstrated against a baboon being killed and its heart transplanted to a dying child.

Animal-rights activists objected to the notion that primates would thereafter be bred for spare parts; to which syndicated columnist Beth Fallon wrote, "If I were Baby Fae's mother, I would kill every last baboon in the world, down to the last surviving pair, to save my child."

Nevertheless, the number of animal-rights groups have grown significantly in the last few years, and so has their clout. Polls indicate wide public support for efforts to limit the number of animals used in labs, and the severity of their suffering; activists say they are mutilated, poisoned, smashed, burned and systematically driven insane without anesthesia in 85% of the cases.

Today's activists differ from their predecessors in, at least, one-important respect. Whereas animal protection was once regarded as something humane and kindly, today's activists consider it an animal's right; its entitlement. This concept puts the animal-rights groups into a peculiar political position. Their belief in the sanctity of all life and the shock-value imagery they sometimes use might indicate a kinship with the right-to-life movement, but, in fact, many animal-rights activists are women and pro-choice feminists. Similarly, sympathy for the plight of animals has always been associated with religion. But fundamentalists actually oppose the animal-rights movement, referring to those passages in the Bible which say that animals have no souls and mankind has been given dominion over them.

As for Henry Spira, he is neither an extremist nor a politico. He does not preach immediate vegetarianism as national policy or even the end of all scientific research that uses animals. Instead, Spira has, taken the movement's basic impulse--to be an advocate on behalf of the powerless--and used the most sophisticated techniques to save as many animals as possible as quickly as possible. His emphasis is on effectiveness. Audacity," he wrote, "must be fused with meticulous attention to program, strategy and detail."

Spira describes his activities as if he were talking about military maneuvers. He speaks about choosing achievable goals and vulnerable adversaries, selecting the right weapons and even literally choosing the right battlefield (he went after the Museum of Natural History, he said, partly because Central Park West was a great place to demonstrate). In most of his battles, Spira has succeeded in turning attitudes, even scientific ones, around and actually saving animals.

He was born in Belgium 57 years ago, and his family moved several times before ending up in Panama. At 16, Spira came to New York alone, and at 17, he went to sea.

He wandered the oceans of the world on tankers, passenger ships and tramp steamers, working his way up from "wiper" to Junior Engineer. A shipmate described him as a loner who gets along well with people. (Spira knows this because it was in his FBI file.)

He joined a renegade faction of the Maritime Union that was trying to rid itself of corruption. He also wrote an article criticizing J. Edgar Hoover during the height of McCarthyism. For such activities, he was banned by the Coast Guard and drafted by the Army. After a two-year hitch and several odd jobs, he went back to sea. While in Guinea on the hospital ship *Hope* he met some French teachers who inspired him to switch careers. So back in New York he got the necessary credentials and taught high-school English for the next 15 years.

While teaching, Spira went South for civil-rights demonstrations and participated in the antiwar movement. There he read an essay by Australian philosopher Peter Singer that changed his life. He wasn't the only one affected this way: Singer's article and subsequent book, "Animal Liberation," first popularized the notion that animals have rights that could no longer be ignored.

Singer soon came to teach at New York University and Spira took one of his courses. He learned about the immense and escalating use of animals in experiments ranging from the vital to the criminally frivolous. From 1958 to 1978, for example, the number of animals killed in laboratory experiments quadrupled. All were equally sanctioned in the name of Science—even if the same experiment was replicated year after year with no new outcome.

The eloquence of Singer's position inspired Spira and a small group of professionals, including several doctors, to devise their first campaign in 1976. "We tried to pick something that the public could relate to easily, that you could explain in a sentence, that had maximum shock value," he says.

For 20 years, the Museum of Natural History had been experimenting on cats, trying to determine what effect certain altered sensory states like blindness and deafness had on their mating patterns. When Spira learned about this, he gathered mountains of information on the utility of such experiments and got Dr. Leonard Rack, a New York psychiatrist, to help him analyze the data. They concluded that the experiments, which had been going on in total secrecy in the museum's basement since the 1940s, were both bizarre and unnecessary.

Spira next approached the scientist running the experiment, but was brushed off as just another animal-loving loony. He tried the president of the museum—same thing. So then Spira went into the streets, and through that attention-getting device, into the media.

At first scientists everywhere closed ranks against the chanting crowds carrying kitty-torture placards and clotting the museum's donation bins with pennies instead of dollars. The research community defended the experiments without seeming to care what they were about, but when the media debate moved from the front page to the scientific journals, they were forced to confront the facts of the case. After more than a year of controversy, the National Institutes of Health refused further funding, and the experiments were stopped.

Some critics immediately raised the specter of good science being interfered with by emotional furor, but Spira says that's preposterous. He says the campaign couldn't have succeeded if their side hadn't been credible. Although the lives of relatively few animals were affected, the victory, he says, began an important pattern.

"This set the precedent that if somebody is going to use animals, they're going to be accountable," Spira says. "You're not going to have a priesthood out there that's going to say, 'You give us the bucks and we'll handle the animals as we please.'"

Spira's next campaign was aimed at saving millions of rabbits whose eyes were used to test new chemical products. (Rabbits were used because they have no tear ducts to wash the chemicals, and the results, away.) This procedure, called the Draize Test, was routinely used by all cosmetic companies, but Spira decided to focus on one—Revlon—because it was the biggest and its headquarters were in New York.

Once again, Spira started by trying to talk. This time he got in the door—Revlon's vice president for public relations listened politely to Spira's proposal that Revlon devote 0.01% of its gross income (or about \$240,000) a year to a university research program to find alternatives to Draize. But, according to Spira, nothing much happened. (Revlon maintained that it was doing its own research.) So out came the demonstrators in bunny suits, and the full-page newspaper ads, and within a remarkably short time, Rockefeller University had Revlon's money for a new research program.

(As a result of the research done so far, there are promising new procedures to replace Draize that don't use live animals at all.)

Spira and his mounting coalition of animal-rights groups then tackled the oldest and most frequently-used toxicity test, L.D. 50 (which stands for Lethal Dose 50%). Here, groups of 40 to 200 animals are fed new products in increasing dosages until half of them die. Most were rodents, but the test was routinely done on dogs and cats, the purpose being to satisfy government safety standards. Used for the last 50 years,

in some 20 countries, L.D. 50 was killing 5 million animals a year in the U.S. alone, even though some scientists doubted its applicability to humans.

“Three or four years ago,” says Spira, “you couldn’t find a scientist who’d say L.D. 50 wasn’t necessary.” Today, thanks to Spira’s efforts, the federal government no longer requires the test to prove a product’s safety.

Spira says that 75% of all laboratory animals are unaffected by these changes. Nevertheless, a fundamental shift in attitude has taken place, he believes. “Within the scientific community, it’s not chic anymore to put animals down, like it isn’t chic to put women down since the women’s movement. No one is going to say it doesn’t matter how many animals we use and how we use them. And that’s a big change.”

But more battles need to be fought to heighten public sensitivity, he says. “If you have to use an animal in matters of life and death, take measures to make sure the animal suffers as little as possible, and search for alternatives.” For example, at a nearby college lab, Spira describes “primates stacked up like nuts and bolts, in cages literally one on top of the other. They’re just keeping them there—most of them aren’t involved in research activity. They’re in solitary confinement with no benefit to science. This has nothing to do with science—it has to do with flagrant insensitivity.”

While the lab wars go on, Spira is anxious to widen the movement’s field of action by including factory farms, where animals are typically overcrowded, penned in small enclosures and force-fed from birth to death. Chickens are particularly maltreated--they are barely permitted to move and are hung, upside down, on assembly lines to their slaughter.

Once again, Spira thinks, a large company may have to be singled out for dramatic effect. For instance, the most publicly identifiable figure in the business is Frank Perdue, claims Spira. “Perdue gets more money for his chicken because he’s created the image that they live in pens the size of the Waldorf-Astoria.”

So far, the animal-rights movement has been reluctant to take on the factory farms. They represent the largest single economic interest the movement has faced, and the most difficult to portray in a bad light (doggy and kitty torture is one thing, but now we’re talking beef and pork). Still, some practices are already changing in Europe, and Spira is, as always, realistic. “Even if we get a reduction of suffering for 10% of these 4 billion animals,” Spira says, “that’s a big victory.”

Spira himself continues to work in the experimentation arena; soon, he plans to go to some of the country’s largest charities, such as the American Cancer Institute and the Heart Association, and “... suggest that they have an obligation to review and reassess” methods that are not only scientifically better but also save animals.

Some possibilities involve computer simulation and the use of animal tissue rather than live animals. It’s all part of what Spira calls a “zero-based” policy, which means that instead of simply ordering up some animals every time you have an experiment to do, you constantly evaluate your procedures with the intent of reducing the number of animals or replacing them altogether whenever possible.

Spira also intends to focus on one of his old haunts—the New York City school system. “I’d like to see no animal dissection through secondary school. We don’t want to program the next generation of scientists to equate research with using animals.”

Spira will of course go to the Board of Education first, but he can't help imagining what a classroom-roots campaign would be like. As a theme, he'd like to use the scene in the movie "E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial" in which E.T. inspires his young friend Elliot to free the frogs from the biology lab. "We could get somebody dressed up as E.T. and say, 'Cut classes, not frogs.'"

For most of human history, people have had deep and daily contact with animals. Animals were a focus of the first religions, the subject of primitive art, myth and fairy tales. Our alphabet itself is partly derived from drawings of animals. Our ancestors feared and worshipped them; most of our great-grandparents lived on farms. But for the last century or so, we have banished animals from our urbanized lives and increased our technological power over them to such an extent that animals have become an abstraction—as if lab animals were furry robots and meat is manufactured from chemicals, like Tang.

When such broad-based talk is bandied about, Henry Spira gets an expression that can only be described as sheepish. He doesn't want achievable goals to get lost in the mist of verbiage, or energies to be siphoned off for ineffective stunts. That's why he doesn't particularly favor one-shot extravaganzas such as the animal-rights march held every spring in New York. "The first one was on behalf of primates used in labs," he said. "After the march was over, there was one more primate lab than there was before. All the march accomplished was to get the research community to close ranks and start another lab.

"I'm not into consciousness-raising for its own sake. I think you raise awareness in the course of a campaign that's designed to accomplish something. That's been one of the trademarks of our coalitions. We've done things. We could talk about how rabbits get harmed from now to doomsday and it wouldn't have made beans of a difference. But we say, this is wrong—and this is how we can do away with it."

Recommended Citation:

Kowinski, W.S. (1985, April 14). One man's beef. *Daily News Magazine*, pp. 12-15.