



The Viking in the Wheat Field: A Scientist's Struggle to Preserve the World's Harvest

Susan Dworkin

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The gripping story of how Bent Skovmand and others preserved the world's wheat harvest.

In 1999, a terrifying new form of stem rust² spotted in Uganda and dubbed "UG99"³ quickly turned robust golden fields into dark, tangled ruins. For decades plant scientists had bred wheat varieties with rust-resistant genes, but these genes did not work against UG99. Unchecked, UG99 could spread all over the world, including the United States.

Breeders everywhere began searching wheat germplasm collections for sources of resistance. The largest collection was at the Center for Improvement of Maize and Wheat (CIMMYT) in Mexico, developed by the brilliant Danish scientist Bent Skovmand. For three decades, Skovmand amassed, multiplied, and documented thousands of wheat varieties. He served as an advisor on wheat genetic resources to dozens of countries, and hunted for seeds that would contain the genes to protect the harvest from plagues like UG99 and the stresses created by global warming. In an era when corporations and governments often jealously guarded breeding information, Skovmand fought to keep his seed bank a center for free, open scientific exchange. By telling the story of Skovmand's work and that of his colleagues, *The Viking in the Wheat Field* sheds a welcome light on an agricultural sector⁴ "plant genetic resources"⁵ on which we are all crucially dependent.

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