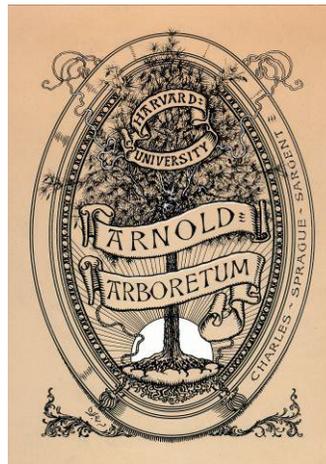


Archives III JH

**Joseph Hers (1884-1965) papers, 1919-1992: Guide**



**The Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University**

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III JH

# Joseph Hers (1884-1965) papers, 1919-1992: Guide

**Archives of the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University  
125 Arborway, Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts**

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## Descriptive Summary

**Repository:** Arnold Arboretum, Jamaica Plain, MA.

**Call No.:** III JH

**Location:** Archives.

**Title:** Joseph Hers (1884-1965) papers, 1919-1992.

**Date:** 1919-1992.

**Creator:** Hers, Joseph, 1884-1965.

**Quantity:** 2 linear inches.

**Abstract:** Hers, a Belgian citizen, originally went to China as an interpreter with the Belgium Ministry of Foreign Affairs, though he would eventually hold several jobs in that country. Despite describing his own knowledge of botany as "very limited," between 1919 and 1924, Hers compiled and sent to the Arnold Arboretum over 2000 plant specimens. The materials in this collection primarily document Meyer's research and travel in Asia during 1919 and 1923-24.

**Note:** Access to Finding Aid record in [HOLLIS](#).

**Preferred Citation:** Joseph Hers papers. Archives of the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University.

**Additional material:** Additional Joseph Hers correspondence may be available in the [Arnold Arboretum Correspondence Index](#). See a sample of the specimens collected by Hers in the Harvard University Herbaria [Index of Botanical Specimens](#).

## Acquisition Information

**Provenance:** Joseph Hers' photographs and most of his correspondence were acquired by the Arboretum during his association with the Arboretum as a plant collector.

**Processed:** September 2007, December 2009. Revised August 2011, Liz Francis. 2023, 2024, Larissa Glasser.

## Terms of Access

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## Biographical Note

Joseph Hers was born in Mamur, Belgium on September 6, 1884. Holding a degree in "Sciences Commerciales et Consultaires," Hers arrived in China in 1905, employed as an interpreter for the Belgium Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He fulfilled various functions as an attaché to the Consulate General of Belgium in Shanghai until 1913, when he became Secretary General of the Belgium financed Lunghai and Pienlo railways, a post he held until 1944. He was also an assessor at the International mixed court in Shanghai, where assessors, like Hers, sat with the Chinese judge and represented the interest of the foreign plaintiff.

In 1915, Hers founded the Sino-Belgian Friendship Association and then later established the Sino-Belgian Inter-University Commission. He was also president of the Sino-Belgian Commission for Education and Philanthropy; it was in this capacity that he arranged for Chinese students to attend Belgium universities.



Joseph Hers

Through Hers's efforts, one young Eurasian woman would attend Brussels University and go on to obtain a medical degree in London. Born Rosalie Elisabeth Kuanghu Chow, she was the daughter of Zhou Yintong, a railway engineer who had also attended university in Belgium, where he met and married Marguerite Denis. Chow would practice medicine and then become a well-known and respected novelist, writing under the pseudonym Han Suyin (she is also known by her married name, Elisabeth Comber). In *A Mortal Flower*, 1966, the second volume of a two volume autobiography, Suyin describes her impressions of Joseph Hers in 1928: "very tall, gaunt, a bald head, piercing blue eyes, a big nose, a small moustache and beard, a loud voice and an air of command," and who also had "that vigor, meticulousness and vitality that characterizes the explorer." According to Suyin, Hers was as interested in archaeology as he was in botany and helped excavate some Chou dynasty tombs. She also recounts his plant collecting methods:

He was also a good botanist and collected specimens all over China. His contribution to this branch of science is very creditable, for he sent to the Arnold arboretum at Harvard thousands of specimens of plants from north Honan, then a botanically unexplored region. He went on safaris with a trail of porters, immune to fatigue, weather or insects. His appearance struck terror in

village children, his height and voice made the timorous Chinese officials of those days cringe in fear.



*Juglans*. China. June 23, 1923

In a July 18, 1919 letter to Charles Sprague Sargent, the Arnold Arboretum's first director, Hers wrote that although his "own knowledge of botany is, I regret to say, very limited, I happen to live in a part of China where very few botanical collections, if any, have been made, and as I enjoy frequent opportunities to travel in little known districts . . ." Enclosed with the letter was a list of trees and shrubs that

included a number of new species, and Hers offered to send "seeds, or cuttings, or photos." Sargent replied that "this is one of the most important collections of Chinese plants which has been sent to the Arboretum and I am extremely obliged to you for sending it to us."

The Arnold Arboretum has 63 images of botanical subjects taken between 1919 and 1924 by Hers. He also collected seed and herbarium specimens for the Arnold Arboretum that amounted to over 2,000 species. See the Harvard University Herbaria [Index of Botanical Specimens](#) for a sample of these acquisitions. Between 1922 and 1938, Hers also published papers on the cultivated and indigenous woody plants of China, Manchuria, and the Pacific provinces of Russia, and on Chinese names of plants.

After World War II, Hers remained in Belgium and in the late 1950s, he resided in Brussels and was a member of the International Dendrology Union – now the International Dendrology Society. Hers continued his interest and connection with China through a twenty-year post as General Secretary of the Association Belge pour l'Extreme-Orient, a position he retained until the year of his death, 1965.

## Scope and Content

This collection consists of letters written by Joseph Hers, biographical and bibliographic materials about Joseph Hers, planting lists, and photographs taken during Hers' trips to Asia. Materials in the collection date from 1919 through 1992, with most items relating to the 1919 and 1923-24 trips to Asia. 68 images of eastern Asia taken in 1919, and 1923-24 have been digitized and are available on [HOLLIS Images](#).

## Arrangement

The Hers collection is organized in two series:

- I. Correspondence, Biographic and Bibliographic Materials, Planting Lists.
- II. Images

## Container List

### Series I: Correspondence, Biographic and Bibliographic Materials, Planting Lists

#### Folder 1: Correspondence of Joseph Hers

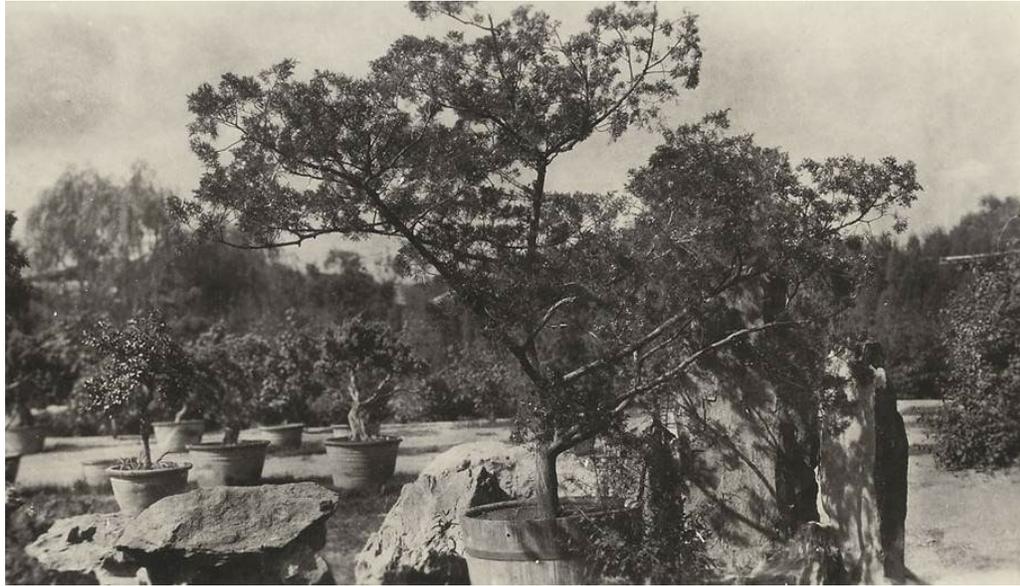
**NOTE:** Additional Joseph Hers correspondence can be found by searching the [Arnold Arboretum Correspondence Index](#).

Correspondence between Joseph Hers and Charles Sprague Sargent can be found in Charles Sprague Sargent's letterbooks, IB CSS, Series II, Box 9: (8/27/1919, p. 431, and 9/12/1919, p. 455). Letters between Joseph Hers and Charles Sprague Sargent are also housed in Sargent's Pre-1927 Correspondence file.



*Ailanthus altissima*. China. 1919

- Joseph Hers to Charles Sprague Sargent. Chengchow, July 18, 1919.
- Charles Sprague Sargent to Joseph Hers. September 12, 1919. (copied from Charles Sprague Sargent letterbook, IB CSS, Series II, Box 9 (1917-1923), p. 455). [Charles Sprague Sargent papers, 1893-1927 \(inclusive\): A Finding Aid](#).
- Joseph Hers to Charles Sprague Sargent. Peking, September 27, 1919.
- Joseph Hers to Charles Sprague Sargent. Peking, July 20, 1923.
- Joseph Hers to Arnold Arboretum, Shanghai. July 9, 1938.



*Juniperus chinensis*. Honan, China. c1923

## 2: Correspondence about Joseph Hers

- Paul Bamps to Rob Nicholson (Arnold Arboretum). [Miese], Belgium, September 28, 1986.
- Rob Nicholson (Arnold Arboretum) to Dr. [Henri-Géry] Hers. [Ottignies], Belgium, November 5, 1987.
- Dr. Henri-Géry Hers to Rob Nicholson (Arnold Arboretum). No date.
- Philippe de Spoelberch to Robert E. Cook (Arnold Arboretum). [Brussels], Belgium, February 11, 1992.

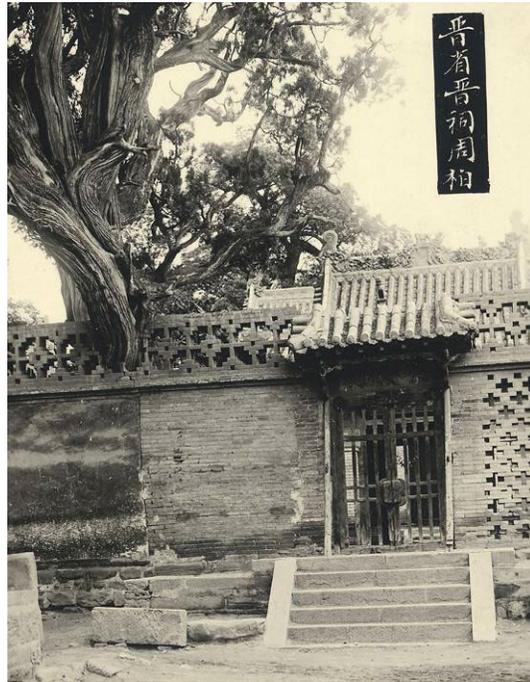
## 3: Biographic and Bibliographic Materials

- Biography of Joseph Hers. French.
- Bibliography of Joseph Hers. Photocopy from *A Bibliography of Eastern Asiatic Botany* by Elmer D. Merrill and Egbert H. Walker, Jamaica Plain, Mass.: Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University, 1938, p. 176.
- Review by D. Bois of photographs containing *Magnolia Aulacosperma* by Joseph Hers.

## 4: Planting Lists

- Planting list. "Chemin de fer Lunghai – Plantations. Liste des grains et boutures envoyées au Jardin Botanique, Bruxelles en octobre – novembre 1923; d'ordre de Mr. Hers."
- Planting list. "Collections of Joseph Hers within the Arnold Arboretum – October 1987."
- Planting list. "Plants collected from the wild by J. Hers, J. F. Rock, and E. H. Wilson in the Morton Arboretum collections."
- Planting list. French.

## Series II: Genera Collection; Images



*Thuja orientalis*. Shansi (Tsin tze), China. October 1923

The Arnold Arboretum retains Joseph Hers images in two formats: black and white photographs mounted on boards and digital images. Of note are Hers' 68 images of eastern Asia taken in 1919, 1923–24 which have been digitized and are available on Harvard's Visual Information Access (VIA) system which is a union catalog of visual resources at Harvard. It includes information about slides, photographs, objects and artifacts in the university's libraries, museums and archives. To find and display Hers' photographs of eastern Asia, search [HOLLIS Images](#) for keywords *Hers* and *Eastern Asian Historical Photograph Collections*.