

Hans Fernholz at the Hermann-Föttinger-Institut

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When Hans Fernholz came to the Hermann-Föttinger-Institut of the Technical University of Berlin in 1965, we found that we had to share a tiny little room just opposite Professor Wille's office. Four years later when we gained our habilitation we were each found worthy of an office of our own. From then on, the little room was considered inadequate even for a single young scientist and it has been used for the copying-machine ever since. At that time, however, we felt quite all right there. We soon found out that we had both recently spent a year at Cambridge University, though at different colleges, and that we had a lot to talk about. This was the beginning of a life-long friendship.

In Germany what counts in the work of a Professor above all is research, therefore most of the contributions in this issue give proof of Hans's wide-spread activities in this field. But life at an Institute holds more than research, and I give here an account of those other aspects of his professional life.

Hans is a devoted teacher. One of the problems of the traditional lecture is that many students just lean back and listen to a lecture as if it was a television show. So we developed an alternative to the lecture: a text-book suitable for self-study was written, students were divided into groups of not more than twelve to fifteen and the class was held only once instead of twice a week. The students have to read a certain section before each class. The class session is limited to answering questions and presenting complementary material such as educational films, experiments and exercises. Students soon found out that they did not get anything out of attending the class if they had not worked through the section assigned to that week before – and that was the essence of it. Hans has practised this form of teaching for many years, and about half the students even prefer it – while the others have no choice. Our only common published paper is on this model of teaching.

Hans soon began to raise money for research projects, so he always had a group of research students and young scientists about him. To introduce students to team-work in research, to encourage them individually, to find suitable topics for doctoral theses, and to train doctoral students became the centre of his professional work. Once a week there is an obligatory coffee meeting for discussion of 'official' problems, but since Hans drinks his coffee every day at this same table, he is open to 'unofficial' problems daily, ranging from science and administration to political and cultural topics. Since his cultural interests also cover fine wine and food, he meets with his group for a Christmas dinner. The choice of the restaurant usually takes several meetings, so the dinner traditionally does not take place before the middle of January.

His research activities increased from year to year, and in 1998 Hans became Chairman of a Sonderforschungsbereich, which certainly is one of the summits a researcher can reach in a career in Germany. The ascent to this peak was paved with numberless meetings in scientific committees and editorial boards. He was the Chairman of the Fluid Mechanics Conference Committee of Euromech for many years and is President of the Council now. Nobody can reckon how often he is away from home in the course of the year.

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As if this was not enough, Hans has always been engaged in university administration. He was a member of the Committee of the Department almost all the time and for three years its Head; he was Chairman of a most influential University Committee, for Development and Planning, and latterly a member of the Supervisory Board of the University. So university politics was a standing topic at the coffee meetings. Thus, his research and doctoral students were well informed in university affairs, and many of them were motivated to engage themselves in this field. Most of the controversial decisions to be taken were discussed at the coffee meetings beforehand. Here also Hans's research students were rather his collegial advisors than his assistants.

Together with his wife Cornelie and their two daughters, Isabel and Annette, he always gives a very warm welcome to his numerous friends from the many countries with which he is connected. Discretely keeping his private life separate from his professional, one link remains: for many years he has attended lectures on medieval history at the university. He must be quite an expert in this field by now. In the rather unlikely event that he gives up fluid mechanics research after his retirement, I do hope he will continue with medieval history. We discussed that already when talking about Cambridge in the one-time copying machine room, and I hope to continue these talks and learn from him when we have both retired.