

# Memorial to Jurgen Henning Illies

## 1924–1982

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Jurgen Henning Illies was working in his office in the Geological Institute, Karlsruhe University, on 2 August 1982 when death beckoned him to his next adventure. Typically, since he learned of a terminal and inoperable condition, Illies had been putting his affairs in order. An earlier serious operation aggravated by war wounds had left him weak but had not diminished his activity. Now he began writing, finishing two papers, and organizing the affairs of the institute and his research group so that his absence would not leave his students in a difficult position nor handicap his successor.

My last correspondence with him was during this period when he wrote that he could not undertake new projects because he was not sure he could see them through, and recommended one of his assistants. To

his wife, Gisela, he explained that he was “standing aside and writing the personal record of Henning Illies.”

For us left behind, taking stock of the record of Henning Illies is no easy task; if we all, petty actors, have our moment on stage, that moment can be evaluated in Kipling's words:

If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,  
Yours is the earth and everything that's in it,  
And—which is more—you'll be a man, my son.

Henning Illies was such a man, and his was the world. He could “walk with kings” and not “lose the common touch.” So it is important to realize that, although he held many elected offices and advisory roles (president, council member, etc.) in many scientific societies, such as the Geologische Vereinigung, the Deutsche Akademie der Naturforscher Leopoldina, the Germany Quaternary Society, the Upper Rhine Geological Society, the German Geological Society (who awarded him the Hans Stille Medal in 1981), and the Geological Society of America (Fellow), he also stood high in the esteem of his many friends and students both in Germany and abroad.

The record of his scientific work requires no lauding and is there for all to see. But how necessary it is to record the warm, friendly, enthusiastic, companionable man who, together with his wife, loved to entertain friends and colleagues and talk long into the night on questions of general interest; to depict the man who loved to spend long hours working with his assistants and students, encouraging them and giving them confidence, and the serious man whose sense of proportion could always break the tension of any discussion with a joke or his infectious laugh.

His dedication and total immersion in teaching and research is best described by one

of his former assistants who likened him to a child amongst his presents on Christmas Day. A most felicitous description, for it captures the spirit in which he tackled his work.

This life he shared with his wife, Gisela, whom he married the year after his habilitation. She too was a geologist, accompanying him on his field trips, at first by bicycle, then by motorcycle, and finally by car. Together they mapped ice margins, researched river history, and mapped in Germany and then in Chile where they spent two years in Valdivia University. Upon their return to Germany, to the University of Karlsruhe, their interests in rift valleys took form, and when the geological community suddenly became aware of the importance of rift valleys, a wealth of geologic and geophysical information was available. Illies early recognized the need to use all aspects of research, and his ability to interest colleagues in rock mechanics and all facets of geophysics in rift valley research made his work a model. Karlsruhe became a Mecca for geologists and geophysicists, and both Gisela and Henning enjoyed turning their home into a pleasant place to relax, drink a little Rhine wine, and converse with students and colleagues.

As interest grew in geotectonic research, he gladly dedicated part of his time and experience to both national and international research organizations, to the Federal Republic's Geodynamics Project and to the IUGG-IUGS Task Force on the Commission for the Lithosphere. With this work came much foreign travel, and with Gisela, he visited most of the younger rift valley systems of the world, with perhaps a special fondness for Malta.

*On a more factual level, Jurgen Henning Illies was born in Bergdorf near Hamburg, 14 March 1924, and by the age of ten his interest in rocks had already taken form, for his boyhood friend Carsten Thode recalls grubbing in sandpits with Henning, and Dr. Gripp can still remember a mother bringing her twelve-year-old son into the institute in Hamburg for geological guidance. The war interfered with his studies, but he "promoviert" in 1948 and took his habilitation in 1951.*

Even before he completed his degree studies in Halle and Hamburg in 1948, he had two published papers, the earlier dating from 1941. He was offered and accepted an assistantship in Hamburg, where he remained until 1953, when he and Gisela, newly married, moved to Freiberg/Breisgau. With the exception of his stay in Valdivia University, he was never to leave the Rhine graben apart from short visits. Appointed to Karlsruhe in 1958, in 1963 he became director of that institute, a post he held until his death. The list of his 119 publications is only one measure of his scientific output; a truer measure would include the students he influenced and the growth of geotectonics. Henning loved research and did not seek fame—rather, fame sought out this modest man who then used that unsought reputation to aid the advancement of science.

Henning enjoyed life to the hilt and shared that joy with his friends. Wherever he is now, he'll be enjoying that too, and it is wholly natural to believe that when we shuffle off this mortal coil, we'll bump into Henning bubbling over with enthusiasm for his latest idea. His scientific work will preserve his name, but it is such a pale reflection of the man. His presence is missed—but for a few, the lucky few marked for life by his influence, he cannot die.

I am exceedingly grateful to the Geological Society of America for this opportunity to pay my respects and homage to a close friend, and to those of his friends who helped with information.

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