

Eulogy: Tribute to a friend, Prof Dr Walter Liese

By Salleh Mohd. Nor, IUFRO Past President



Walter and Katrin

It was in late 1978, when I was then Director of the Forest Research Institute (FRI) Kepong, a research branch of the Forestry Department Peninsular Malaysia (FDPM), when a tall, handsome, distinguished looking gentleman from Hamburg, Germany, suddenly appeared unannounced. He was then President of IUFRO, the International Union of Forest Research Organizations, based in Vienna, Austria. He had come all the way to invite me to become a member of the Board of IUFRO as a Regional member from the Asia Pacific. He was concerned that IUFRO had been dominated for too long by the West, especially Europe and North America, and wanted more representations from the developing countries. After receiving the necessary approvals from the FDPM, thus began my romance with IUFRO for over twenty years that culminated in me being elected the first President of IUFRO from outside Europe and the United States in 100 years history of IUFRO at the 20th IUFRO World Congress at Tampere Finland on 12 August 1995. That could not have been made possible without the vision and foresight of Prof Dr Walter Liese, a world specialist amongst others of bamboo, who became my mentor and a close personal friend until his untimely demise at 6pm on the 24 February 2023, just short of a month after his 97th birthday on the 31 January 2023.

Walter was such a respected figure in the University of Hamburg as when I accompanied him to visit the University a few years ago, the admiration, respect and

love from his colleagues and the students were apparent and this was expressed openly wherever we went at the University.

Walter and his lovely equally tall and slim late wife Katrin, lived in a beautiful German cottage just off Hamburg with a large compound with trees and off course bamboo in the courtyard at the back of the house, that was also adorned by 2 stone statues from South America about half the size of a man. My wife and I had often enjoyed his hospitality and stayed in his house a number of times in the past and our last visit was in 2022 after my Antarctica Treaty Meeting in Berlin but unfortunately our planned dinner had to be cancelled as Walter suddenly contacted COVID and we could not meet and only spoke on the phone. He was so apologetic and regretted not being able to meet my wife and I.

Our friendship and relationship in IUFRO took us all over the world, including the United States, South America, Burkina Faso in Africa and Malaysia. When FRI became a statutory body as the Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) in 1985, I invited Walter to become a member of the FRIM Inaugural Research Advisory Committee where he also chaired the sub-committee on forest products research. In that capacity, he visited FRIM many times and mentored some FRIM Research Officers in their research and post graduate studies, notable Dato' Dr. Abdul Latif Mohmod who studied for his Ph.D. under Walter.

IUFRO celebrated its centennial in 1991 and the Board had planned to hold the celebrations at its birthplace in Eberswalde, that was then under East Germany. Walter was such a respected personality in Germany that he even managed to organize meetings with the authorities in East Germany before the unification of Germany. Fortunately, Germany became a reunited country in 1990 before the Centennial event in Eberswalde and IUFRO members could freely attend the centennial celebration that was well attended by German Ministerial officials and the whole IUFRO Board and IUFRO Members from all over the world. It was a joyous occasion, all thanks to Walter and the local Organizing Committee chaired by Professor Hans-Friedrich Joachim.

On the 28 April 2016, FRIM under the Director General then, Dato Dr Abdul Latif Mohmod, organized a seminar entitled "A Tribute to Walter Liese" to celebrate Walter's 90th birthday that resulted in a small publication with messages from Dr Cherla Sastry from IDRC Canada, Dr Arnold Fruehwald from Germany, Dr Florentino Tesoro from the Philippines and a message from "Children of Walter Liese House, Hilltop School, Kumasi, Ghana". The common message from everyone was our respect and pride for having known him and our best wishes for a healthy ad long life.

I was shocked when on the early morning of the 28th February 2023, I received a message on my e-mail from IUFRO Headquarters and WhatsApp message from my friend Dr. Wulf Killmann from Hamburg, that Walter had passed away. My wife and I were grieved at the demise of this great friend.

IUFRO had lost a distinguished past President, Germany had lost a much loved son, Hamburg University had lost an iconic professor, the bamboo community had lost an expert, FRIM had lost a colleague and advisor and I had lost a close personal friend of over 45 years. You can understand my anguish and sadness and much more so as I was unable to pay my last personal respects. Life must go on but that vacuum that Walter has left is hard to fill and will take a long time to heal.

May His soul rest in peace.

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