

In Memoriam of Professor Dr. Dr. hc. Mult. Walter Liese

A personal view on his Life and Person

By Dr. Wulf Killmann

Professor Dr. Dr. hc mult. Walter Liese passed away on February 24, 2023, just three weeks after his 97th birthday.

When I began my studies in wood economics in Schloss Reinbek in the winter semester of 1969, I was immediately fascinated by this tall, slender, elegant biology professor who could talk so eloquently about the big wide world. When I wanted to travel to Bolivia during the semester break, I had to take up a bank loan of 3000 marks for the plane ticket and, as a student on a meagre stipend, I needed a guarantor. So I courageously entered Walter's room in the Reinbek Schloss - I still remember the beautiful semicircular window with a view of the pond below. After I had presented my request, he only said: "This must be supported" and signed without further ado the guarantee for a student who had only studied with him for one semester and whom he hardly knew.

What kind of person was this man who had so much confidence in young people even if they were unknown to him?

To explore this more closely, please accompany me on a journey through Professor Walter Liese's life.

Childhood, youth and war

Walter Liese was born in Berlin on January 31, 1926. His father was a professor of forest botany at the Forestry College in Eberswalde. From him Walter learned discipline, a sense of duty, hard and precise work, his devotion to forestry research and teaching - and his joy in it.

During his school years at the humanistic high school in Eberswalde, young Walter also took care of the vegetable garden and the 35 rabbits, both important for providing for the family during the scarce war years.

In August 1943, he passed the emergency school-leaving examination (Notabitur) and, as a war volunteer, first had to do his labor service - hard work draining the swamps in western Havelland near Berlin. From November, 1943 he attended forestry lectures in Eberswalde as a guest student, but as early as February 1944 he was drafted into reserve officer training in a tank regiment in Neuruppin. By the time he finished basic training as an officer candidate, tanks were scarce and he became a platoon leader in an infantry regiment near Küstrin, now Poland. Walter was part of the last detachment on the Oder Front, in which a decimated German army, together with old men and children, tried in vain to prevent a Red Army, far superior in numbers, vehicles, weapons, ammunition, fuel and food supplies, from advancing on the Reich capital Berlin. He was awarded the Iron Cross II for bravery in face of the enemy.

We all know how it ended. In the confusion of the collapse, Walter managed to escape to the then American sphere of influence in Mecklenburg and he was captured there.

He managed to escape from the camp - and by convincing an American soldier with a bottle of Schnaps, he managed to cross the Elbe River in June 1945. A district forester near Helmstedt took him in and gave him work, bread and a bed.

While working in the forest as a "Forstbefeisener" he was attacked by three released Polish prisoners of war, at that time so-called displaced persons. They wanted to shoot him, but fortunately their ammunition was wet, so they only beat him up and left him presumed dead - thank God he survived.

University studies and marriage

Walter wanted to study forestry, but the forestry faculties in West Germany at that time were full with war returnees and people who had fled from the East. So he continued to work as a forestry worker until he was offered a place to study in Freiburg in the winter semester of 1946-47. He financed his studies by helping to repair war damage in heavily bombed Freiburg, forest and garden work, and selling his tobacco cards. Nevertheless, Walter, like most of his compatriots at that time, suffered from hunger- something we can hardly imagine today. From 1948-1950 he studied at the forestry faculty of the University of Göttingen in Hannoversch - Münden.

He wrote his doctoral thesis in 1951 on "Studies on the importance of wood structure for the penetration of oleous preservatives" with Professor Dr. Herbert Zycha. His work with Helmut Ruska, the brother of Ernst Ruska, inventor of the electron microscope and later Nobel Prize winner, laid the foundation for Walter's later work with the electron microscope. During his doctoral work, he also met Elsa- Katrin Pabst, who was then conducting mycological research on edible fungi in the institute's basement. Walter and Katrin married in March 1952.

Early working life

The West German forestry offices took in many German foresters who had fled or had been expelled from the former German provinces of East Prussia, Pomerania, and Silesia. So it was impossible for Walter to get a job in the forest service. But he was lucky again and was hired as an assistant at the Lintorf forestry research station in North Rhine-Westphalia. The director, Dr. Erich Eidmann, had been in contact with Indonesia since before the war and imported bamboo culms to test them for their suitability as pit timber. After all, wood from German forests was not available; it had been extensively deforested for the purpose of reparations to UK and France. It turned out that bamboo was not suitable as pit timber, it failed in the internodes. However, the foundation for Walter's later work with bamboo was laid.

Walter examined bamboo with the electron microscope - no one stopped him! So he used the freedom of science coupled with his connection to "Brother Ruska". He then also worked with the electron microscope on wood and held a lecture before the

Botanical Society in Berlin on "Electron Microscopic Observations of bordered pits (Hoftüpfel)" in September 1951.

The accidental death of his father in July 1952, when he was only sixty years old, had a drastic effect on Walter. He turned down an offer to succeed his father in Eberswalde, partly because he did not consider himself sufficiently qualified for the job at the age of 26, and partly because he did not want to go to the German Democratic Republic.

In September 1952, Walter moved to the wood preservation company Weyl, Rütgerswerke AG in Mannheim, and after a year accepted an assistant position in forest botany at the University of Freiburg. Here, in 1954 and 1959, his two sons Andreas and Stefan were born. In 1957 –his habilitation thesis on the "Fine structure of the lignified cell wall" (Feinbau der verholzten Zellwand) was accepted.

A visit to Freiburg by Dr. Purushotam from India revived Walter's interest in bamboo, and, together with his wife Katrin, he joined for 4 ½ months as an FAO expert the Forestry Research Institute Dehra Dun in India, where he worked not only on wood conservation issues, but also on bamboo.

This was followed by consulting assignments in Indonesia, and a research stay at the CSIRO in Melbourne, Australia.

In 1959, Walter went to the Forest Botanical Institute in Munich as a lecturer, where he devoted himself to research and teaching. When the director of the institute, Professor Bruno Huber, succumbed to a heart attack, Walter assumed responsibility for the administration of the institute, as well as for field trips, often to the Alps, in addition to research and teaching duties.

Hamburg

On April 1, 1963, Walter accepted a call as professor of wood biology at the University of Hamburg, combined with the direction of the Institute for Wood Biology and Wood Protection of the Federal Research Institute for Forestry and Forest Products (BFH) at Schloss Reinbek. His institute moved to Lohbrügge in 1970.

Walter held this position until his retirement on March 31, 1991. Many things could be reported from this time, some of which we hear today. It would take days to go into details. But the fact that he still had a job at the institute until in his nineties was typical for him. It shows his discipline as well as his commitment to research and to the students, who still gladly appreciated his advice. Until some years ago, he could be found at the Institute almost daily.

In his long life as a scientist, Professor Liese wrote more than 500 publications, 8 books and gave countless lectures.

In Walter's life there were not only highs, but also times of deep pain. His youngest son Stefan died of a brain tumor in 1979, when he was only twenty years old. His dear wife Katrin died in his arms in spring 2011, 83 years old after sixty years of marriage.

The international Walter

Walter was not only an outstanding scientist, but also a gifted diplomat. Thus, he became one of the most internationally important and well-known German forestry and timber scientists of his time.

His work on bamboo and palms was groundbreaking, and so the "Hoftüpfel Liese" became the "Bambus Liese".

He put his extensive expertise at the service of development cooperation very early on, among others for the FAO, EU, ITTO, UNDP, UNIDO, CIFOR, GTZ and GIZ. Walter is also called "the grandfather of INBAR", the International Network for Bamboo and Rattan based in Beijing.

Walter Liese worked in many countries, especially in Africa and Asia, until long after his retirement. He was President of the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO) from 1976-1981 and chaired the XVII IUFRO World Congress in Kyoto in 1981. Walter served also on many international committees, including as coordinator of the Franco-German forest damage program Eurosilva, and was an honorary member of numerous scientific academies and societies, with honors in twenty countries.

He was always very open to the world. Even in the days of the Cold War, he built bridges with colleagues behind the Iron Curtain, at a time when this was frowned upon by many. He was thanked for this not only by deep and long friendships, but also by being awarded honorary doctorates from the universities of Budapest, Posen, Sopron, Zvolen and Istanbul, as well as an honorary professorship from Nanjing University. He also established early contacts with otherwise completely isolated colleagues in Cuba.

I remember that in the early seventies he was expecting a student from Havana. Knowing that I spoke Spanish, he asked me to pick him up at Hamburg airport. I picked up the student in my battered R4 and took him to Lieses in Bernhard Ihnestrasse, where I interpreted for the Cuban student over dinner. That's also where I met his lovely wife Katrin. We were immediately united by our common interest in archaeology.

Walter had a big heart for young people. He believed in their possibilities and strengths without prejudice, even if they looked like me at the time, with unkempt beard and long hair. Walter gave them strength and motivation. This is the only way to explain that during the time of student unrest, in early 1971, he was honored by the woodworking students with a torchlight procession! They thanked him for his refusal of a call to the University of Munich.

Like for the young Cuban, he helped and paved the way for many other young people from developing countries. He counted a large community of former students and co-workers, later his friends in Africa, Asia and Latin America. I especially would like to mention Dr. Albert Ofosu-Asiedu from Ghana, Dr. Florentino Tesoro from the Philippines, Tan Sri Dato Dr. Salleh Mohd Nor and Dr. Mohd Latif from Malaysia, Dr. Cherla Sastry from India, now Canada, and many more. Tan Sri Dr. Salleh became the first IUFRO President from a developing country thanks to Walter's advocacy.

In early 2016, when Walter had turned 90, some of his international students and friends held an international colloquium in Walter's honor at FRIM in Malaysia. Walter kept in close contact in particular with his friends Tan Sri Dr. Salleh, Dr. Sastry and Dr. Tesoro until his demise.

Some personal remarks

Walter did everything for his students and was very caring. When I was admitted from Pakistan to the Hamburg Institute for Tropical Diseases in 1982, already comatose and with a severe amoebic liver abscess, and was on a drip there for 10 days, Walter took loving care of me, visited me in the hospital and brought me reading material.

Walter also had a great sense of humor. For my diploma thesis on wood preservatives, I carried out impregnations tests with creosote. I was sitting in the basement of the institute one weekend, and while the impregnation was going on, I was reading a book. I was so absorbed by "The Open Veins of Latin America" by Galeano that I did not pay attention to the impregnation cycle. A gasket burst, and I stood suddenly up to my ankles in the oily brew. By chance Walter came down the stairs, saw the disaster and laughed out roaring, "Well, Mr. Killmann, you've got some cleaning up to do!"

But he could also be very strict. At the time, I was studying Precolombian Archaeology in addition to wood products. In March 1974, the assistant for Ancient American Studies asked me if I would accompany him to southern England to survey Neolithic stone circles. I thought it was exciting, although he mainly took me along to drag his heavy theodolite across fields, fences, and upland moors -there was no GPS back then. So I disappeared from the forest products scene for two weeks during my diploma thesis. Walter was "not amused" and told me very clearly that this would not work.

Sometimes he could also painfully blunt. When I asked him in 1983 if he would support me to run a project on behalf of GTZ at the then FRI - since 1985 the *Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM)* in Malaysia - he told me: "Mr. Killmann, that's a bit too big for you!" Of course, that was an incentive!

However, later on he changed his opinion on this, and he supported me to get the job and throughout the project's life. He visited FRIM frequently, partly because the then director and a mutual friend, Tan Sri Dato Dr. Salleh Mohd Nor, had become president of IUFRO thanks to Walter's support. How beautiful were the tropical evenings on the terrace of the project's guesthouse, an old colonial bungalow on the FRIM grounds, overlooking the old arboretum, where we listened to the cicadas and night jars while enjoying an anchor beer and good conversations.

Walter has been a great teacher and role model for me. Without his strict, demanding guidance on scientific work and writing, I would not have been able to write many of the admittedly non-scientific documents in my management jobs. He sharpened my focus on the essentials and taught me to avoid the superfluous. He introduced and encouraged me to working with palms, and his guidance was irreplaceable.

I am sure to speak for many of Walter's former students when saying that I feel grateful for many things he taught me - far beyond wood biology. I feel privileged to have been prepared by him for professional life and work in an international environment, and to have had a teacher, advisor and good friend in him during my career, and in personal life.

We will hold Walter Liese in fond memory.

Dr. Wulf Killmann