



## GEORGE HERRMANN

1921–2007

Elected in 1981

*“For major contributions to administration, publication, research, and teaching of applied and structural mechanics; has particularly stimulated students and younger colleagues.”*

BY PETER PINSKY, DAVID BARNETT, AND CHARLES STEELE

GEORGE HERRMANN, professor emeritus of mechanical engineering, passed away quietly as he sat with a friend in Zurich’s main train station on his way to Lucerne to celebrate Russian Christmas, on January 7, 2007. He was 85 years old.

Herrmann played a major role in the mechanics community in the latter half of the 20th century, and his influence persists to the present day. Born in Moscow on April 19, 1921, he moved to Basel, Switzerland, with his Swiss mother (leaving behind his Russian father) in 1933 and was educated at the Gymnasium of Mathematics and Sciences, where he received his *Maturität* in 1941. He attended the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, where he received a diploma in 1945 and a doctor of science in 1949, both in civil engineering. After a year as a postdoctoral exchange fellow and an assistant professor at the *École Polytechnique* in Montreal, Canada, he joined the Department of Civil Engineering at Columbia University in 1951. He became associate professor in 1955. From 1962 to 1970 he was a professor of civil engineering at Northwestern University, including two years as Walter P. Murphy Distinguished Professor. In 1970 he moved to Stanford

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Adapted from the *Memorial Resolution: George Herrmann* written by Peter Pinsky, David Barnett, and Charles Steele and published in the *Stanford Report*, March 11, 2009. The National Academy of Engineering wishes to thank Stanford University for permission to use the Memorial Resolution.

University. At Stanford he served as chair of the Department of Applied Mechanics and, when the department merged with the Department of Mechanical Engineering in 1975, as chair of the Division of Applied Mechanics. He held this post until his retirement from Stanford in 1984.

His research interests were broad and touched on many of the major themes in mechanics over the past 60 years: plate and shell theory, stability theory, vibrations of elastic bodies, wave propagation, and fracture mechanics. He remained active in research following his retirement from Stanford, and in later years he developed an interest in the mechanics of solids as viewed from an Eshelbean standpoint. He pursued this vigorously with longtime collaborator Reinhold Kienzler until his death in 2007. His work brought him wide recognition and a number of awards from various professional societies. These included election to the National Academy of Engineering, the Centennial Medal of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, the von Karman Medal of the American Society of Civil Engineers, the Eringen Medal of the Society of Engineering Science, and the American Academy of Mechanics Outstanding Service Award.

George Herrmann's service to the mechanics community was equally important. He served on innumerable boards and committees and was quite influential in the Applied Mechanics Division of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers. During an era in which important Soviet work in mechanics was largely unknown in the West, he began the English translation edition of *PMM*, the premier Russian-language mechanics journal and served for many years as its translation editor. Perhaps most significantly, he founded the *International Journal of Solids and Structures* in 1965 and served as its editor until his retirement from Stanford, building it into one of the most reputable journals in the field.

On a personal level, George Herrmann was a man of great warmth and charm. His former students recall his kindness and consideration. Particularly impressive was his uncanny ability to find the best line of attack on a given research problem, where he was often able to obtain significant results

with only a minimum of tools. His lectures were clear, focused, and well organized, and his courses were always popular with students. He was an accomplished linguist and constantly amazed those around him by his ability to converse with the seminar speaker of the day in the speaker's native language. While at Stanford, he organized frequent outings, excursions, and dinners for students and faculty that did much to build a strong sense of camaraderie within the Department of Applied Mechanics and later the Division of Applied Mechanics.

At the time of his death, Herrmann's primary residence was in Davos, Switzerland, although he continued to travel extensively, including visits to Stanford several times a year. Following his retirement, he maintained much the same life he had lived as a professor. He continued to publish papers, give talks, attend and organize conferences, and collaborate on books, including *Mechanics in Material Space with Applications to Defect and Fracture Mechanics* (2000), which he co-wrote with Reinhold Kienzler. Toward the end of his life he was learning Spanish, even though he was already fluent in English, German, French, Russian, and Italian. Herrmann was an extraordinary individual with an enthusiastic, creative spirit that was never diminished.

His final journey exemplified several characteristics of his life: his Russian origins, his love of travel, and his curiosity about religion as both a scientist and a close friend, toward the end of his life, of Kirill, the current patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. He was married three times. The first marriage ended with the death of his wife, Elizabeth Rüttschi-Herrmann, the mother of his two children, in 1978; the second marriage ended in 1983 with the death of his wife Alicia Golebiewska Herrmann. His third marriage, to Louise Ostroff, ended in divorce. His second and third marriages also brought attachments to stepdaughters Joanna Lasota and Debbie Kahn-Wand. He was a skier until late in life, and in his middle years he was also a mountaineer, which involved climbing both the Matterhorn and Piz Palü. He was an avid reader, a devotee of classical music, and a frequent visitor to art museums. He was also a gifted excursionist whose destinations often included

a visit to one of many obscure baroque churches near Davos and a meal at a Michelin-starred restaurant. One of his oldest friends and colleagues, Tom Kane, put it this way: “Art, science, music—with anything [George] was interested in, he didn’t waste time on anything less than the best.” He saw himself as a “citizen of the world,” who was interested in those he had not yet met, made friends easily with the prominent, and although certain about where he was going, was not always clear about what it was he wanted to leave behind.

Herrmann is survived by his daughter, Anne Herrmann of Dexter, Michigan; his son, Peter Herrmann of Küsnacht, Switzerland; and two grandchildren, Celine and Henrik.

