

OBITUARIES

Professor Gerd Weisgerber (1938–2010). A Commemoration¹

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It is indeed sad that more and more frequently we have to say farewell to colleagues and friends with whom we have worked and cooperated for many years. In July 2010, I received a letter from Professor Rainer Slotta, at this time Director of the German Mining Museum, informing me that Professor Gerd Weisgerber, organiser of the 8th Flint Symposium in Bochum in September 1999, had passed away in Recklinghausen hospital on June 22, 2010, "...after a long and bravely endured illness". The Flint Symposium in Bochum was the last of a series of symposiums which had begun forty years earlier in Maastricht. Gerd Weisgerber then became a founding member of the UISPP Commission "Flint Mining in Pre- and Protohistoric Times"; its creation had his enthusiastic support.

Gerd came from the industrial and mining region of Saarland and his place of birth determined his future archaeological interests. He was an eminent representative of the field of industrial archaeology and, in particular, one of its branches – mining archaeology. The years of Gerd's early childhood were the hard times of the Third Reich and Second World War. He was born on January 24, 1938 in Saarwellingen (district of Saarlouis), shortly before the outbreak of World War II. His father was an accountant. After finishing school, he studied at the Higher Pedagogical School in Saarbrücken and became an elementary school (*Volksschule*) teacher in the small villages of the region. At this time, he became interested in the local history and geography and looked after heritage sites and historical monuments in the area. His interests gradually turned towards archaeology (Slotta 2003: 21).

In 1961, while continuing to teach, Gerd Weisgerber began studies at the Institute of Pre- and Protohistory of Saarland University, under the direction of Professor Rolf Hachmann (1917–2014). As a result, in 1969, he resigned from the teaching profession, which in the Bundesrepublik provided safe employment and financial stability, and

¹ A commemorative speech given in Vienna, 21 September 2010, at the Third Conference of the UISPP Commission "Flint Mining in Pre- and Protohistoric Times".

began a career in archaeology, initially as an assistant to Professor Hachmann at the Institute for Pre- and Protohistory of Saarland University. Then, in 1972, he moved to the Mining Museum in Bochum, located “in the heart of the German coal district”, with which he was to remain associated for the rest of his life. In 1977, the Museum changed its name to the German Mining Museum (*Deutsches Bergbau-Museum*) in Bochum and became a Scientific and Research Institute of Mining History with extensive resources for conducting research. Dr Gerd Weisgerber made full use of these resources to study the “History and techniques of mining” from their beginnings to Antiquity (Slotta 2003: 22).

Allow me to cite part of the letter I mentioned earlier. In it Professor Slotta writes about Professor Gerd Weisgerber:

“The German Mining Museum loses in him its long-lasting assistant director, who throughout many years contributed decisively to its growth and development. As one of the first mining archaeologists in the world, he set standards in this scientific discipline and will be remembered for his groundbreaking research in the Near East, especially in Israel, Oman and Jordan. He has made a fundamental contribution to the development of the German Mining Museum into a scientific museum with international standards and recognition.

His outstanding personality, his tireless involvement, his ingenuity and deep humanity made him a respected, responsible and dedicated scientist. We, his colleagues at the German Mining Museum always held his opinion in the highest esteem, and constantly sought his advice and expertise. We will never forget his expeditions, which constituted a profound formative experience for all of us who took part in them”

So much from the letter from the director of the German Mining Museum and Gerd Weisgerber’s colleague.

Gerd published much of his research in “Der Anschnitt”, a journal that has been brought out since 1949 by the Society of Friends of the Fine Arts and Civilization in Mining and edited by members of the management of the Mining Museum in Bochum. Since the 1970s, Dr Gerd Weisgerber was a member of the journal’s editorial staff and in recent years a member of its Scientific Council.

Dr Weisgerber conducted investigations into mining and metallurgy in prehistoric and ancient times and, on rare occasions, even in the Middle Ages. He viewed research into mining archaeology and archaeometallurgy as subdisciplines of industrial archaeology and was of the opinion that: “Both these branches of archaeology primarily aim at investigating the methods employed in mining and metallurgy in different ages and different places”. He was interested in all forms of mining, from its beginnings in the Old Stone Age through the Neolithic, the Bronze and Iron Ages, and Antiquity, up



Fig. 1. Gerd Weisgerber in September 1999.
Photo: J. Lech

to the Middle Ages. He devoted equal attention to the mining of flint, “bloodstone” and metal ores, but his main interest was copper mining and early metallurgy.

Gerd Weisgerber did much to distinguish “mining archaeology” (*Montanarchäologie*) as a subdiscipline of archaeology and a part of industrial archaeology. In this, he is considered to have continued the work of Baron Ernst von Preuschen (1898–1973) and Professor Richard Pittioni (1906–1985) from the University of Vienna (Slotta 2003: 23). Maybe, at this point, it should be noted that Gerd and I differed in our approach to studies of prehistoric flint mining and to how we understood the concept

of “mining archaeology”. For Gerd, the systematic study of evidence of early exploitation of raw materials and the accompanying archaeological remains belonged to the history of mining, understood in the wider sense, from the Palaeolithic to modern times, and this history, in its beginnings must necessarily be the domain of archaeology. Gerd always carried out his research in close association with geology and geography. For me, the archaeology of flint mining is primarily a field of archaeology and an important means of learning about those prehistoric societies that were somehow connected with flint mining, their patterns of culture and settlement, their knowledge and technology, contacts and behaviour. In such research, apart from geology, it is most important to make use of culture and social anthropology.

Gerd was an exceptional scholar and researcher of prehistoric mining in many countries, on several continents. For us, he was first and foremost a meritorious researcher of flint mining. The book “5000 Jahre Feuersteinbergabu”, edited by Gerd, Rainer Slotta and Jürgen Weiner belongs among the most important publications dedicated to prehistoric flint mining in the 20th century. Professor Rainer Slotta, co-editor of the book and the present director of the German Mining Museum, even wrote some years ago that the subject of “flint” held Gerd enslaved throughout his life.

In 1991, Dr Gerd Weisgerber was awarded the title of honorary professor by the Ministry of Science and Art of Baden-Württemberg, and thus became the German Mining Museum’s first professor. It was then he began to lecture and conduct seminars in the distant Freiburg im Breisgau.

Let me include a few words on a more personal note. The first time I met Gerd was in May 1979 at Maastricht, during the Third International Symposium on Flint, organised by the Working Group of Prehistoric Flint Mining affiliated to The Netherlands Geological Society – The Limburg Branch. He was especially interested in the interpretation of a Danubian grave from Michałowice in Little Poland, of which I had spoken in my paper. One year later, we met again when, in 1980, he prepared a splendid exhibition entitled “5000 Years of Flint Mining – Searching for the Steel of the Stone Age” (“5000 Jahre Feuersteinbergbau – Die Suche nach dem Stahl der Steinzeit”). The exhibition, at the German Mining Museum in Bochum, organised with extensive international cooperation, was accompanied by a conference attended by scholars from many European countries. We met later at various conferences and symposiums, including the ones at Otzenhausen in 1989, Madrid in 1991, Warszawa and Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski in 1995, Bochum 1999.

Symposiums following the Maastricht meetings were organised in Brighton, Bordeaux, Madrid, Warsaw and Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski, and the last one in Bochum in 1999. During the Polish symposium in 1995, we had trouble finding organisers for the next – 8th symposium on Flint, which needed to be announced then. Remembering the success of the symposium in Bochum, organised by Gerd in 1980, I approached him with the suggestion that he oversaw the preparation of the Eighth Symposium

on Flint in Bochum. After two or three days of talks, Gerd accepted the idea. The Eighth Symposium on Flint, organised in Bochum in September 1999, was probably the best, though, unfortunately, also the last of the series of flint symposiums which had started at Maastricht in 1969 (Körlin and Weisgerber eds 2006).

Among us, researchers of prehistoric flint mining in Europe, Gerd was greatly respected for his achievements in the field of mining archaeology; of which just a few have been mentioned here. He was an authority in his field. When, in 2006, we began to organise the Commission on Flint Mining in Pre- and Protohistoric Times, one of the commissions of the International Union of Pre- and Protohistoric Sciences, Gerd Weisgerber and Sjeuf Felder were among the first people to whom I turned for support and approval of our initiative. He was also an important member of the Commission, which includes former participants of International Symposiums on Flint. It is certain that Gerd Weisgerber and his achievements in the study of prehistory of mining in the Old World will always remain a part of the history of mining archaeology in the last decades of the twentieth century and in the first decade of the twentieth first century. Therefore, at the end it should be mentioned, that one of Professor Gerd Weisgerber's last articles was devoted to Indian mining in the pre-Columbian era at Chuquicamata in the Andes, in the Antofagasta Province of Northern Chile.

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