



Gundolf Ernst (29.08.1930 – 25.04.2002)

Gundolf Ernst – Personal reminiscences

My first encounter with Gundolf was on an excursion to the Mesozoic of the Harz Foreland led by his father Professor Dr. Wilhelm Ernst, from whom I heard my first geology lectures in 1944 and who, after the war, counted amongst my most respected academic teachers. The young schoolboy Gundolf often accompanied his father on geological excursions and in this way grew up from an early age already exposed to the science that was later to become his great love. The father and son were both unusual people and in many respects were very like each other. Whenever they come up in my thoughts, as they often do, I rarely think of one without the other. I little realised that day in the field that the son of this inspirational teacher was destined to become one of my closest scientific colleagues and one of my dearest friends.

Gundolf and I could always express our opinions and ideas to one another clearly and without either of us feeling at all damaged or hurt by any disagreement that might arise from time to time. It was fortunate that we could work together like this because we wrote several joint geological and palaeontological papers on the Cretaceous of northwest Germany. I have vivid memories of those times when we worked together, in the institute, in the field, and during conferences and excursions. However, one episode has always remained particularly memorable:

This was the approximately four-week period in 1979, which we later referred to as the 'Braunschweig nights'. Each morning I drove from Hannover to Braunschweig, arriving at his house between 11 and 12 o'clock. When Gundolf came downstairs to open the door to me he was still half asleep and responded to my friendly greeting in his distinctive high, somewhat tense voice with "You know very well that I am not in a fit state to talk to anybody so early in the morning". Over breakfast he always remained silent, although this was already my lunch. After this rather strange meal, we started on a period of intense and concentrated work that lasted until supper time between 7 and 8 o'clock. Supper was followed by the second working period, which didn't end until 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning, when I had to drive back home to Hannover. Our co-worker Klischies was once rung up about 2 o'clock in the morning so that he might fetch the draft versions of diagrams to be drawn as fair copies and brought back to the house the following afternoon. It was very exhausting and stressful to put up with, and even to survive the Gundolfian working rhythm. There was a time when, having caught a chill and developed a slight fever, I pleaded with him that I might

have a short break of a few days. He looked at me witheringly and said "Friedrich, you are becoming old. You can't be ill now - remember that our Multistratigraphy paper has to be completed and sent off for publication as soon as possible".

Gundolf was an unconventional person, who had his own inimitable way of expressing things and loved to wear eccentric clothes. On excursions he often wore strange head covering, which was never really suitable for the area or for the time of year - for example, a straw hat with a broken brim in the white chalk quarries of Lägerdorf in Schleswig Holstein, or a fur hat in more southern regions.

Unusually in university life at the time, when the contact between the professor and his students was always rather distant, Gundolf often had a close, friendly relationship with his undergraduates and particularly with his research students. This closeness to his students had the effect that his own inspiration and energy carried over to his research group, so that the work in the field and in the institute was always exceptionally productive.

Even when Gundolf was difficult to deal with, as he could sometimes be, I still think of him with sympathy and respect. Many shared private and professional memories bond me to this characterful man, who often used to call me by the nickname "Fiete" in the Hamburg manner. He hated writing letters and much preferred to telephone instead. Nevertheless, on my birthday in December 1998 I was surprised and touched to receive an intensely personal note from him thanking me warmly and effusively for introducing him to the Misburg quarries near Hannover and our German "Cretazicum" some forty years before (in 1958). This field trip had awakened in him that same love of the Upper Cretaceous strata in northern Germany that I had acquired not only from my academic teacher, Professor E. Voigt, but also earlier from Gundolf's own father.

The last time I saw and spoke to Gundolf was early in 2002 in a Berlin hospital, where he was being treated for his serious illness. He knew then that the situation was hopeless but behaved with unbelievable bravery and fortitude. The memory of the time when we said goodbye to each other will always remain with me.

Friedrich Schmid

I have known Gundolf since the 1960s, when I first met him at a conference and was working at the Geological Survey in London. He decided at an early stage that my knowledge of the English Chalk could be applied to the concept of event stratigraphy that he was developing, and requested that I had a six-week leave of

absence from the Survey so that we could investigate the sections in Lower Saxony close to Braunschweig where he was than working at the Technical University. This collaboration continued when he moved in 1976 to the Free University in Berlin, where he was employed until his retirement in 1995.

Gundolf's comment to Friedrich during the 'Braunschweig nights' about there not being any time to be ill reminds me of his own remark to me when he took me skating on the frozen-over Krumme Lanke lake in Berlin one particularly cold winter: "Chris, Chris, be careful not to fall over—we need your head!" I also remember a time early in the 1980s, which I could think of as the 'Berlin nights', when we wrote two papers in three weeks; I actually passed out once from exhaustion in the middle of the night, and another night he gave me a sleeping pill at seven o'clock in the morning (it was then daylight) so that I could get some sleep before we started work again.

Gundolf never learnt how to use a computer and I never saw him type. Typing was something left to his long-suffering secretaries, who somehow managed to decipher his atrocious handwriting. His way of writing papers was to accumulate copious files of notes written in pencil on one side of sheets of scrap paper which already had other notes crossed out on the other side. Despite this rather unpromising working style, he published an amazing quantity of extremely well written and well structured papers, ranging from his early work on Cretaceous belemnites and echinoids, through his ground-breaking establishment of the concept of Cretaceous event stratigraphy, to more recent papers in which he wrestled, not always entirely successfully, with the complexities of sequence stratigraphy.

However much he was sometimes over-demanding and something of a slave-driver, I always enjoyed the friendship of this essentially kindly, charismatic and scientifically inspirational man, with his sardonic sense of humour. Deadlines meant very little to him ("There is no deadline that is so dead that there isn't one even more dead beyond it!") and he rarely took any notice of the time limits imposed on speakers at conferences. He was a workaholic, often greeting people with the question "Have you sent anything off for publication today?" Although impatient with university politics, he took his teaching very seriously and devoted a lot of time to preparing his lectures, which were always excellent and easy to understand. He never suffered fools gladly and paid little attention to students who did not come up to the high standards he demanded. On the other hand, he inspired generations of the best students to work on Cretaceous projects in Germany and elsewhere, and was always skilled at obtaining funding for their research, even though he was usually not particu-

larly punctual at preparing the obligatory final reports, leaving such chores to his researchers.

When he visited England to study our Chalk, we complimented him on his ability to drive on the left-hand side of the road so soon after arriving in the country, to which he replied that he had been practicing driving on the left in Germany for the previous three weeks! However, I think the memory of Gundolf and his handling of a car that will always remain with me was the time when, driving together from Berlin on the Autobahn only a few days before his birthday, he suffered a massive stroke and couldn't see properly. Somehow, he managed to drive the car into and alongside the central reservation in such a way that the car was hardly damaged at all, thereby miraculously preventing what could have been a devastating accident not only for us but for other drivers as well.

Although he largely recovered from the physical effects of the stroke, he had no memory of it whatsoever, or of the events immediately preceding it, while still retaining a remarkable recall of events in the distant past. He never lost the power of speech, but his eyesight was seriously affected, to such an extent that he had difficulty identifying what he was looking at. While he was in the rehabilitation hospital he seriously considered writing about his strange experiences with vision but, strangely, and to everyone's amazement, he was still able to cycle to the university, go shopping and cook for himself during the last phase of his life. Needless to say, the effective loss of his eyesight sadly brought about an abrupt end to his scientific work. When he was taken back one day to the Salzgitter-Salder Quarry, near Braunschweig, which was one of the key localities in his development of event stratigraphy, he said sadly "I am the person who should know this place best, but I recognize nothing". It was then clear to all of us that he would never again be able to enjoy the fieldwork that meant so much to him.

In the closing months of his life, Gundolf suffered from an inoperable and invasive pancreatic cancer, in addition to having to cope with the residual effects of his stroke. Despite all this, he never lost his zest for life, even in the last days when he was being cared for in a hospice in Berlin for the terminally ill, where his friends had held a small party for him. My last and saddest memory of Gundolf was saying goodbye to him in the hospice, two days after the party, knowing that I was flying back to England that afternoon and that I would never see him again.

Christopher J. Wood