

Herwig Schopper 1924 – 2025

Herwig Schopper, EPS President from 1995 to 1997, passed away at the age of 101.

Herwig Schopper passed away on 19 August at the age of 101. A brilliant scientist, manager and diplomat, he will be remembered by most for his leadership of DESY and CERN. However, in a career spanning almost 80 years, he made a lasting impact on global science that reaches far beyond particle physics in Europe.

Born on February 28, 1924, in Landskron (today Lanškroun) in a German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia, Herwig enjoyed a protected childhood. He developed his interest in science, music, and sport, and learned fluent English. Drafted into the Luftwaffe signals corps during World War II, he served mainly on the Eastern front, ensuring communications with the military headquarters. At war's end, he found himself a prisoner of the British military who, thanks to his language skills, engaged him as a translator. His friendship with an English captain facilitated his admission to Hamburg University, where he began his research career.

Starting in 1951, several sabbaticals shaped his path: in Stockholm with Lise Meitner, in Cambridge with Otto Frisch, and at Cornell with Bob Wilson. In Cambridge, he published one of the first experimental confirmations of parity violation in weak interactions, for which Lee and Yang received the Nobel Prize in 1957. At Cornell, he learned the science of electron synchrotrons, a step up in energy which established him as an experimental particle physicist.

Back in Germany, he held chairs at Erlangen, Mainz, and Karlsruhe, where he laid foundations for today's Karlsruhe Institute of Technology. He built user groups for DESY and CERN, pioneered superconducting RF studies, and new calorimetry techniques which are still used in present-day experiments.

By that time, Herwig had established a reputation not only as a brilliant physicist but also as an equally competent manager. In 1970 he joined CERN as head of the Nuclear Physics Division, only to return to Germany in 1973 to lead DESY. There, the electron-positron storage ring PETRA was



constructed under his watch and the gluon discovered in 1979.

In 1981 he became Director-General of CERN, tasked with securing approval for the Large Electron-Positron collider LEP. The construction of LEP provided ample opportunity to demonstrate his unique blend of managerial and diplomatic skills, and his ability to take unpopular decisions without dividing the community: to build the machine in a constant budget envelope, he had to shut down the Intersecting Storage Rings (ISR), world's first hadron collider; his insistence on a 27 km long tunnel, despite some controversy, paved the way for the LHC and ultimately the 2012 discovery of the Higgs boson. His leadership set out the blueprint of CERN for decades to come.

Herwig turned 65 two months after stepping down from his CERN position, but retirement was never on his mind. Instead, he started to deploy his unique skillset on an even grander scale. From 1992-94, he was President of the German Physical Society where he managed the integration of the Physical Society of the defunct German Democratic Republic, the first merger of two major scientific societies following the reunification of Germany. From 1995-97, Herwig served as President of the EPS, a term that was marked by another unpopular decision: he steered our society calmly through a tumultuous period when the seat relocated from Geneva to Mulhouse, saving our society from

an existential political and financial crisis and building a solid basis for the universal representation of European physicists which the EPS is today.

Subsequently, Herwig held important positions at UNESCO, chairing inter alia the advisory committee for the International Basic Science Programme. Most notably, he steered the creation of SESAME, the synchrotron light source in Jordan modeled on CERN. Mastering the political challenge of establishing this organisation with its most improbable constellation of Members was arguably Herwig's greatest post-retirement achievement, which will remain in the textbooks as a shining example of visionary science diplomacy. He was delighted to see his tenacity rewarded when SESAME started delivering world-class results during his lifetime.

Herwig Schopper was a rare blend of scientific and diplomatic genius, humanitarian, and gentleman. He married Ingeborg Stieler in 1949, and is survived by his children Doris and Andreas, three grandchildren, and his partner Ingrid. With his passing, science loses a unique leader whose legacy will endure. ■

■ James Gillies, Rolf Heuer and Rüdiger Voss (CERN)

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An extensive biography can be found in Open Access in: <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-51042-7>