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In Memoriam

Albert Ludwig Streckeisen **8.11.1901–29.9.1998**



To thousands of geology students and practicing geologists around the world, the name Albert Streckeisen is synonymous with the scheme for the nomenclature of rocks that he was instrumental in creating. While he has undoubtedly become one of the most-cited Swiss Earth scientists, it may come as a surprise to many that he never held a full time university position, and interesting to realize that this modest man only started the work for which he is internationally known when he was already approaching retirement. The story goes that this work started when Albert was once enjoying a cup of coffee with some colleagues including E. Wenk of Basel University after a field trip. When he expressed his frustration at the confusion created by the differences in definitions for the many rock names commonly in use and the misunderstandings this created, Wenk said, "But then, do something about it". And so he did. It became the major task of his later life and a project in which the diverse threads that had run through his life before somehow came together logically.

Albert Ludwig Streckeisen was born 8th November 1901, the youngest child of a professor of forensic medicine and an art teacher, in Basel, which always remained his true home town. He

studied Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Geography and Biology in that city, continuing in Göttingen and at ETH in Zürich, with the aim of becoming a science teacher. However, after obtaining his teacher's diploma in 1923, he embarked on a Ph.D. in Mineralogy-Petrography with Prof. M. Reinhard, entailing mapping and petrographic studies of the Flüela Group in the Silvretta nappe. Here he was the first of a group of Ph.D. students that later included P. Bearth and E. Wenk. They set up a relative sequence of events based on field relationships and textures, which has confirmed itself as the basis for the understanding of this single most important section of Precambrian crust in Switzerland. It is perhaps ironic that one of the commonest rock types in the Flüelagranitic Association is today referred to as "nameless".

After completing his Ph.D. he was offered, at the young age of 27, a professorship at the Scuola Politecnica in Bukarest, where he rapidly learned Rumanian and lectured in that language almost from the beginning. He also held a part time research position with the Rumanian Geological Survey, and he took up field mapping in Transylvania where he became fascinated with the nepheline syenite massif of Ditró. This, his first

job, and the Rumanian people meant much to him, and throughout his life he kept in touch with colleagues and friends there. But the stay was shortlived. In 1933, as the political situation in Europe became more tense, he had to return to Switzerland where a bleak job situation awaited him. Eventually he obtained a position as a district secondary school teacher in Rothrist, Aargau. From that time on, his career evolved between high schools and universities, mostly encompassing both. In 1937 he became assistant to Prof. P. Niggli at ETH Zürich, and in 1939 he moved to Bern where he became a teacher of Mathematics, Physics and Geology at the Freies Gymnasium. In Bern he married and settled down. Keen to take up university teaching again, he worked on his habilitation thesis in petrography using the material from his studies on the nepheline massif of Distro, and obtained the *venia docendi*, the "grace to teach" at the University of Bern in 1942. The public trial lecture was called "the alkaline rocks". It is somewhat strange that Bern University did at first not make use of his talents: only after in 1950 was he asked to give lecture courses. In 1954, he was appointed as part time professor, while also keeping his post at the Freies Gymnasium. He kept both jobs up to his retirement in 1971. As an associate of the Swiss Geological Commission he further took part in producing the new geological maps of the Klosters-Davos and Simplon areas. Always mindful of combining research with education, he placed Ph.D. and diploma projects in these areas and even carried out a project with two Gymnasium students. He was also an active member of the Bernese Society for the Natural Sciences, which he served as president from 1950 to 1952, and of the Swiss Society of Mineralogy and Petrology, which issues this journal, and for which he was president from 1971 to 1973. Although he abhorred dogma, he had a lifelong association with the evangelical church, for which he served on the synod for some time, and a strong interest in theological debate which he regarded highly relevant, also in relation to social and political issues such as the liberation theology of Latin America, and questions of war and peace. He was a pacifist and a member of the SCI (IVS, International Voluntary Service) since its founding after the first World War.

This internationalism, his classical background in petrography and an innate attention to detail somehow predestined him to be the initiator of a new drive to bring some order into the chaos of rock names and systematics: a fairly thankless and certainly totally unglamorous task, but one requiring not only knowledge but also great patience and diplomacy. In the mid sixties he started

his campaign for a unified classification system for plutonic rocks. As initial efforts found resonance, the IUGS subcommission on the systematics of igneous rocks was founded, and he served as its first president from 1969 to 1980. This commission reached agreement on plutonite systematics in 1972, and on volcanics in 1979. Obtaining consensus on the systematics was clearly a long and arduous effort, which could be expected as boundaries were placed in a continuum, and views and previous usages of names differed. Long arguments preceded each compromise. But Streckeisen evidently really enjoyed this wide ranging effort, conducting copious and lively correspondence in five languages on all the relevant criteria, from texture to etymology. This correspondence he carried on well into his nineties, as his opinion continued to be asked on ever more subtle matters of classification. On his ninetieth birthday, he was presented with a double triangle made of the real rock types featuring in the classification. Undaunted, he gracefully accepted the gift but immediately asked for thin sections to be made of all the constituent rock types, which had naturally been chosen with some decorative purpose in mind. He later reported that, although most types were close, only two of the triangle segments were quite correct. This did not stop him from lending the gift back to the Institute in Bern for teaching purposes.

Ultimately this work led to a number of honours: The Abraham-Gottlob-Werner Medal of the Deutsche Mineralogische Gesellschaft in 1984, the election as *Sozio Straniero* by the Academia dei Lincei in Rome in 1987, honorary memberships of the geological Society of Rumania and the Rumanian Academy in 1990 and 1991, and finally an Honorary Doctorate of Bucarest University in 1994. Most important to him was however the fact that the work had actually served its purpose. When he set out to do the nomenclature reviews, it was not to make a name for himself but because he saw a very simple and basic need, which nobody was attending to. When his work turned out to be a reference and his name became known from Zimbabwe to Greenland, there is no doubt that this pleased him, but he had not expected it nor aimed for it.

While that is his international Persona, he is fondly remembered by Bern University students and Freies Gymnasium pupils as a committed and inspiring teacher. Maybe the fact that he, who started university teaching at the age of 27 but had to wait until he was 50 before he could resume it, needed to make up for lost time, explains his superlative enthusiasm for teaching, both at high school and at university level. Not content with

the context of current textbooks, he produced his own scripts, in which all views were represented, and which he then expanded on with great clarity. He was a teacher who never talked down to students, who genuinely encouraged discussion and wanted not only to transfer knowledge and understanding, but also to highlight uncertainties, and one who did not mind admitting it when there was something he did not know. He blended his high school and university jobs so well that in neither place the students realized that half his job was somewhere else. Albert Streckeisen loved his profession. An image remains of him charging onto a train after a field trip to claim four empty seats, pack of cards in hand, to have a game of Jass on the way home.

Jan Kramers

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