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Max Furrer

1920 – 2013

Max passed away aged 92 on March 11, 2013 in Caracas, where he had his most permanent home during his long and rewarding journey through life and manifold professional positions as internationally renowned micropalaeontologist and immensely popular academic tutor in various countries, mostly in Latin America.

He was born on March 26, 1920 in Grenchen (Switzerland) as the only child of Adolf and Johanna Furrer-Vogt. His father was a teacher and mayor of Grenchen and national parliamentarian for thirty years. After primary school (1927–33) in his native Grenchen, Max attended the cantonal gymnasium in Solothurn. In 1940 he obtained his federal baccalaureat in Basel.

Between 1940 and 1948 he studied at the University of Basel. His studies and doctoral field work were often interrupted by active military service during the Second World War. Max became a student of the *Basel Flysch School* under the guidance of professor Louis Vonderschmitt. During that period advanced biostratigraphical studies of Mesozoic-Cenozoic marine deposits had become popular through the pioneering micropalaeontological research of Professor Manfred Reichel. As a result the research subject of the *Flysch group* was the genesis of the Late Cretaceous-Late Eocene Helvetic, Ultrahelvetic and Penninic «Flysch» and «Wildflysch» units in the wider area of their type localities. Max's doctoral thesis required detailed field mapping of some 25 km² of the tectonized main subalpine overthrust nappe wedged between the North Helvetic Niederhorn nappe and the adjacent Molasse foreland basin to the North. Comprehensive tectonic, litho- and biostratigraphical work was carried out, i.e. with particular empha-



sis on micropalaeontology-biostratigraphy. Max's careful observations, interpretation and painstaking micropalaeontological age determinations of matrix and of all typical manifold «exotic» blocks of the subalpine Flysch mélange s. l. remain invaluable to this day.

He took up his first job in 1949 as well site geologist and micropalaeontologist with Socony-Mobil Oil in Bogotá (Colombia). 1950, he was appointed chief of the geological laboratory of the National Iranian Oil Company and formed part of the Swiss oil explorers team from 1950–59. The team, originally set up by Arnold Heim, was headed by Augusto Gansser as of 1952. His main work was focused on the Tertiary and Mesozoic of South Iran. In addition he taught micropalaeontology at the University of Teheran.

In 1955 he entered Stanford University as temporary replacement of professor Hans E. Thalmann but already in 1956 took a new position as micropalaeontologist at the Cali-

fornia Oil Company. His first assignment was in Habana, followed by Guatemala, Guayaquil and finally in San Francisco.

In 1959, Max married Maria Luisa Tapia in Quito. From this turning point in life his family with one son, two daughters and four grand children formed the very heart and centre of his life.

During 1959–1963 a somewhat less hectic time ensued with California Research Corporation (Chevron) in La Habra (California). Yet after three years, Max changed to Dominion Oil as chief of the stratigraphic laboratory in Port-of-Spain (Trinidad). In 1965, he became the chief of the geological laboratory of Creole Petroleum Corporation (Exxon) in Caracas, where he was to spend the second half of his life, with a short interlude during 1973–1975 with Esso Production Research-European in Bordeaux. After the nationalisation of the petroleum industry on January 1, 1976 Creole became part of Petroleos de Venezuela S.A. under the new name of Lagoven S.A. Max did work as a consultant with Lagoven S.A. and Maraven S.A. until their fusion with PDVSA, interrupted only by short engagements in Ecuador as consultant to Petroecuador and professor at the Universidad Católica de Ecuador.

Max last but by no means least continued as consultant of PDVSA and her technological arm INTEVEP. He was a. o. instrumental in the installation of the micropalaeontological and petrographic center of INTEVEP at Los Teques. Even at his advanced age he visited this laboratory once a week.

Besides all his professional work, Max was also engaged during many years at the Universidad de Venezuela. He co-tutored an impressive number of diploma and doctoral theses and familiarized generations of geologists with micropalaeontology. He will always be remembered and widely esteemed by students and younger colleagues as an open hearted, committed and modest mentor.

Max was truly one of the best experts of the geology, specifically the stratigraphy and micropalaeontology of North Latin America, above all of Venezuela, Ecuador and the Caribbean. His encyclopaedic knowledge and immense experience made him one of the most respected geologists of Venezuela. In 2007 he was honoured as a «maestro de generaciones» at the «1er Simposio Venezolano de Paleontología y Bioestratigrafía» during which the Laboratorio de Petrografía y Micropaleontología of INTEVEP has been dedicated to him. This very high esteem is also reflected by Mirtha Rivero in «Heroes silenciosos» (El Universal, October 21, 2007): «Max Furrer – por su lado – es un suizo amable que por más de treinta años trabajó en la industria petrolera, cosechando amigos y alumnos, y llegando a ser uno de los más respetados y queridos micropaleontólogos de Venezuela. Cuentan que muchos de los descubrimientos de hidrocarburos que se dieron en los últimos décadas tuvieron que ver con el trabajo minucioso del viejo Max. ...A lo largo de toda su carrera, Max Furrer rechazó las oportunidades que se le presentaron para asumir altas posiciones administrativas. Nunca deseó ser importante sino ser útil.»

His life may likewise best be summed up by a comment by R. W. Walker in his «Grenchner Geschichten» about his own father: «Er war ein Grosser und zugleich ein Bescheidener».

Hanspeter Mohler, Hanspeter Luterbacher