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# Gisbert Winnewisser and Gerhard Herzberg: A Personal Perspective

Henry Horst Mantsch

National Research Council Canada, Ottawa, presently on assignment to the Department of External Affairs as Science and Technology Counsellor at the Canadian Embassy in Berlin, Friedrichstrasse 95, 10117 Berlin, Germany

This contribution to the 2003 Cologne-Bonn-Zermatt Symposium comes from a personal friend of both Gisbert Winnewisser and Gerhard Herzberg.

I first met Gerhard Herzberg in 1963 at the European Congress on Molecular Spectroscopy in Budapest, Hungary. He already was the undisputed star amongst the many distinguished participants like Sir Harold Thompson, Longuett - Higgins, Pimentel, Lippincott, Mecke, Mandelstam, Shimanouchi etc (the list of participants reads like a who is who in spectroscopy) and this fully eight years before Herzberg finally received the Nobel prize. Five years later, in 1968, I came to Ottawa as a postdoc with Norman Jones in the Division of Chemistry on Sussex Drive where my lab was only a few doors away from GH's office.

Gisbert Winnewisser and I consciously only met at the 1968/69 New Year Reception of the German Embassy in Ottawa. That evening we found out that we share many common values, and decided to meet again soon. Since my family had not yet arrived in Ottawa, Gisbert and Helga invited me to dinner next weekend. As I arrived at their apartment on the 9th floor of a High Rise Building on Saint Laurent Boulevard, Helga pointed out that their Christmas tree, though still very pretty, was extremely dry and represented a legitimate fire hazard. This was a clear Ottawa January night with temperatures well below -30C. To appease Helga, Gisbert and I dragged the tree onto the balcony and since we saw no movement on the ground, quickly jettisoned the tree over the balcony railing. We were darn lucky (also rather stupid), but this dangerous act cemented our friendship which has endured over 35 years. Later we referred to this episode as "the story of the descending Christmas tree".

At NRC, Gisbert and I worked in the same building, but in different divisions and also in different fields. Gisbert, deeply anchored in the Division of Pure Physics (later the Herzberg Institute), was building a new sub-millimetre wave spectrometer, which I saw grow under my eyes as I passed his lab on the way to my office. His colleagues, particularly John Stone, perpetually teased



**Fig. 1.** September 1985, Canadian bush. Gerhard and Monika Herzberg welcome Gisbert Winnewisser at their cottage on Lynch Lake in Quebec (end of road in the Canadian bush). In the picture (left to right): Gisbert Winnewisser, Mr. Larivière (friend of GH from the neighbouring cottage), Gerhard Herzberg, Henry Mantsch and Monika Herzberg.

Gisbert about building a "Magic Flute". Indeed, Gisbert used this magic flute to compose and to play the HSSH and  $H_2O_2$  tunes.

Gisbert and I often talked science but also about the future. After a stint at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Gisbert moved to Germany and achieved great things at the University of Cologne. I also backtracked to Europe for a few years but then returned to the NRC in Ottawa to head up the Spectroscopy Section of Norman Jones and later also that of Harold Bernstein. Since this was the Division of Chemistry we worked on large molecules, later also on gigantic biomolecules, the building blocks of life. While some of my colleagues from the Herzberg Institute felt that I had sacrificed spectroscopy on the altar of biology, Gerhard Herzberg remained inquisitive about our forays into the world of biomolecules, he was always interested to learn how far we had taken "his" spectroscopy.

The fact that I never worked in the Herzberg Institute or directly with GH, allowed it that over the last 25 years of his life a special, almost father-son-like relationship developed between us. On my way to work I picked him up every morning (usually Monika or John Johns drove him home) and I accompanied him on many of his travels, the most memorable one being a three week trip to China in the early 80s.

Although there was plenty of "shop talk", GH often felt inclined to talk about other subjects. We all know GH as a highly private and discrete person who would never, ever "gossip", especially not about his colleagues or coworkers. However, since this note is dedicated to both Gisbert and GH, I feel compelled to put on record a confession GH once made to me during the time when things did not go that well for NRC and especially with the Herzberg Institute. "I wish Gisbert would be here now, but then even when NRC had to decide on a new Director for the Herzberg Institute, I personally voted against Gisbert because I could not see myself pulling him into an administrative quagmire and destroying his brilliant scientific carrier in Germany".



**Fig. 2.** December 1994, main NRC auditorium on Sussex Drive, Ottawa. Gerhard Herzberg having a good laugh celebrating his 90th birthday and his retirement from NRC. In the picture (front row, left to right): State secretary for science, Gerhard Herzberg, Monika Herzberg, NRC president Arthur Carty and behind Monika, Paul Herzberg, Gerhard's son.

After he left Canada, Gisbert often visited NRC. Thus we kept meeting each other in Ottawa almost every year and GH and Monika always found time to invite us to their home, usually for dinner. Once, on a weekend, Gisbert and I were invited to have tea with the Herzbergs at their Lynch Lake cottage in Quebec. It was a beautiful fall day in 1985 when we arrived at the cottage. There we were met by his neighbour and friend Mr. Larivière, who solemnly announced: "Dr. Herzberg, your deck is caving in". So, GH, Gisbert and I had a quick conference about what to do, while Monika grinned on. Without much

hesitation Gisbert declared "I did build a radiotelescope on the Gornergrat high up in the Alps, I should be able to fix a deck". Well, the deck got fixed after which we indeed had our tea and later on even a canoe ride on the lake. Fortunately, my wife Amy was there to capture this anecdote on our camera.

When GH turned 65 in 1969, NRC invented a new title for him, that of "Distinguished Research Scientist" so that he could go on working, and so he did for another twenty five years. Then, in December 1994, he finally decided to "retire" and NRC gave him a big retirement party in the Sussex Auditorium to also celebrate his 90th birthday. I had the pleasure and privilege to present a non-scientific slide show entitled "This was your life, it all seems like only yesterday", which GH and Monika obviously enjoyed.

Yes, dear Gisbert, all of us who had the privilege to know GH, try to emulate him in one way or another, so in that spirit I wish you a "meaningful retirement". Enjoy!