

URSULA FRANKLIN (1921-2016)

A VERY PERSONAL MEMOIR OF AN EXTRAORDINARY WOMAN

BY MICHAEL STEINITZ



One of my first and fondest memories of Ursula is from our first meeting in 1972 when I saw the sign over her desk that said, “I am a Quaker. In case of emergency, please be quiet!” It pretty well describes Ursula’s quiet strength in the face of any difficulty. My last is of a lunch with Ursula and

my wife, Heidi, a month before Ursula died, at which her wisdom and insight shone as ever.

Ursula’s biography can be read in recent summaries in the *Globe and Mail*^[1] and *MacLean’s* magazine^[2] on the CBC^[3], and in Wikipedia^[4]. The list of honours and recognitions is long. Interestingly, she was brought to Canada by a very important Canadian institution, the Lady Davis Trust, the same organization that built the Student Union building at St. Francis Xavier University and twice provided a visiting professorship for me at the Technion in Israel.

Ursula’s life was defined and formed by experience and judgement. Her experience of discrimination and imprisonment under a fascist dictatorship in Nazi Germany shaped her lifelong opposition to oppression of any form and to militarism and war. Coming from a Jewish and Lutheran background, she gravitated to the pacifism of the Quakers. As she often said, “War is stupid.” She would have laughed at the idea of “saintliness” and her family is the first to point out that she shouldn’t be seen as a saint. She was an inspiration, a mentor, and a force for change, but it was possible to disagree with her and still have her respect. We disagreed on many things!

Ursula was a consummate rationalist and gave an inspiring commencement address at St. Francis Xavier University when she received one of her many honorary degrees. She spoke about the importance of numeracy and it led clearly to the importance of evidence-based decision-making.

Ursula’s doctorate from the Technical University of Berlin was supervised by Professor Richard Becker. Becker was also my father’s thesis supervisor. Becker helped to save my father’s life by arranging for him to give a seminar at NYU in New York City and advising him to buy a one-way ticket. (Becker also supervised the thesis of Simon Fraser University’s professor Tony Arrott at Carnegie Mellon University after the war.) When I first met Ursula we talked about the fact that my wife and my father shared the experience of having been nourished after the war by “Quakerspeisung”, the school lunches that the Quakers provided to school children in Germany who would otherwise have starved. The experience was shared, but one was from after the First World War and the other from after the Second World War. We shared the joys of our shared German language and of a certain kind of German folding kayak.

Many will recall Ursula’s inspiring talks at the CAP Congress in Toronto in 2010^[5] and at the International Conference on Women in Physics in Waterloo in 2014. One of my favourite students, wavering on the brink of changing fields after graduation, was inspired to remain in physics by meeting and hearing Ursula at ICWIP2014. For this, as for so many things, I am very grateful.

Michael Steinitz, editor of the *Canadian Journal of Physics*
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REFERENCES

1. *The Globe and Mail*, July 25, 2016.
2. *MacLean’s* Magazine July 25, 2016.
3. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ursula-franklin-dead-1.3692502>
4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ursula_Franklin
5. *Physics in Canada* 66(3): 171-173 (2010).