

In Memoriam: Ilgars Grosvalds (1927–2019)



Ilgars Grosvalds at the celebration of his 85th birthday, July 2012. Photo by I. Griņevičs.

On 4 May 2019, the chemist and science historian *Dr. sc. ing.* Ilgars Grosvalds, honorary member of the Latvian Association of the History of Science, passed away at the age of 91.

He was born on 21 July 1927 in the city of Lawrence, Massachusetts in the United States of America into the family of Ella and Janis (John) Grosvalds, a construction entrepreneur and revolutionary of the Russian 1905 Revolution. With the onset of the Great Depression at the end of the 1920s, the Grosvald family returned to their homeland Latvia. They lived in Jurmala and Ilgars studied at different schools in Riga. In 1946, he enrolled in the Faculty of Chemistry of the Latvian State University. After working and studying in Riga, he transferred to a distance learning institution in Leningrad, which in 1911 was merged with the St. Petersburg Mining University. He graduated in 1957 with a diploma of a chemist-technologist. In 1975, he defended his dissertation as a Candidate of

Technical Sciences (an academic degree in Russia) which in 1993 came to be recognized as a doctoral degree in Engineering Sciences.

The chemist and engineer Ilgars Grosvalds started his career in 1949 as a laboratory worker at the Institute of Chemistry of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic Academy of Sciences (now Latvian Academy of Sciences). To better support his family, he started work at the textile factory “Kurzemes manufaktūra” but only a week later was offered the position of a technical director of the Roman Cement Factory in Sloka, which he took as he preferred working in industry. At the cement factory he made experiments to improve the quality of cement. In 1954, together with a group of scientists, Grosvald received the Prize of the Council of Ministers of the Latvian Socialist Republic for development and production of high-quality cement. In 1957, they received the certificate establishing them as authors of the invention.

After graduating from the university, Grosvalds started work as a senior engineer at the Cement and Slate Factory, first as substitute to the head of the laboratory and later as a senior engineer (1957–1964). For many years (1970–1993) he was a senior engineer at the Faculty of Chemistry of the Riga Polytechnic Institute (since 1990, the Riga Technical University) (Grosvalds, 2013, pp. 5–13). In addition to his work at the Riga Polytechnic Institute, in 1975, Grosvalds became the co-founder and director (1975–2009) of the Latvian Museum of the History of Chemistry. The museum was established in the historical building on 4 Kronvalda Boulevard, which had been built in 1901 as the building of the Faculty of Natural Sciences of the Riga Polytechnic Institute and which housed also the Department of Chemistry until 1983. He put his heart and soul into the museum and dedicated all his spare time to this task. He searched and collected exhibits, organized lectures and exhibitions for outstanding chemists and gave guided tours. He dedicated also his final years to the museum, working in honorary function without pay. Because of his initiative, the building on 4 Kronvalda Boulevard has been included in the list of important local architectural monuments, and the museum space is also under heritage protection.

Engineer Grosvalds liked working with young people. Already during his studies and while working at the Roman Cement Factory in Sloka, he started teaching young pupils in chemistry at an evening basic school in Sloka (1952–1960). He was later a teacher of chemistry, physics, and astronomy at the Rainis 8. Evening Basic School (1960–1990) in Riga, and for many years a teacher at the Industrial Polytechnic School, which later became the State Technicum Riga (1964–1970, 1993–2009). Grosvald had good relationships with his students, despite of the

significant age difference between them, as he continued to work as a teacher until the age of 82. He was tolerant and had a positive outlook on life. He was often admired and even envied by his colleagues for the respect from his pupils and his colleagues. In addition to his extensive knowledge in chemistry and other matters, he used his own life experience to give advice to his students in everyday life problems.

Since the 1950s, Grosvalds carried out scientific research and published scientific articles. Together with some colleagues he was responsible for the conservation and restoration of Latvian architectural monuments such as the Cemetery of the Brethren, the Freedom Monument in Riga, St. Peter's Church and Riga Cathedral, and medieval castles. In 1998, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia honoured him with the title of 'Master in the Restoration Technology with Mineral Building Materials'.

Ilgars Grosvalds was interested in art, literature and history. Since 1962, he was an active member of the Latvian Association of the History of Science (until 1990, the Society of the Historians of Natural Sciences of Latvia) and acted as their secretary in 1994–2006. In 1994, he became an honorary member of the association. Grosvalds took part in many conferences of the Baltic Association of the History and Philosophy of Science in Riga, Kaunas, Vilnius, Tartu, and Tallinn. He was a member of the Latvian Union of Scientists, Latvian Chemical Society, as well as a member of the council of the national conservative party *Tēvzemei un brīvībai/LNNK*. He was a member of the editorial board of journals *Akadēmiskā Dzīve*, *Tehnikas Apskats*, the collection of journals *Baltijas zinātņu vēstures apcerējumi*, the scientific publications of the Riga Technical University, *History of Science and Higher Education* (2002–2016), and the monograph in five volumes *Augstākās tehniskās izglītības vēsture* ('History of technical university education', 2002–2017). He was also one of the authors of the mentioned monograph. The chemist Ilgars Grosvalds has authored more than 700 scientific and popular scientific publications, and is the author and co-author of 18 books (Berga & Griņevičs, 2013).

Grosvalds' work is highly merited—he is the laureate of the Paul Walden Prize and Medal (1994) for the research cycle 'The Development of Science and Technology in Latvia and in Exile'. In 2006, Grosvalds became the State Emeritus Scientist of Latvia.

Grosvalds loved books and his personal library included works on a range of different subjects. He always reminisced that he used the first money he had

earned with his brother to buy the Latvian conversational lexicon, which was published in the inter-war period. Later he regularly bought books to improve his article-writing skills and, inspired by his wife Ilona who wrote and published poems, he tried to write poems, too.

Ilgars Grosvalds, together with his wife, raised a daughter and two sons, and helped educate five grandchildren. His large family, with grandchildren and great-grandchildren, often invited him to their family festivities and the four generations made regular trips to visit the places where the family once had lived. The family of Ilgars Grosvalds often saw only the back of him, as he spent much of his time at his desk where he prepared publications. He was sitting at the same desk also on 4 May 2019 when his life ended.

The Latvian Association of Historians of Science extend their deepest condolences to the family and friends of Ilgars Grosvalds.

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