Wolfgang often visited our team in Rennes to give seminars and tutorials and participate in Ph.D. and Habilitation degree defenses as a valued committee member. On 4 April 2003, he was awarded the Doctor Honoris Causa of the University of Rennes 1 (Figure S7). This is still the most impressive and significant scientific ceremony I have ever attended, and it was wonderful to see him so happy.

At his side, I learned so much about education. He was my constant source of inspiration and my greatest supporter. I feel incredibly fortunate to have known him!

Wolfgang, wherever you are now, I truly miss my weekly phone calls with you, my eternal guide.

Eric Pottier is with the Université de Rennes, France.

Tribute to Wolfgang Boerner

Paul Rosen

There aren’t many people in this world who have the ability to convince another person to willingly and gladly take on additional duties in an already overburdened life. Wolfgang Boerner was such a person. In the later years of his life, when I came to know him well, he was a man on a mission—or, rather, a man on many missions for the betterment of the IEEE Geoscience and Remote Sensing Society (GRSS).

As an internationally known figure in polarimetric research with a vision of the future that was squarely centered on rapid societal and technical developments in Asia, Wolfgang was an active and forceful advocate to create a strong GRSS presence throughout Asia. He made countless trips, formed lasting and deep relationships with many top researchers in remote sensing, and left a network of researchers and newly formed Chapters for others to nurture and develop.

Wolfgang was instrumental in convincing me to take on some of his duties in India, which has allowed me to build my own wonderful and lasting relationships there. He was also instrumental in establishing the groundwork for the current international collaboration between NASA and the Indian Space Research Organization—although none of us, including Wolfgang, could have predicted it at the time. He led by example, with an infectious energy and sense of purpose, and he has inspired many others to “think big and deep” about our interconnected, highly remotely sensed world.

Another of Wolfgang’s missions was to promote recognition of GRSS members within the Society. He was instrumental in advocating for the recognition I have received from my peers within the GRSS, for which I am very thankful. And having also been asked to help him recognize others, I know firsthand how much energy and vision he applied to this area.

For many of us who tend to focus on the requirements of the day, Wolfgang was an essential and much needed force for connectivity and community within the GRSS. His boundless energy, technical insights, and world-wise intelligence were tremendously inspiring; but, most of all, I will remember Wolfgang as someone who cared about me as a
person. Even when he was asking for help—for slides, travel funds, reviews, recommendations, or whatever—he had a way of making it about me. He recognized that all of us in the Society are important and essential members and honored each of us with his attention, good humor, praise, and guidance.

Perhaps he knew better than most that his legacy and memory would be best secured through those of us who carry on his work. While we will miss our fond interactions with Wolfgang greatly, he is still with us in all we do (Figure S8).

Paul Rosen is with NASA/JPL, Pasadena, California.

Free Radar: Traveling with Wolfgang Boerner in Siberia

Christiane Schmullius

Wolfgang influenced my professional life in many ways. But, above all, he introduced me to various colleagues in Siberia and thus to my former husband from Lake Baikal, as well. Eventually, Wolfgang and I ended up in a series of KGB interrogations—together with an illustrious group of world-renowned radar experts. Here is my story about a scientist who believed in a world without frontiers.

Starting in 1991, I met Wolfgang many times during his frequent visits to the German Aerospace Center’s Institute for Radar Frequency Technology in Oberpfaffenhofen. We both shared a great enthusiasm for radar applications as well as for the vastness of the Siberian forests and Russian culture, with the big difference that Wolfgang had already established several contacts in radio science departments all over the former Soviet Union. He was extremely excited about the outstanding level of education in the various institutions of the Russian Academy of Science.

When the opportunity came up during the second SIR-C/X-SAR mission in October 1994 to acquire polarimetric InSAR data, I was lucky—as science team lead—to include one of the very few multifrequency PolInSAR data takes in the mission planning. This unique data take stretches along the beautiful Eastern shore of Lake Baikal in the Republic of Buryatia. The first publications on forestry mapping with PolInSAR techniques from space are a result of this endeavor, which was supported by indescribably fascinating field trips in summer and winter, where Wolfgang’s eager willingness and joy in teaching and motivating Russian colleagues—and, especially, young students and postdocs—were always extremely impressive.

His personal history as a cosmopolitan motivated him to share his view of a worldwide society with highly educated and peaceful human beings. His Russian colleagues loved Wolfgang for his academic networking, encouragement, and friendship (Figure S9). But we both underestimated Russia’s still existing observational entities and their reluctance to adopt modern mapping tools, specifically “free radar.” In 2000, when we cooperated on the deployment of corner reflectors for the SRTM DEM calibration in Buryatia, their patience ended, and our international project workshop was hijacked and “escorted” to the cells of the central FSB (former KGB) headquarter in Ulan-Ude.

Wolfgang’s scientific exchange with and support of the Russian scientists was outstanding. Hence, it was even more disappointing that, instead of honoring his truly international spirit, he was considered by the Russian officials a spy (as was I).

Radar earth observation is now thriving, and we would need Wolfgang for many more decades to teach and motivate young people across all cultures in his own special way as a universal philanthropist-scientist and nature lover, a role he lived to the fullest in his late years as crane observer—another book-filling story.

I am forever thankful for what I have learned from Wolfgang—and very happy to have met Eileen, who made Wolfgang’s life possible as it was.

Christiane Schmullius is with Friedrich-Schiller University, Jena, Germany.