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Keith McEwen & Andrew Taylor

To cite this article: Keith McEwen & Andrew Taylor (2019) Uschi Steigenberger (1951–2018), Neutron News, 30:1, 25-26, DOI: [10.1080/10448632.2019.1605797](https://doi.org/10.1080/10448632.2019.1605797)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10448632.2019.1605797>



Published online: 24 May 2019.



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Uschi Steigenberger (1951–2018)

Ursula (but always known as Uschi) Steigenberger was born in Augsburg, Germany, on 25 April 1951. She chose to study physics and mathematics at the University of Würzburg and stayed to carry out PhD research under the guidance of Michael von Ortenburg. As part of her thesis work, Uschi designed and developed a stress rig to apply uniaxial pressure to tellurium single crystals and make magneto-spectroscopic experiments.

After completing her PhD in 1980, Uschi decided she would like to spend some time abroad. Her supervisor proposed six months at the Magnet Lab of the Lebedev Institute in Moscow. Whilst the funding and various permissions were underway, she spent six months at the SNCI/MPI high-magnetic field lab in Grenoble. She enjoyed Grenoble in the summer—mountains, good food and wine—and met interesting people working at the nearby Institut Laue-Langevin (ILL).

Then on 1 December 1980, Uschi went to Moscow, staying there until the end of July 1981. It was a fascinating time. The scientific work was not very productive because of the many hurdles to obtain equipment and access to measuring facilities, but the personal experiences compensated. She visited Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) on an official visit, and then on her own (but always under the “protection” of the Soviet KGB) to Alma Aty in Kazakhstan, to Samarkand and Tashkent in Uzbekistan, and to Baku in Azerbaijan.

In the Moscow winter, the attractions of Grenoble became obvious



and Uschi successfully applied to the ILL, joining it in January 1982 and becoming responsible for the hot-source triple-axis spectrometer IN1. The challenge was to develop this spectrometer so that measurements of the spin waves in transition metals could be extended up to several hundred meV.

Many ILL colleagues were keen mountaineers, and in early July 1982, with a group led by Jean-Xavier Boucherle, she climbed Pic Coolidge (3,774 m) in the Barre des Ecrins; it was an unforgettable experience that she was proud to have completed.

Soon afterwards, she met Keith McEwen, who was also in the ILL Triple-Axis Group, and they almost immediately began a partnership that was to last all her life. They were married in Grenoble and moved to the UK in 1986. Uschi joined the new ISIS neutron source at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory and, in collaboration with Italian colleagues, was initially responsible for the construction and development of

the PRISMA spectrometer. This was a prototype crystal analyser spectrometer with 16 analyser-detectors, which was designed to measure coherent excitations on a pulsed source.

Uschi’s leadership skills meant that she was soon promoted to Group Leader of the ISIS Excitations Group. In 1994, she became the first woman Division Head at ISIS, responsible for a suite of instruments covering half of the facility’s science programme. She subsequently became Director of ISIS Operations, a key role, which she carried out with dedication for ten years, retiring as Director of ISIS in 2012. She brought her wisdom to the overall governance of RAL, including making the case to the government for funding for science, and mentoring and championing women in senior roles.

Uschi was internationally recognized: throughout her career at ISIS, she played a major role in developing international partnerships, particularly with Japan and Italy. She chaired the Scientific Council of the Helmholtz Zentrum in Berlin and was a member of the governing board of the heavy-ion institute GSI in Darmstadt. She was also a frequent member of neutron review committees in Japan, Korea and the USA. Uschi was a Fellow of the UK Institute of Physics, and an active member of its Science Board. As one of the most senior women in UK physics, she was part of the IoP’s review of women in the physics workplace, leading to the JUNO programme that addressed the underrepresentation of women in university physics departments. In December 2015, she was honored with the

award of an OBE for her leadership and achievements, particularly for supporting women in science.

Uschi shared her love of photography and travel with Keith. They made many visits to the Australian outback, and safaris to most countries in sub-Saharan Africa, with Zambia being a special favorite.

Sadly, soon after a visit to Cambodia, she was diagnosed in January 2017 with pancreatic cancer. She fought bravely, but passed away in Oxford on 12 December 2018, with her husband by her side. Uschi will be greatly missed by her family, friends and colleagues worldwide.

KEITH McEWEN
*University College London,
Didcot, UK*

ANDREW TAYLOR
*ISIS Neutron and Muon Source,
Harwell, Oxford, UK*

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