Remembering Erhard Meister

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At the end of the 1970s, big envelopes from Darmstadt filled with red preprints started to come to my address in Leningrad. Like many others in the USSR at that time, I was isolated from Western mathematicians and the arrival of every parcel symbolized a kind of personal contact for me. The envelopes were charged with sympathy. That was the beginning of my acquaintance with Erhard Meister, the head of the young Darmstadt school of applied mathematics. He and his colleagues Wendland, Speck, Costabel, Stephan, Varnhorn and others worked on the problems I was also interested in. Their papers dealt with numerical methods of solving partial differential equations, scattering theory, boundary integral equations, elliptic boundary value problems in non-smooth domains etc.

It became possible for me to accept Meister’s invitation much later during perestroika. Coming to Darmstadt for the first time in 1990, the year of his 60th birthday, I met a big, strong, energetic man, speaking enthusiastically and with a broad smile. There were no spare offices at the Department of Mathematics and he offered me a part of his own. I was seated on a sofa, with my papers on a long, low table perpendicular to Meister’s. From time to time I had to leave for the library, since he had meetings.

As a young man, Meister was very interested in the engineering sciences, but he changed his mind and studied mathematics and physics at Heidelberg. He had a unique ability to speak expertly both on topics in engineering and pure mathematics. Following the course of modern technologies and materials, he liked to discuss issues of their mathematical modeling. Some of his work dealt with rotating and vibrating blade rows, subsonic flow, dielectrical antennas, scattering of acoustic and electromagnetic waves. At that time, I was running an engineering laboratory in Leningrad and was involved in some of these topics. I spent hours listening to him and was impressed by his knowledge of both classical structural mechanics and the most recent theories of coupled fields.

Unselfishness characterised Meister’s devotion to science. He loved the science itself and not himself in the science. Always surrounded by students, he had great influence in shaping the careers of many applied mathematicians.

I saw clearly that Meister was greatly respected by his colleagues at the Department, at the Darmstadt Technical School, in Germany and beyond. That was not only because of his enormous erudition but also owing to his openness, optimism, and readiness to help. My late friend Siegfried Prössdorf told me that Meister’s role in saving the Weierstrass Institute in Berlin after the unification of
Germany was very important. My personal profound indebtedness goes to Meister for his support when I told him about my intention to leave the USSR. I keep with gratitude his strong recommendation letter for my Linköping position.

In 1991 and 1994, I invited Meister and Wendland to be plenary speakers at the Linköping Conference on Applied and Industrial Mathematics. My impressions of their visits are unforgettable. Neither missed a single talk, always making notes and bombarding every speaker with questions. The range of their knowledge seemed to be boundless and both conferences owed most of their success to their participation.

Meister was an inexhaustible source of stories, personal, professional, and historical. Some of his reminiscences were exceptionally interesting and it is a pity that they are not preserved. For example, he was an expert on R. Courant’s relations with German colleagues after World War II, the history of the Oberwolfach Institute, and the lives and works of many in the generation of his teachers.

Years passed, our relations became warmer and meetings more frequent. My first Humboldt visit to Darmstadt in 1999 was especially memorable. We made plans for joint research in crack propagation. He and I, and our wives Mila and Tanya, spent much time together. The Meisters showed us picturesque neighboring towns and invited us to their hospitable home with a collection of teddy bears which he was fond of. They were a happy couple, caring for each other. Their