

OBITUARY FOR PROFESSOR DR. GUNTER MENZ

(18.11.1956 – 9.8.2016)

Prof. Dr. Gunter Menz (Institute for Geography, University Bonn) died on August 9, 2016 surprisingly and completely unexpected following a serious accident. His sudden death tears a hole in the remote sensing and geography community. We all have lost a highly esteemed University professor, enthusiastic scientist and good friend. He leaves behind his wife and two children to whom we all share our deepest sympathy.

In June 2016, Prof. Menz organized with great success the international annual EARSeL Symposium at the Gustav-Stresemann-Institute in Bonn. Besides the Symposium, he managed to organize several workshops and the Junior Scientist Days, which will be kept in good remembrance due to the great number of young participants. Gunter was always very enthusiastic in promoting and encouraging young scientists in their career.

Gunter Menz, born 1956 in Heidenheim, studied mathematics and geography at the University in Freiburg/Germany. He had planned to become a high-school teacher and his exam thesis brought him to African, especially East-African, landscapes for the first time. However, things often turn out in a different way as originally planned. Instead of starting a teacher position, he accepted a PhD position at the University of Freiburg under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Hermann Gossmann who was a PI for the HCMM campaign (Heat Capacity Mapping Mission) in Europe. The HCMM satellite offered two spectral bands, one visible with 500 m and one thermal infrared with 600 m spatial resolution, which was at that time of the late 70s and early 80s a very good resolution in the thermal IR band offering new challenges for regional to local scale studies.

The excellent contacts between the Institute of Physical Geography (IPG) at the University of Freiburg and the Bio-Meteorological Research Unit of the German Weather Service (DWD) provided the basis for his PhD thesis, which was finalized and published in 1987 and titled "Maps of human heat stress in the Freiburg-Basel region computed from satellite data" (Freiburger Geographische Hefte 27, 1987).

Due to the fact that during that time GIS systems were not really existing or powerful enough and satellite data analysis was usually only possible by booking some working hours at the DLR in Oberpfaffenhofen (formerly named DFVLR) or the Joint Research Centre in Ispra, Gunter Menz had to design the software he needed himself. This was only possible because the IPG in Freiburg invested in its own multi-user computer infrastructure to enable to work independently from the DLR, Ispra etc. This individual software development strongly affected the work of Gunter Menz and allowed him to develop analytical tools and algorithms, which were at that time mostly unavailable to a "normal" young scientist in geography or environmental sciences.

Then his career developed were rapidly. In 1988, he accepted a post-doc position with Prof. Mathias Winiger at the Geographical Institute of the University of Bonn to help to establish a powerful remote sensing unit. He was very successful and finished his habilitation thesis in 1993 at Bonn University. His topic was to model and estimate precipitation patterns and biomass productivity in semi-arid East-African ecosystems using preferably Meteosat satellite data. The habilitation thesis was published in 1996 at Franz Steiner Publishers Stuttgart.

Following his habilitation, he started years of travel and gained manifold experiences on non-tenured professorships at various geographical institutes in Mainz and Bonn. In 1995, he became a visiting scientist at the University of California in Santa Barbara with Prof. John Estes who was a pioneer in developing applications of Earth observation data e.g. for urban applications. This visit at the University in Santa Barbara affected Gunter's work for a long time.

In 1996, he was appointed associate professor for remote sensing at the University of Jena and two years later in 1998, he accepted the appointment on the newly established chair for remote sensing at the Geographical Institute at Bonn University.

He very successfully developed the Remote Sensing Research Group (RSRG) at the Geographical Institute and was a co-founder of the inter-disciplinary Centre for Remote Sensing of Land Surfaces (ZfL), acting as its director from 2001 – 2010.

He also engaged as speaker of the remote sensing working group of the German Geographical Association and as representative of the Geographical Institute at the University of Bonn within EARSeL, the European Association of Remote Sensing Laboratories. Together with Prof. Rudi Goossens from Ghent University, he organised several workshops of the EARSeL Special Interest Group (SIG) "Developing Countries" such as the workshop of 2002 in Bonn.

His research project repeatedly brought him back to Africa from Morocco, Ghana and Benin to Kenya and Namibia. Much of his work related to topics such as land degradation, biomass etc. Mostly in connection to satellite remote sensing data analysis.

He was a very productive professor and great mentor for his students. Gunter had an exceptional ability to lead and guide graduate students, rather than direct them, in pursuit of their education and research objectives. His strength in teaching both undergraduate and graduate students was based on his thorough knowledge and competence of his scientific subject and his ability to organize and present complex materials. Many of his former students and postdocs hold positions in important German and EU institutions and will continue what they have experienced from Gunter Menz. His contribution for the future development of geographical sciences and remote sensing as well as his advice will be missed. His co-workers in Bonn lost an important mentor and supervisor and his colleagues an open-minded friend.

Prof. Gunter Menz became only 59 years of age. On November 18, 2016 when he would have normally celebrated his 60th anniversary, the Geographical Institute of the University of Bonn held a big memorial colloquium with international speakers – friends, colleagues, and companions from different periods of his life. This was an appropriate event and Gunter would have had his pleasure with this special day.

Our deepest sympathy goes out to his wife and his two children. We can hardly understand the loss, we are very sad and we all miss him.