

Remembering Ulrich Becker

Ulrich was like a brother to me. I have not yet recovered from his loss as I relied for years on his judgment, his broad spectrum of knowledge, and his genuine interest in learning more.

I remember that when I was at the end of one of our last get-togethers he asked, "Bruno, do you know Albertus Magnus?." Fortunately I had some familiarity with the contributions of Albertus (1200-1280), but Ulrich told me of one I did not know. I think it had to do with his estimate of the curvature of the Earth.

Ulrich and I collaborated closely in sustaining the Boston Forum on Energy and Global Concerns, which aimed to identify the diverse issues that have to be addressed while developing necessary and innovative sources of energy for different parts of the world. These included the preservation of the environment, the effects of energy production on climate, and the related possibility of the onset of conflicts and other world concerns, which have become most evident and pressing since Ulrich left us.

We shared a special interest in Thorium nuclear reactors and in particular for hybrid fusion-fission reactors of the kind E. Velikhov and I had proposed. As I remember, the reduction of the extravagant number of existing nuclear warheads was a recurrent concern of the Forum, as it was spearheaded by Dick Wilson of Harvard, whereas Ulrich and I were interested in relevant technological advances that could make the situation worse than that we are facing now.

Ulrich had courage; when the SPARC initiative involving results in nuclear fusion research came to light in 2018 with the open support of the office of Vice President for

Research of MIT and raising serious ethical issues, Ulrich did not hesitate to let his views be known to the President of MIT.

Ulrich and I had a special formative experience in common. We were both children during the Second World War. His father was listed as a nonsupporter of Nazism and my father was connected to the anti-fascist partisans. We did not have an easy life during that time. I remember that during the day, everyone around us in Northern Italy was constantly made aware that we could end up in the nearby Fossoli concentration camp which could lead to that of Mauthausen, and by night we were terrorized by erratic bombings of low-flying Mosquito allied airplanes. Among the war stories that Ulrich remembered and liked to tell was that of a former German soldier who had been caught in the battle of Montecassino and who returned to town before the end of the war with a broken skull warning the younger generation about the horrors he had witnessed. Gerda Becker has never forgotten seeing the bombing of Dresden from a distance.....

Speaking of Gerda, I cannot forget her generosity. I was greatly shaken by the unexpected news of Ulrich's passing, which I learned of shortly after returning from Europe, and the only thought I had was to deliver a note to Ulrich's mailbox at his home in Lexington with my wife. Gerda and her daughter spotted us, invited us in, and understanding my distress found the needed words of comfort while telling us about the last moments of Ulrich's life.