

Stefan Verne (1928 – 2016) – A tribute

Stefan was well known to most of us who worked at Wood Lane from the mid-1950s until its closure in 1987. Having completed his education in England in the years after World War 2, he joined the then Research Organisation of British Insulated Callender's Cables and for some 25 years he served in what was the Rubber and Plastics, and later Polymers, Department, firstly as a Section Leader and progressing to Head of Department in the mid-1960s. At that time the cable industry was adopting newer synthetic materials to replace traditional items such as natural rubber, paper and lead. It was a time of great expansion and enthusiasm for polymers in many industries. Even Hollywood recognised this when, in the 1967 film "The Graduate", Dustin Hoffman's prospective father-in-law said that he had just one word to say to him – "Plastics".

The R&P Department was at the forefront of such work for cables and allied products. Major examples related to polyethylene, which had grown up from its wartime role as the insulant for cables in radar equipment to be recognised as a key dielectric for the industry. Wood Lane (through Dr Black and others) had pioneered the use of radiation to make a more robust cross-linked version (XLPE). Later on a technique involving moisture and modest temperatures (Sioplas) was developed to create XLPE, and this method was extended to produce hot water pipes. In telephone cables, where the 1960s saw a significant surge in demand, polyethylene became the standard insulant and sheathing material, again with major Wood Lane input. Stefan organised and controlled much of this work, and the History of Wood Lane lists many papers on the subject written for International conferences and symposia.

Other materials came along and were exploited for more demanding and even iconic uses. The development of the Anglo-French Concorde demanded special high temperature lightweight wiring. R&P under Stefan played a major role in achieving this. Concorde is now only a museum-piece, but other major developments from that era survive. One that occupied much laboratory time, in collaboration with ICI, was a high temperature material known as PEEK which, given careful processing, could be used on wiring in very demanding environments such as deep oil and gas wells.

During Stefan's time as Head of Department there was an expansion of direct collaboration a) with individual BICC factories and businesses, b) with suppliers/ manufacturers of plastics such as ICI and BP, and c) with BICC's overseas operations. Whilst the first of these sometimes lead to clashes between the often pragmatic approach of factory staff at the sharp end, and the scientific approach at Wood Lane, many major advances were made, and survive to this day.

In the late 1970s Stefan became Deputy Research Manager with special responsibilities under John Banks (by then a Main Board Director). At that time the Polymers Department split into two – Polymer Materials and Polymer Processing. By 1982, following David Margolis's

retirement, he was Research Manager, and at closure in 1987, with Wood Lane being a legal entity as BICC Research and Engineering Limited (BREL), Stefan was one of six directors serving under Dr George Moore, being responsible for Applied Science. He remained with the company as Scientific Advisor to the whole BICC Group until December 1990, officially retiring on St Silvester's Night (New Year's Eve) after 36 years' service. This final period included liaison with academia, and also lecturing in polymer physics in the UK and many other countries.

As well as the technical side of things, Stefan kept a keen eye on the educational and career progress of his staff, and tried to ensure that opportunities for enhancement were especially based on competence and ability, which was sometimes tricky in a very male-dominated company such as BICC.

Whilst Wood Lane was perhaps a little ahead of its time in respect of what is now called multiculturalism, the fact that Stefan's accented use of the English language never left him was a gift to some of the site's more accomplished mimics. If he knew about it, and he can hardly have failed, then he never showed any anger. By comparison with the horrors of his early and teenage years, such episodes would have been of little import.

Stefan was born into a Catholic family in the Polish city of Łódź (pronounced "Woodge"). His father, like his father before him, was a chemist, and his mother had studied languages in France. His early years coincided with the rise of Nazi Germany, and all that it entailed for the people of Poland, especially its Jewish population. His education was gravely disrupted by the onset of war which saw him deported to Warsaw, where he continued his education in secret teaching groups. Had he been caught in such a group he would have been sent to a concentration camp.

He witnessed the gradual subjugation of the Jewish population until, in August 1944 he played an active part in the Warsaw Uprising, having by then joined the Polish Home Army (Armia Krajowa – or just "AK"). Although only 16 (there is a hint that he may have actually only been 15) he acted as a courier, taking important messages and information through no-man's land beyond the barricades, under sniper fire and in danger of ambush by German soldiers and dogs; also through battle-torn streets often strewn with bodies, and threading through cellars of buildings to help maintain the effort to drive the German Army back westwards. During the 63 days of the uprising he witnessed many horrific scenes, which is hardly surprising when one recalls that about 16,000 members of the Polish resistance were killed and about 6,000 badly wounded. In addition, between 150,000 and 200,000 Polish civilians died, mostly from mass executions. Approximately 25% of Warsaw's buildings were destroyed.

After the uprising Stefan, wounded and taken prisoner along with hundreds of others, was sent by cattle train to a prison camp for execution, but was pardoned and sent for hard labour. By late 1944 he was suffering from pleurisy, pneumonia and typhus which lasted 3

months and included a period of sightlessness. Eventually he was liberated as the Red Army moved westwards. Despite strong pressure to the contrary Stefan, with the help of some French officers, decided to head west. After many days, and witnessing more horrors, he reached unoccupied southern France and the city of Marseille, where he was recognised as the first soldier from the Polish Army to have made the journey, and afforded a special reception at the Polish Military Mission, which acted as a wartime embassy. He subsequently joined the Allied Forces in Italy until being demobilised from the 8th Army in Britain.

His experiences in WW2 drove much of his life outside Wood Lane, most notably via his strong distaste for antisemitism. He was a very firm and long-time supporter of the Council of Christians and Jews and, for many years, especially before the fall of the Berlin Wall, regularly drove truckloads of medical and related supplies from the UK to Poland.

He also travelled widely in Egypt, Sinai, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Greece and Italy. His special interest there was Jewish and Christian communities in the Roman Empire.

In 1957 Stefan married Christine Chappell, who also worked in the Rubber & Plastics Department. Christine pre-deceased Stefan 4 years ago. They had two daughters, Julia and Frances, and a total of five grand-children.

Stefan's daughter Frances returned to Ealing to live with him and look after him last summer, finding employment as a chemistry teacher in a local school. Stefan said this arrangement was 'like a dream'. He died at his elder daughter Julia's house in Bristol during a short visit, on Tuesday 22nd November 2016, age 88.