

Chemist and dedicated proofreader



15 August 2020

Dorothee Wegmann discovered her interest in science at the gymnasium of the Töchterschule in Zurich. In 1954, having completed her schooling, she enrolled in the Natural Sciences Department of ETH Zurich. Thus began her close attachment to the institute, which would last a lifetime – and even extend beyond it, thanks to her legacy.

In 1959, having graduated in Chemistry/Physics, she immediately began working on her doctoral thesis in the ETH Organic Chemistry Laboratory. Her chosen topic – «Study of acidbase equilibria in acetic acid». After obtaining her doctorate, Dorothee Wegmann spent several years working at the Universidad de La Laguna in Tenerife. She chose this location partly for health reasons: in Zurich, she had frequently suffered from migraine, and the island's climate proved much more congenial. But her thoughts often returned to her alma mater, and whenever she came back to Switzerland she would usually also visit the institute. It was during this period that she got to know Professor (now emeritus) Ernö Pretsch, in whose group she later spent much of her career. Pretsch assisted Dr Wegmann with the interpretation of NMR spectra produced by her colleagues in Tenerife. After the death of her father, who had served for many years as Director of the trading company Karr AG, she returned to Zurich. Here, she lived with her mother in Moussonstrasse – just a stone's throw from the main ETH building, where she would soon be employed once again at the Organic Chemistry Laboratory.

A stern, but fair, critic

Dorothee Wegmann worked part-time at the Laboratory, mainly as an administrator and proofreader. Her colleagues recall her painstaking approach – she would often burn the midnight oil, polishing texts for publication. And she assumed that others would also be working late into the night. Nothing escaped Dr Wegmann's eagle eye.

Any publication or thesis which she examined would always end up full of comments and corrections in red pen. And her corrections were not merely linguistic – as a chemist, she had no qualms about correcting inaccuracies. If necessary, she would pore over books in the library or consult English native speakers so as to ensure that no errors slipped through. In fact, she was herself a gifted linguist, fluent in Spanish, Italian, French and English. In her retirement, she also taught herself Russian.

Dedication lasting beyond retirement

Former colleagues at the Laboratory describe Dorothee Wegmann as being of a modest and solitary disposition. The person she was always closest to was her mother, whom she looked after right up to her mother's death at the age of 90. She had no family of her own and only sporadic contact with her sister in Basel. She did, however, remain in contact – by letter – with several female friends from her time in Tenerife. Even after her belated retirement in 2007, she continued to support doctoral students at the ETH Organic Chemistry Laboratory with undiminished enthusiasm and patience. Among the scientists whose doctoral thesis received the Wegmann treatment was Dr Martin Badertscher – who remains grateful to this day. He remarks: «Dorothee Wegmann lived for ETH Zurich. And she died, as she had lived, quietly and modestly».

Legacies and bequests

https://ethz-foundation.ch/en/spotlight/legacy_dorothee_wegmann/

PDF exported on 05/30/2026 22:25

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