

Walter F. Hitschfeld

1922 - 1986

Walter Hitschfeld, Professor of Meteorology at McGill University and past President of the Canadian Meteorological Society, died on May 28, 1986.

Born in 1922 in Vienna, Hitschfeld moved to England before World War II in hope of completing his schooling there. Though classified as a "refugee from Nazi oppression," he was interned and, with other youngsters, was shipped to Canada in May 1940. At an internment camp in Farnham, Quebec, he was accepted into an improvised school organized by faculty members of McGill University. He was among the group who did so well in the courses that sponsors were found for their early release. He was thus able to attend the University of Toronto, where he was awarded a bachelor's degree in Engineering Physics in 1946, the same year he became a Canadian citizen.

After working briefly as a physicist at the Defence Research Board on Ottawa, Hitschfeld entered the graduate physics program at McGill and decided early to specialize in atmospheric physics. As one of the first student members of the Stormy Weather Group, directed by Dr. J.S. Marshall, Hitschfeld made many contributions to laboratory cloud physics and the development of radar meteorology as a discipline. His Ph.D. thesis of 1950 was on the collision and coalescence of water droplets, a subject that is still at the center of cloud physics.

Dr. Hitschfeld was appointed Lecturer in physics at McGill in 1951, continued as a core member of the Stormy Weather Group, and subsequently advanced through the academic ranks. A charter member of the Department of Meteorology when it was formed in 1959, he was honored with the Canada Steamship Lines Chair in 1962, and served as Chairman of Meteorology from 1963 to 1967.

Hitschfeld made his mark in several different areas of research during this time. The work on drop coalescence was published in 1951 as a joint paper with his close friend and fellow student Kenrick Gunn. With Marshall and P.R. Wallace, he contributed to the definitive pair of papers on radar signal fluctuations in the Canadian Journal of Physics of 1953. Other landmark contributions were the studies of Alberta hailstorms with R.H. Douglas and the calculations of infrared radiative transfer with J.T. Houghton, following an extended visit at Oxford University. Three of his papers up to 1964 earned First Darton Prizes of the Royal Meteorological Society.

With his reputation established as a leading atmospheric scientist, Hitschfeld became increasingly recognized for his wisdom, diplomacy, and administrative ability. There were more and more calls for his advice and assistance, from within McGill and beyond. In 1967 he accepted the position of Vice - Dean for Physical Sciences. Universally admired for his judgement and fairness, he was chosen in 1971 to fill the newly created position of Dean of Graduate Studies and Vice - Principal (Research). In this position he was an effective advocate at the national level for science education and the need for adequate research funding.

Dr. Hitschfeld served on many national and international committees, including those of the Canadian Meteorological and Oceanographic Society, the National Research Council of Canada, the World Meteorological Organization, and the American Meteorological Society. He was Member and Chairman of the NRC Committee on Meteorology and Atmospheric Science from 1966 to 1969; President of the International Commission on Cloud Physics of the International Association of Meteorology and Atmospheric Physics from 1975 to 1984; President of the Canadian Meteorological Society in 1973-74. He was active on many editorial boards. He will be remembered for organizing the International Conference on Cloud Physics in Tallinn, Estonia, in August 1984. Fluent in German, English, and French, he was one of Canada's most effective science ambassadors.

Among many honours and awards, Dr. Hitschfeld was elected Fellow of the American Meteorological Society in 1968 and Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1978. He was awarded the Patterson Medal of the Atmospheric Environment Service in 1978.

In 1980 Dr. Hitschfeld resigned from his administrative position at McGill and took a sabbatical leave to bring himself up-to-date in cloud physics and weather modification. The time was divided between the Convective Storms Division of the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder and the Laboratoire Associe de la Meteorologie Physique, in Clermont-Ferrand. With a characteristic sense of responsibility, he had remained committed to the challenge of weather modification during the time of its vicissitudes. While helping the world to understand the severe limitations of cloud seeding, he continued to advocate the scientific pursuit of its possibilities.

Returning to McGill in 1981, and in addition to his duties in the Department of Meteorology, Dr. Hitschfeld accepted the directorship of McGill International, the campus office devoted to improving relations between the McGill community and appropriate institutions and individuals in the Third World. His efforts led to many exchanges of students and staff members and to McGill-directed research and engineering projects abroad. He probably regarded these accomplishments as just as important for the ultimate benefit of mankind as earlier contributions in atmospheric science. He resigned from this position in June 1985 and was honoured afterwards for his four years of unflagging leadership at a reception in McGill's Redpath Hall attended by more than two hundred friends and admirers.

Although Dr. Hitschfeld was battling cancer for the last year, he continued to serve McGill and the scientific community. He taught the large course in introductory meteorology in the winter term. He was active as a Trustee of the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research and a Councilor of the American Meteorological Society. His main project was to lay the groundwork for a Montreal-based, collaborative institute for mesoscale meteorology that would bring together meteorologists from the Atmospheric Environment Service, the University of Quebec, and McGill. Although the future of this project is now uncertain, the concept of the institute is a tribute to his vision and scientific leadership.

Friends of Walter Hitschfeld will remember him for his wit, wisdom, and civilized urbanity. Whether in the midst of a conversation on science, literature, or politics, or riding his little tractor at the Eastern Townships farm that he and his wife, Irma, enjoyed so much, his zest for life was compelling. Even in his final weeks he maintained a buoyant attitude and continued to thrive on intellectual excitement. A grievous loss to Canada and the world is the passing of so great a spirit. He is survived by his wife of thirty-nine years, Irma Morissette Hitschfeld, and by sons Paul and Charles, sister Annie Pucher of Vienna, and four grandchildren.