Wegner, Peter
July 27, 2017

In Memoriam: Peter Wegner, 1932-2017

It is with great sadness that we share the news that Peter Wegner, Professor Emeritus of Computer Science, passed away this morning following a brief illness. Peter came to Brown almost fifty years ago, in 1969, and we remember him with great respect not just as educator, theorist, historian, and researcher, but as one of the founding members of Brown CS.

Born in St. Petersburg to Austrian parents, Peter was present in Vienna for the terrifying days of the *Anschluss* and *Kristallnacht*, and escaped the Holocaust on the special trains known as *Kindertransports*. Graduating from Regent Street Polytechnic in London, he studied mathematics at Imperial College of London University, organizing the University of London Philosophical Study Group, which sponsored lectures by such luminaries as C.E.M. Joad, J.B.S. Haldane, and Karl Popper. This interest in philosophy continued throughout Peter's life, and philosophical analysis was a frequent component of his scientific work.

Later, at Cambridge University, Peter completed a graduate program in Numerical Analysis and Automatic Computing, also working with Professor Maurice Wilkes on the EDSAC computer, now widely seen as the first practical general-purpose stored-program electronic computer. It was during his stay at Cambridge that Peter met his future wife, the late Judith Romney, and received a Post-Graduate Diploma in Numerical Analysis and Automatic Computing at a time when there were no Master's or doctoral programs in computer science anywhere. He is believed to be one of the world's first two or three CS postgraduates.

After working at the Prudential Insurance Company, Pennsylvania State University, MIT (Wegner worked with Fernando Corbato on the Multics project, for which Corbato would later receive a Turing award), the London School of Economics, and Cornell University, Peter came to Brown in 1969, accepting a position with tenure. During his time at Brown CS, he supervised six doctoral students and taught numerous courses, particularly in the areas of programming languages, software engineering, and theoretical computer science.

Peter was the author of several books, including *Programming Languages, Information Structures, and Machine Organization*, one of the significant texts of the discipline's early history, concerned with the very nature of computing. He continued writing until his death, publishing *Interactive Computation: the New Paradigm* (with Dina Goldin and Scott A. Smolka) in 2008.

He was also the editor of the ACM Curriculum Committee's *Curriculum 1968*, which provided recommendations for CS academic programs. It was an effort more than a half-decade in the making, and its effects on computer science education are still being felt today. Peter's close involvement with the organization continued for decades: he served on multiple committees, led its Publications division, and was later named a Fellow of the ACM and given a Distinguished Service Award for "focusing the field's intellectual energy" through his commitment to research and publishing. Four years later, he received the Austrian Cross of Honor for Science and Art, 1st Class. For more than a decade, he was also one of two editors of the *Brown University Faculty Bulletin*, where he wrote on Russian literature and continued his love of philosophy with essays on Popper and Russell.

"I have always been in a position," Peter Wegner once said, "of trying to understand new ideas when they entered my life." Interviewed just a year before his death, he urged computer scientists to focus on the opportunities of the field: "Sometimes we work too hard trying to do things we can't do and neglect the things we can. In computer science we work with possibilities and hope we'll someday be able to solve them."

Brown CS sends our condolences to the entire Wegner family. Peter was a founder and a friend, and we have benefited for decades from his eagerness to contribute, his participation through questioning, and his hope of unifying bodies of knowledge. He will be greatly missed and long remembered.