OBITUARY – Heinrich Wänke (1928 – 2015)

Heinrich Wänke, the Mars and meteorite researcher, has died at the age of 87

Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Heinrich Wänke, former director of the Max Planck Institute for Chemistry, died on November 21, 2015, at the age of 87.

The nuclear physicist, who held a Ph.D., headed up the Cosmochemistry Department at the Max Planck Institute for Chemistry from 1967 to 1996. Heinrich Wänke started working at the Mainz Institute in 1953 as an assistant to Professor Friedrich Paneth (who, at the time, was the director of the Radiochemistry department).

Wänke, who was born on September 5, 1928, in Linz, Austria, studied Physics in Vienna and then obtained his Ph.D. in Nuclear Physics. His passion for meteorite research was first awoken in 1953 while he was studying in England and was something that stayed with him for the rest of his life.

To name but a few examples, the highlights of his scientific career included examining lunar rock from the Apollo 11 mission and the 1997 Mars Pathfinder mission. During the latter, an Alpha Proton X-Ray Spectrometer, developed in his department, conducted the first chemical rock analyses on Mars.

Heinrich Wänke’s research gained wide international recognition and was honored with prizes and awards. Up until he retired in 1996, Heinrich Wänke maintained an extensive collection of 1,900 meteorites from all continents. After the Cosmochemistry Department closed in 2005, his collection was handed over to the Senckenberg Research Institute in Frankfurt on permanent loan.

The Institute mourns the loss of an excellent scientist and an outstanding individual.
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