

OBITUARY Georges ALFF (1946 – 2022)

Francis Massen with the help Roger Meyrath



Georges passed away on the 11th of May 2022, after a 7-year-long struggle for life. He was not only a good friend, a contributor to the Computarium and to meteoLCD, but also one of the small group of Luxembourg pioneers who in the 70s and early 80s tried to introduce computing in our Luxembourg secondary schools.

Georges had a very busy professional life, so the following lines give just a glimpse into his work.

After his secondary studies at the Lycée Classique d'Echternach (Luxembourg), Georges went to the Université de Liège (ULg) in Belgium to study what was called "ingénieur civil". ULg was known as a very demanding university, seen with the ETHZ (Zürich) as among the top universities for technical and scientific studies. Georges chose

to specialise in electronics ("ingénieur civil électronicien"), with an additional curriculum in "informatique" ("computing" in the English-speaking world). Many of the Luxembourg engineers from ULg went to work at the Luxembourg steelworks, but Georges chose to become a teacher in Luxembourg's technical lycées and started his "stage" (internship) to become a "professeur-ingénieur" in 1973 at the LTAM (Lycée Technique des Arts et Métiers) in Luxembourg-City. Later on he became a collaborator of the head of that lycée.

The LTAM was the first Luxembourg school to have a minicomputer in 1973. This HP-2100A was rented thanks to the tenacity of Jos Lahr, another professeur-ingénieur, who started to teach Fortran programming at the IST (Institut Supérieur de Technologie) to his students and Luxembourg teachers who were interested in computing; I was one among them.

Several lycées now began extra-curriculum courses for their students (as I did from 1974 on with BASIC programming at the LCD). But all these endeavours grew somewhat chaotically, and there was a dire need to put them into a structured countrywide ensemble. A national commission for the computing curriculum named CNPI (Commission Nationale pour les Programmes d'Informatique) was created in 1982, and Georges was one of the first members. Together with Roger Meyrath and others he started teaching in computing, mostly an introduction in algorithmics and BASIC programming, using the VICTOR computers of the Centre Universitaire (which was the university-level precursor of the much later created Université de Luxembourg).

In 1983 a couple of lycées were equipped with one or two BBC microcomputers, and shortly after this received up to a dozen BBC model B microcomputers to start in 1985 full-class computing

teaching. The decision-making for the BBC microcomputers was strenuous, but at the time these microcomputers had successfully worked in the UK educational system, what was not the case with the IBM PC's mostly found among the administrative people.

1985 was the year where the "Nouvelles Technologies de l'Information" (NTI) were officially introduced in the curricula, and Georges became the president of the CNPI, the group who defined the computing curricula. Georges remained president up to 1994.

In 1986 the Ministry of Education decided to invest 6 million LUF into the computing equipment of the lycées, and Georges was mandated to manage that money. For a short time, the ancillary equipment and the consumables were distributed by the Centre Universitaire (Jean-Claude Asselborn, Fernand Reinig), but shortly after, Georges became the manager of this equipment. He had a bureau at the LTAM, with a large number of cabinets where software, disks and much ancillary equipment was stored. I remember with great pleasure many visits I made there, often together with my colleague Jean Mootz. Sure, we always had wishes, but Georges as a conscious administrator needed good persuasive arguments before we could leave with Eproms, floppy drives and disks, cables, software or other equipment to keep our computing material in shape. Georges was a man with a very dry humour, and he clearly saw through our "diplomacy" to receive what we thought was an absolute necessity, but what could sometimes be seen as "nice to have".

The following years, and especially the end of the 80s, the 90s and the start of the 20s see Georges tackling an ever-increasing number of tasks, many of them considered today as a full man's job.

In 1987 Georges is given the task by Minister Fernand Boden to supervise and coordinate the introduction of new technologies (i.e. computing) in all secondary schools, and to prepare the launch of RESTENA, the computing network of the National Education. RESTENA means RESeau Téléinformatique de l'Éducation NAtionale) and was planned as an overarching structure coordinating network facilities and interconnection of all educational computers and/or networks, as well as hosting common web servers. Later on, RESTENA became the official manager of the Internet domain .LU, of many international high-speed research nets and the host of many official research computer nets. RESTENA became operational in the spring of 1990, when an international colloquy on computing in schools was organised in Luxembourg. George also became a member of the SCRIPT of the Ministry of Education; SCRIPT was created to issue guidelines on curriculae and on technical infrastructure in the Luxembourg educational "universe".

At each secondary school, a teacher had to be found to become the local computing manager, called "correspondant informatique". Georges became president of that group, which had 22 members in 1991. I was one of these, and have good memories from the multiple meetings, where often really nasty practical problems had to be solved; coming to a consensus demanded clever psychology and diplomacy, and Georges in his calm manner was usually able to guide the sometimes furious and flamboyant debates to a working solution. At the beginning of 1990, Georges was involved in the creation of a computer science section at the LTAM in the division of technician training.

In 1990 he is nominated director of the agency EUROTECNET-Luxembourg, which was responsible for promoting technological

innovation in vocational, initial and continuing training in order to integrate a European dimension into the corresponding curricula. At that time he had to manage computing budgets of all the Luxembourg lycées; technical lycées had just started a process of changing the teaching system to a more modular structure and their demand for computer equipment was increasing. There was no real organisational structure for this; but in 1993 the CTE ("Centre de Technologie de l'Éducation") was created, and Georges became the director of this institution in 1998, keeping that function until his retirement in 2011. Meanwhile the Ministry of Education had received its own administrative computer systems, and Georges was named director of the IT department in 1995. One of his jobs was to bridge the computing work at the ministry with the CIE ("Centre Informatique de l'État"), which was the overarching computing structure of the Luxembourg government and its administrations (the legal structure of the CIE was set up in 1974).

Just to show the volume of equipment which was introduced during Georges' schedule, look at these numbers that correspond to the time span 1982-2011: more than 20000 computers + miscellaneous material as servers, beamers, printers, plotters, switches, routers, etc. were bought and installed. The large scale buying was defined by public tenders, which later on had to be launched EU-wide and demanded strict adherence to legal rules. Paul Seiwerath, the head of the Ministry of Education's financial department, usually managed the opening of these tenders in an open session. Georges was the "chief" of a small group of people who defined these tenders, wrote the "cahier des charges" (specifications) and chose among the bidders. Roger Meyrath and I were members, and here also, Georges had a

difficult job to separate the good from the chaff, as normally many companies were eager to make an offer, but not all could be relied on for subsequent maintenance or warranty.

As for RESTENA, which status changed into a foundation, Georges was vice-president of the board of administrators from 2000 to 2010, and president of that board from 2010 to 2015.

Sadly, I have to conclude this obituary with the years 2015 to 2022, which put a terrible burden on Georges and his family. Georges was struck down by an aneurysm in 2015, which his normal practitioner did not see developing, despite Georges' frequent complains on chest pain. He was carried in a life-threatening state to the hospital, where the cardiac surgeons worked nearly 10 hours to keeping him alive. But alas, due to this, he had a near-fatal brain stroke. A year-long rehab was more or less effective, as Georges was again able to walk. Talking had improved, and he remained interested and curious. But again the fate was against him. After a stay in the hospital for a banality, he fell and suffered a fractured pelvis. The consequence of that new operation was fatal: the side effects of his first stroke became more and more serious, and Georges could not leave his wheelchair anymore. His family, especially his wife Jeanny, his daughter Diane and his son Tom cared lovingly for him, and were aided by several caring organisations. Sadly, his body could not manage all these increasing health problems anymore, and he passed away Wednesday, on the 11th of May 2022.

Georges will be remembered by many friends. Without his help, our meteorological station (<https://meteo.lcd.lu>) would not have been able to continue the difficult atmospheric gas measurements for many

years. As for the Computarium (<https://computarium.lcd.lu>) Georges was not only a contributor, but a big help allowing us to continue that endeavour. Mostly of all, he was an excellent, reliable friend for many, many years, and we all miss him deeply. I hope that his family will find some consolation in sharing the grief with his many comrades, friends and former collaborators!



2004, from left to right: Georges Alff (+), Jean Mootz (+), Roger Meyrath



2005, from left to right: Nico Beckerich, Georges Alff (+),
Jean-Claude Asselborn (+), Jean Mootz (+)

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