Jean Jacques “Jacky” Peters

On January 22, 2012 we lost a friend, a colleague, a great professional with a constant and real passion for river hydraulics and a vocation to transfer his knowledge, and his passion to younger generations: Jean Jacques 'Jacky' Peters passed away. Jacky was a great engineer, he was a civil engineer but he belonged to the ‘chosen few’ who intuitively understand “how the water flows”, while knowing perfectly hydraulics, its hypotheses, its theories and its laws and also history. From this point of view he was an exception because he was not only able to say “no, I disagree with the results of this world-wide recognised and most elaborate numerical simulation model, because water in this estuary does not flow in this way and the sediments do not behave that way”. He was able to fight using all his knowledge of hydraulics to prove his point of view, often in extremely important situations when the decisions involved money, politics, and the environment. And he knew laboratories, modelling and models too but he was a man of the field. He started with the Congo River as an expert in hydrography and navigation, working for the Belgian Administration for Cooperation and Development and carried out between 1968 and 1992 some 35 missions for the IDA (World Bank), for Engineering consultants and dredging companies. His last mission there was in 2010! The Congo River was his 1:1 scale research laboratory or, one may daresay, playground. It was there that he developed his a method to predict the morphological channel changes in the complex channel and sandbar system and to steer, on the basis of these predictions, the evolution of the river morphology through dredging and deposition operations. The last application of the method is the Western Scheldt project (currently in progress, for dredging the Antwerp harbour approach waterway). His most important idea that he laid foundations for (against particularisms and ivory tower-like attitudes) is that in hydraulics, when powerful forces of nature are involved, there is no single approach to study and implement complex engineering projects. An ensemble of field surveys and measurements, in-situ experiments, scale models, numerical simulation models, under the leadership and coordination of engineering intuition-expertise, should be used in order to define ways and means that enable difficulties, if not disasters, to be avoided. And the understanding of the physics, together with a knowledge of the possibilities offered by all these tools are essential to propose the actions and politics of implementation. And this was precisely his professional profile. A civil engineer from the Université Libre de Bruxelles 1964, he started his career at the State Hydraulics Laboratory in Antwerp on sediment issues in the Western Scheldt estuary. From 1968 to 1988 he was deeply involved in studies of improvement by dredging of the maritime access channel of the Congo River. He developed In 1978 he set up the Walloon section of the Hydraulics Laboratory in Châtelet and became the director of this laboratory. In 1991 he left administration to start up a new career as an international consulting engineer. He specialised in sediment transport and the morphology of rivers and coastal areas and in finding the responses of these natural systems to human interventions. His working area was the morphological management of rivers and river basins in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe. He worked mainly as consultant on large hydraulic management projects (water basins, river and lakes, flood mitigation plans, harbours and navigability, etc.). He participated in projects and studies concerning most of the large rivers and lakes in the world, including the Amazon and the Orinoco and their tributaries, the Lake Titicaca basin, the Grijalva and Balsas Rivers, the Congo and Senegal Rivers, the Brahmaputra, Ganges and Meghna Rivers, La Meuse, La Loire, and the Danube; and also on the Var and the Vilaine in France and the Scheldt in Belgium and in Netherlands. His clients were international institutions (such as the EU Commission, the WMO and UNESCO, the World Bank, the Danube Commission), and governmental administrations in France, Mexico, Bolivia, The Netherlands and Belgium, and the private sector. He was involved in a number of studies and expertises aiming to help citizen associations set up to protect their rivers. He headed the Port of Antwerp Expert Team (PAET) composed of independent experts and set up to advise on the feasibility of deepening of the Western Scheldt access to the harbour.

But this was only one aspect of his activity. The second one was teaching. Teaching and transfer of knowledge and of professional pride, interest and ethics to younger generations was his second life-passion. He retired in 2007 as Honorary Professor from both institutions, at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and the Université Catholique de Louvain, where he was teaching to the end. He was
teaching for limited periods of time, every year, at various places and countries. Here again, the list of places where he taught students and engineers during special courses, teaching assignments, summer schools covers all parts of the planet. In February 2011, already seriously ill, he came as in every previous year to Nice in order to guide HydroEurope EU project students along the Var River and explain to them the river morphology and behaviour as well as engineering actions and the human errors involved.

Then, there was a third aspect, the hydraulics engineering profession. Jacky was, in spite of all other occupations, devoted to national and international organisations. He felt that it is our duty to maintain the links of professional communities, links created in the past through our associations and organisations which are also professional representatives within “civil society”. He was an active member of academic and professional organisations, including the CEDA, the PIANC and the IAHR (he founded and was first Chairman of the European Regional Division) and the KAOW-ARSOM.

His input to the IAHR activities was one of great importance: he was an active member of the Fluvial Hydraulics Section Committee, had been the Chairman of the Section on Hydraulic Instrumentation, and created the European Regional IAHR Division for which he acted as first Chairman (1999-2003). He wrote more than 80 reports and monographs and about 30 papers in International Publications and Congresses but his illness did not allow him to put his enormous experience and vast knowledge together in one work.

Besides and within his professional engagements he was faithful to the spirit, ethics and principles of the Age of Enlightenment (l’Âge des Lumières, Aufklärung): universality of tolerance, understanding, search for truth, equality, freedom of thought. All those who had the chance to work with Jacky Peters deeply regret his passing.

The last word is to answer the question how could he do all this? And fight a terrible illness while carrying on as much as possible with his professional life? One certain reason is that he had continuous support and active help and cooperation in all his endeavours and activities from Monique Verlinden, his life companion whom he left behind and to whom, as to his children, goes our deepest sympathy.