

# Peter Gergely

*February 12, 1936 — August 25, 1995*

Peter Gergely, Professor of Structural Engineering in the School of Civil and Environmental Engineering, died at his residence on August 25, 1995, after a long and courageous battle against cancer. Peter was born in Budapest, Hungary, on February 12, 1936, a son of the late Maria and Istvan Gergely. He grew up there and entered the Technical University of Budapest in 1954. He was a freedom fighter during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, and left Hungary on New Year's eve, 1956, to come to North America. He soon became a student at McGill University, where he completed an undergraduate degree in civil engineering (Applied Mechanics Honors) in 1960. He then entered graduate study in structural engineering at the University of Illinois. Immediately after receiving his Ph.D. degree in 1963, Dr. Gergely began his distinguished 32-year career at Cornell University. He held two prominent leadership positions at Cornell—Chairman of the Department of Structural Engineering (1983-88) and Director of the School of Civil and Environmental Engineering (1985-88).

Peter Gergely had an exceptional zest for life and a strong interest in science and the arts. He often spoke about his early school years in Budapest and how lucky he was to have had wonderful, inspirational teachers, especially in mathematics and literature. In his personal writings he stated:

*These giants taught us the joys of learning and infused into us a thirst for knowledge. They were noble, conscientious, and tireless teachers and educators. They implanted into us the germs of talent, which we otherwise were not blessed with, and also self-confidence.*

Surely these early experiences with great teachers had much to do with his own superb ability to teach and to inspire students to reach for the stars and to achieve their very best, not only while at Cornell but also after they launched their engineering or business careers. He set a very high example for his students; those who came to know him soon understood the nature and depth of his personal qualities—rigor, innovation, integrity, professionalism, and a continual quest for excellence.

He was instrumental in the training and development of thousands of young engineers through his inspired teaching and advising of undergraduates and graduate students. He consistently ranked in the top group of Cornell Engineering faculty, and in 1995, he received a Dean's Prize for Excellence in Teaching. He will be remembered by his many students for his constant examples of technical and professional excellence and for his strong support of student activities. His legacy is captured in the following quote from a letter sent to Peter by 17 engineers (16 with

Cornell CEE degrees) from the firm of Leslie E. Robertson Consulting Engineers in New York City: “There is no way that we can sufficiently thank you for that which you have so freely given to us. Our only form of payment to you is to do our very best, intrepidly, to use the skills and wisdom that you have bestowed upon us in creating beautiful buildings and structures and to otherwise contribute to the world around us.”

Peter co-authored a three-volume undergraduate textbook series published by John Wiley in the 1970s, and his notes for a book on structural dynamics and earthquake engineering have become widely recognized and used all over the world. Peter Gergely made major contributions to a wide variety of structural engineering problems, ranging from design procedures that have been adopted by national building codes to complex seismic analyses and consulting work on numerous nuclear reactor facilities and other structures.

His research led to many important advances in understanding the mechanics of reinforced and prestressed concrete, with strong emphasis on using research results to improve building codes. He also made pioneering contributions in structural dynamics, earthquake engineering, and earthquake hazard mitigation, particularly for structures and facilities built in regions of moderate seismicity. He was one of the founders and leaders of the National Center for Earthquake Engineering Research. He played key roles in developing new seismic provisions for eastern states and in working with national agencies in developing new and improved seismic design philosophies and codes. He reported his research in more than 100 technical papers.

Peter Gergely was exceptionally generous in volunteering his time and talents to professional societies and groups, including the American Concrete Institute, the American Society of Civil Engineers, the International Association for Bridge and Structural Engineering, the International Committee on Tall Buildings, the National Research Council, the Transportation Research Board, the Applied Technology Council, the Building Seismic Safety Commission, and the National Committee on Property Insurance. He was an enthusiastic and valued participant in each of these important professional groups and his many contributions and ability to make meetings enjoyable will be sorely missed by his engineering colleagues around the world.

Peter also participated fully in the life of Cornell University. He was a valued member of numerous committees at the school, college, and university levels. He was one of those rare faculty members who “always showed up” at all school and college events, be they faculty gatherings, student activities, or alumni events.

In recognition of his outstanding contributions to the advancement of the understanding of concrete structures under severe static and dynamic loadings, and for applying these advancements to design and to design codes,

Peter Gergely was honored with numerous national and international awards, including co-recipient of the State of the Art of Civil Engineering Prize (ASCE, 1974) and the Raymond C. Reese Research Prize (ASCE, 1976); election to Fellow of ACI (1974); Delmar Bloem Distinguished Service Award (ACI, 1981); and co-recipient of Wason Award for Most Meritorious Paper (ACI, 1993) and Structural Research Award (ACI, 1994). Of all his honors, the one that meant the most to him was the Honorary Doctorate he received in 1992 from his beloved alma mater, the Technical University of Budapest, given “for his outstanding international activities in advancing the development of his profession of mechanics and reinforced concrete.” Cornell University honored Peter with the Gergely Symposium in August 1995, which was attended by colleagues and friends from around the world.

Peter had a life-long dedication to his beloved native Hungary, and returned there for visits on many occasions. His automobile license plate was H-56, selected to serve as a constant reminder of the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian revolution in 1956. He delighted in telling stories about Hungarians and was particularly fond of the definition of a Hungarian as someone who can go into a revolving door behind you and come out in front. And, as he said in his honorary doctorate acceptance speech in 1992:

*The 1956 Revolution obliged and inspired us. We were representatives in foreign lands. We had to succeed and could not fail and could not abandon the ideals of the nation. We have had to keep up the momentum.*

This same love for Hungary extended to his feelings about the United States. He was a strong champion for free enterprise and for the American way of life.

Peter was a great lover of classical music and the arts, and an avid chess player who often spent his lunch hours at Cornell playing chess with other faculty and students. He had a wonderfully dry sense of humor and was particularly fond of telling lawyer jokes, sometimes almost too fond considering that many of his students had lawyers in their families.

Peter’s family meant so very much to him—he was a dedicated and proud husband, father, and grandfather. He married Kinga Mecs in 1964 and they had two children: a son, Zoltan; and a daughter, Ilia. Ilia and her husband, David Burbank of Ithaca, have one son, Istvan, who was Peter’s pride and joy. Kinga was Peter’s constant source of strength and inspiration, particularly during the final year of his life, when he struggled so valiantly against overwhelming odds. Peter and Kinga never wavered, even in the face of great difficulties, and their ability to face life with exceptional levels of grace, courage and dignity provided a lesson to all who knew them.

Peter Gergely always gave his best, he lived life to the fullest, he made a difference, and we have been blessed to share in the life of this remarkable individual.

*John F. Abel, William McGuire, Richard N. White*