Michael Peech, born and raised on the Canadian prairie, died in Ithaca, New York, after a long and distinguished career at Cornell University. After completing his primary and secondary education, he enrolled in the University of Saskatchewan, from which he received his B.S.A. degree in agricultural chemistry in 1930. He then began his graduate studies at Ohio State University under the direction of Professor Richard Bradfield and completed his Ph.D. degree in 1933. He began his professional career as assistant chemist at the University of Idaho. After three years he became soil chemist at the Florida Citrus Experiment Station at Lake Alfred. Meanwhile, Richard Bradfield, his mentor at Ohio State, became head of Cornell’s Department of Agronomy, and in 1941 invited his former student to Ithaca as professor of soil chemistry, where he completed his professional career. He became professor emeritus in 1974 and remained in Ithaca until his death.

A classical inorganic chemist, Professor Peech brought basic insights, patience, and rigor to the demanding problems of soil science, beginning with efforts to develop and verify sound analytical methods with which to estimate the specific needs of farmers’ fields for lime and fertilizers. Possibly his best known and most widely distributed paper, “Rapid Microchemical Soil Tests,” was a classic that set standards for soils laboratories throughout the world.

Professor Peech was active in a revival of studies of adsorption and exchange reactions at the surfaces of soil particles, including poorly organized alumina-silicates. He studied the behavior of very slightly soluble compounds in plant nutrition. In the fifties, efforts to measure specific ion activities in soil solutions using selective ion electrodes fostered controversies that involved all the leading soil chemists of the day, including Professor Peech.

In the meantime, along with Professor Bradfield, he maintained an abiding interest in the chemistry of soil acidity. He and his colleagues concluded that soil pH was not responsible for the deleterious effects of acid soils on plant growth, but that high concentrations of aluminum in soils were responsible. The result was a series of papers on the chemistry of aluminum in soils, done with the customary care that characterized the work of Professor Peech. Late in his career he became interested in the differences in behavior of highly weathered soils of the tropics and less weathered soils of temperate regions. The result was a paper leading to new understanding of the electrochemical nature of clay minerals, including fixed and variable electrical charge density associated with their surfaces. This and other studies completed within the last year before his retirement capped a career of continuous achievement.
Professor Peech was a teacher of remarkable talent. He was well-known for the lucidity of his prepared lectures. Students from many departments and countries came to enroll in his soil chemistry course. He served as major professor to 55 students during his tenure at Cornell. His seminars and professional papers were exceedingly well received. At the same time, in informal discussions, he was celebrated for the mercurial excursions of his brilliant mind. His colleagues and his students were hard-pressed to keep pace with him as he debated the issue at hand, making points and counterpoints with astonishing rapidity.

Membership in professional societies included the American Chemical Society, the American Society of Agronomy, and the Soil Science Society of America. He served on many important committees of these societies, and early in his career, he served as president of the Soil Science Society of Florida. Many honors came to Professor Peech, including a Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, Fellow of the American Society of Agronomy, the American Society of Agronomy Soil Science Achievement Award, and the New York Farmers’ Award for Outstanding Achievement in Agriculture.

Professor Peech became a naturalized citizen of the United States in 1937. He was preceded in death by his wife, Sonia, and his son, John. His daughter, Marjorie, survives. In an academic community, where individualism is the norm, Michael Peech will always be remembered by those whose lives he touched.

Murray B. McBride, Robert D. Miller, Douglas J. Lathwell