Herman Feshbach 1917–2000

Renowned nuclear physicist Herman Feshbach died on 22 December in Cambridge, Massachusetts, aged 83. He served on MIT's physics faculty for more than 50 years and was department chairman for 10 years from 1973. He also directed the MIT Center for Theoretical Physics (which he helped to create) from 1967 to 1973.

Feshbach won many awards, including the US National Medal of Science in 1986. He notably worked to open communications between western and Soviet scientists during the height of the Cold War and he championed the cause of "refuseniks", including Andrei Sakharov.

A native of New York, Feshbach received his BSc from the City College of New York in 1937 and then moved to MIT for graduate study, subsequently remaining there for his entire career. He received his PhD in 1942, became assistant professor in 1945, associate professor in 1947 and full professor in 1955, and he was named an Institute Professor in 1983. He retired in 1987.

Feshbach was one of the world's foremost nuclear theoreticians. He was one of the leaders in developing nuclear reaction theory, and he contributed significantly to the statistical description of nuclear states and reactions, as well as furthering the understanding of nuclear structure. He co-authored two seminal textbooks: Methods of Theoretical Physics (1953) with Phillip M Morse and Theoretical Nuclear Physics with Amos deShalit.

Feshbach was a member of the US National Academy of Sciences from 1969 and he headed the physics section of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1987. He was president of the American Physical Society from 1980 to 1981 and of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences from 1982 to 1986. He served on several government and professional committees and was a consultant to the Brookhaven, Los Alamos and Argonne National Laboratories, as well as the Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory. He was also editor of Annals of Physics.

MIT recently established the Herman Feshbach Chair, the first incumbent being distinguished theoretician Frank Wilczek.