Alexis Pappas, an early pioneer and acknowledged giant of nuclear chemistry for over half a century, died peacefully in his Oslo home on 12 February. He was the Norwegian delegate to CERN Council from 1968 to 1983, and vice president in 1976–1978.

Alexis Constantin Georg Pappas was born in London of exiled Greek parents before the family moved to Norway shortly after the end of the First World War. He studied natural science at the University of Oslo, where he did his graduation work on uranium radiochemistry under Ellen Gleditsch. She was a pioneer in the field, having worked with the Curies in Paris for five years around 1910, and remained a personal friend of Marie Curie. These contacts allowed Pappas as a young graduate to visit the Institut de Radium and the Collège de France to study with leaders such as M Haïssinsky, Frédéric Joliot and Irène Joliot-Curie. He then went on to the US to join the group headed by C D Coryell at the Laboratory of Nuclear Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His doctoral work on radiochemical studies of fission yields placed Pappas at the forefront of a fast growing field.

After returning to Norway and establishing a nuclear chemistry group at the University of Oslo, Pappas was appointed to a chair in radioisotope chemistry, which in 1962 was transformed into a permanent chair in nuclear chemistry, the first in a Scandinavian country. He remained in office until retirement in 1985.

Because of his unique expertise Pappas was frequently called upon to be a consultant for or member of governmental advisory boards in matters of ionizing radiation and nuclear safety. He supervised a 15-year long project in the 1950s and 1960s, studying the uptake of radioactive strontium in people and grain from fallout after the testing of Soviet nuclear devices in the Arctic.

Pappas' involvement with the "embryonic CERN" started very early. Experiments on spallation and fission were performed with the new 170 MeV Uppsala synchrocyclotron, in a fruitful collaboration with the Gustaf Werner Institute involving the Swedish chemist G Rudstam and A Kjelberg, Pappas' first graduate student. In 1953 Niels Bohr, on the behalf of the CERN Theoretical Study Group then located in Copenhagen, wrote to Pappas inviting him to join the group as consultant. This arrangement continued until 1957. It was therefore logical that the director of the CERN Synchrocyclotron (SC), Wolfgang Gentner, asked Pappas to help build up CERN's nuclear-chemistry laboratory and to extend the research that had started in Uppsala to higher energies. The laboratory was ready in 1958 with Rudstam as its first leader.

An important extension to the experimental facility came 10 years later with ISOLDE, the online isotope separator at the 600 MeV SC. Again Pappas was active in the planning stage, notably together with Rudstam, G Andersson from Gothenburg, R Bernas from Orsay and K O Nielsen from Aarhus. When the future of the aging SC was hotly debated in the early 1970s, and the question was raised in the Scientific Policy Committee whether CERN should concentrate on high-energy physics and exclude medium- and low-energy physics from its activities, Pappas was among those in the Council and the Finance Committee who most strongly advocated that CERN must maintain a broad scientific programme to serve the needs of a large body of users in the Member States. In later life he enjoyed following the extraordinary success of ISOLDE, which is now by far the longest-lasting experiment at CERN.

Alexis Pappas – Aleco among friends and colleagues – was a kind person, always positive and in good spirits despite an often-fragile health. He was an excellent lecturer and good communicator of popular science. He leaves behind a legacy of more than a hundred graduates in nuclear chemistry, of whom quite a few have gone on to spend part of their later careers at CERN. He will be missed very much by all those who learnt to know him, and he will be remembered for all his engagements in the science he loved.

His students, colleagues and friends.