Karl Strauch 1922–2000

Karl Strauch, experimental high-energy physicist and Professor Emeritus at Harvard, died in Boston on 3 January at the age of 77 years. His death ended a 15-year struggle with Parkinson’s disease.

Strauch’s early research at Harvard’s Cyclotron was on proton–nucleus scattering. Later, at Brookhaven’s Cosmotron, he discovered the decay of the eta into two photons. In the early 1970s, as director of the Cambridge Electron Accelerator, he led experiments that produced tantalizing evidence for an additional degree of freedom, suggesting the existence of heavier quarks. His most recent research was carried out in major colliding beam experiments at CERN (L3), SLAC (Crystal Ball) and DESY (Crystal Ball).

Strauch wrote more than 145 scientific papers and served on various national and international committees and commissions, including the Commission on Particles and Fields of the International Union of Pure and Applied Physics, and the US–USSR Joint Coordinating Committee on Fundamental Properties of Matter. The latter was the chief conduit between the US and Soviet scientific communities during the height of the Cold War.

Strauch was born on 4 October 1922 in Giessen, Germany. His family was exiled in the mid-1930s for advocating democratic principles, and took up residence in Paris, where Strauch earned his Baccalaureate. In 1939 the family moved to California, where Strauch studied chemistry at Berkeley. After serving in the US Navy, he earned a PhD in Physics at Berkeley in 1950.

In 1950 Strauch was elected to Harvard’s Society of Fellows, and he was appointed assistant professor three years later. He rose to become the George Vasmer Leverett Professor of Physics in 1975. He was director of the Cambridge Electron Accelerator, a joint Harvard-MIT facility, from 1967 to 1974, and he served as chairman of the Harvard physics department from 1978 to 1982.

His warm and friendly teaching style endeared him to his college students, and he firmly guided more than 20 graduate students as they began their physics careers.

Strauch also chaired two committees that significantly influenced the policies and culture of Harvard – the first recommended the merger of Harvard and Radcliffe’s admissions offices and the institution of an admissions policy of equal access for women; and the second established the Science Center – the first multidisciplinary sciences building in the college.

Strauch’s enthusiasm for physics, deep insights and friendly smile will be missed by his former colleagues and students.