

## Obituary: Rolf Gossmann (1934–2023)



Rolf Gossmann excelled in bringing people together. Here, Rolf, in the center with the green shirt, discusses the formation of plant fossils and the importance of paleobotany with the general public. Photo: C. T. Gee

On October 19, 2023, we lost one of the most devoted and enthusiastic members of our paleobotanical community with the death of fossil plant collector and Devonian/Cenozoic specialist Rolf Gossmann. Rolf slipped away peacefully in his sleep at his home in Bonn, Germany, at the age of 89.

I first met Rolf some 40 years ago, in March 1986, on a field trip after the *Arbeitskreis für Paläobotanik und Palynologie* meeting in Münster. There was an unexpected cold snap, so it was freezing, and parts of the Devonian outcrop were covered in thick snow. However, despite the frosty weather and futile search for early land plants in heavy snowdrifts with a group of total strangers, I did not find myself the least bit uncomfortable, but instead exhilarated. I could not speak any German then, but Rolf in his open and kind way befriended me and made me feel warmly welcome to the paleobotanical community in Germany.

This was the magical personality of Rolf Gossmann. Charismatic, outgoing, and big-hearted, Rolf was a Renaissance man who had a wide range of interests, deep knowledge of global affairs, and an exuberant passion for people and nature. Luckily for us, he was also an avid collector of fossil plants. Rolf spent roughly 60 years collecting in the Devonian and Cenozoic of the Rhineland, published 34 scientific papers and popular articles, and gave countless talks at scientific conferences, in museums, on field trips, and in the field for the general public. He freely offered his knowledge to the scientific community and to non-scientists in the form of numerous museum exhibits on paleobotany. Rolf's scientific legacy lives on not only in his publications and dissemination of paleobotanical knowledge, but also in the donation of the valuable fossil plant collections that he and his wife Anne Gossmann made together over the course of their lifetimes to the Goldfuss Museum collections at the University of Bonn in Germany. These specimens are so exquisitely preserved that they can be used in lab to show students the central vascular strand, enations, microphylls, and the increasingly complex branching patterns of Devonian plants.

Yet, Rolf did not earn his daily bread as a professional paleontologist, but collected fossil plants, did research, and wrote up his findings in his spare time. In real life, Rolf was a career journalist and diplomat who worked at the highest levels of international relations.

Rolf was born in the mid-sized city of Marburg located some 100 km north of Frankfurt, on October 12, 1934. His childhood and youth were spent in small town of Rosenthal in the Burgwald, about 18 km northeast of Marburg, where he had already begun to collect fossil plants. Despite his interest in paleontology, after high school, Rolf decided to go into journalism and politics. He studied law, modern history, and politics, first at the nearby University of Marburg, then in University of Würzburg where he earned his first degree in 1962. During his studies, he continued to build on his experience in journalism. Rolf was also very active in the Red Cross, and after finishing his studies, he spent several months abroad—in West and Central Africa, as well as in Geneva—on behalf of the Red Cross. One of the most exciting things to happen to Rolf while in Africa was a visit to the *Hôpital Albert Schweitzer* in the rainforest of Lambarene in Gabon, at the invitation of the great man himself, Albert Schweitzer, the multifaceted humanitarian who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952.

Once back in Germany, Rolf married Annemarie ("Anne") Kiehne in 1963. Anne later worked as a microfossil preparator in Paleontology and curatorial assistant for the Goldfuss Museum at the University of Bonn for many years. Not only did Rolf and Anne share an interest in fossil organisms, I know from personal experience that they were also passionate about cooking, plants, gardening, and their family.

Rolf continued working in journalism as the international news editor of United Press International in Germany. In October 1966, he and Anne moved to Bonn, where Rolf began working for the German Federal Ministry, first as the head of the public relations office, then making his way upwards to the head of department of German-German relations. At that time, the world order was quite different: there were two Germanys—West Germany and East

Germany—with a deadly Berlin Wall and intense geopolitical tension between them. I imagine that Rolf was really the right person for this diplomatic mission, given his highly developed social and political intelligence, his skill with words, and his easy way with people.

Rolf was also active in foreign policy, accompanying the German Secretary of State to South Korea on three separate occasions. Back in Germany, during the discussions regarding reunification between the two Germanys, Rolf was instrumental in the high-level economic negotiations. For his service, after the reunification, Rolf was awarded the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany, a prestigious medal given for special achievements in political, economic, cultural, intellectual or honorary fields.

After the reunification of the two Germanys, Rolf continued to strive for international diplomacy and understanding in Germany and in Central Europe. Even after his official retirement from the Ministry in 1999, he still served as an Independent Expert Consultant as Chairperson of the Committee for the National Minorities of the Council of Europe.

It seems hard to reconcile these two sides of Rolf: the polished conciliator well-dressed in a suit and tie, selflessly serving in diplomatic service, and the field guy in rubber boots and a hard hat, toting a bucket of tools to the outcrop and lugging back scores of fossiliferous rocks after a long day. Nevertheless, this was indeed also the same generous man who shared with me the fresh rhubarb leaves that he grew himself in his garden or invited me over for a home-cooked meal of Korean bulgogi.

In the last 16 years of his life, Rolf's attention increasingly turned to the paleontological world, and he began to publish on his findings in the field. Many of his earlier, overview articles on popular science served to bridge the information gap between paleobotanists and people interested in the life of the past. In the last few years, though, while in his late 70's and 80's, Rolf began publishing more scholarly scientific papers, particularly on the Early Devonian plants of the Bonn area, but also on the species-diverse conifer floras of the Cenozoic. His achievements have been widely recognized. In 2007, Rolf was awarded the Zittel Medal from the *Paläontologische Gesellschaft*, which is presented to non-professionals working in paleontology who have made a significant contribution to the discipline. In 2015, Rolf received the distinguished Rheinlandtaler, a medallion honoring engagement and service to the Rhineland in regard to history, ethnology, the local language, linguistics, or the natural sciences.

At the time of his death, Rolf was working on more than a dozen manuscripts on Devonian and Cenozoic paleobotany in various stages of preparation. I am honored that the last paper that Rolf published, in 2022, was with doctoral student Mariah Howell and me, on a gentle bleaching technique that was tested on Miocene conifer cuticles that Rolf had collected. Working with Mariah on her first published paper, Rolf was just as friendly, open, patient, and kind to her, as he was with me that first time that we met on that snowy outcrop nearly four decades ago.

Rolf is survived by his wife Anne, his three children Katrin, Rolf, and Viola and their respective partners, ten grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren. A great legacy for a great man.

Carole T. Gee, University of Bonn,  
with contributions from Viola Hartmann

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