HUGO BENIOFF

1899-1968

A Tribute by Stewart Smith

Sensitivity, warmth, and generosity are foremost in any recollection of Hugo Benioff, a man who was at the same time a master at the art of telling stories and a creative scientist of truly great stature. His ideas pointed the way for fundamental advances in the understanding of earthquake processes, and his inventive mind engineered a revolution in the design of seismic instrumentation.

Hugo was a true Californian, born in Los Angeles, an undergraduate at Pomona College, graduate student at Caltech, and research worker at the Mount Wilson Observatory, the Carnegie Institution, and eventually at Caltech's Seismological Laboratory. He loved California and often spoke of the special responsibility he felt toward it. The guidance and advice he provided in the initial planning for the California Water Project was one of many expressions of this feeling.

Hugo Benioff had a special sensitivity to the earth around him, not only as a subject of scientific inquiry, but as a source of great beauty. As an expression of this love of unspoiled nature, he sought out unusually beautiful wilderness areas in California and Nevada and lived in them for such periods of time as his professional life permitted. In what he knew would be his last choice of land, the wild and beautiful Mendocino coast, he allowed himself the full-time enjoyment of the natural beauty around him.

I came to know Hugo Benioff only in the later part of his life when I had the good fortune to work with him in the final stages of a project he had been concerned with for more than ten years—the detection of the natural vibrations of the earth. In many ways this project was the culmination of his years of work in the development of long-period, seismic instruments, and it was the last major experiment in a monumental career that spanned more than 40 years of work in fields from astronomy to geophysics and from underwater sound to the design of musical instruments.

For a man with interest in music, it was indeed a fitting climax to his career for him to detect and measure what can be thought of as the music of the earth—its natural tones—and he took great pleasure in this fulfillment.

The breadth of his interests and the joy that he felt in his work seem to have come from his essential scientific curiosity. He asked the question "why" with a real passion, and in pursuit of the answer his performance can only be described as exquisite.

All of this, however, does not add up to Hugo Benioff unless one can recapture his humor. "Perhaps I should, but on the other hand . . ." is the caption on a cartoon, "The Benioff Variable Reluctance," which portrays him as a man of varying degrees of reluctance. He was particularly susceptible to this kind of joke because his name the world is over is synonymous with the instruments he invented, the variable reluctance seismometer being perhaps the most famous. He laughed over these and other caricatures involving the Benioff Horizontal, the Benioff Strain; in fact, his laugh was so characteristic it could be immortalized as the Benioff Chuckle.

A recent newspaper tribute referred to him as one who was completely attuned to the world in which he lived. This he was. Seldom does a man leave so much of himself when he departs this world.