

Manfred MacKeben

March 12 1940 – May 6 2026

An adventurous Berliner exploring California through science

The following pages are a personal account based on conversations, correspondence, and many years of friendship.

Dear Colleagues and Friends,

The sudden passing of Manfred saddens me beyond words. My wife Anne and I had visited him just six months ago (Oct 2025, photo attached) at the San Francisco Towers Residency where he had moved in after his partner Jennifer Herman's untimely death, and he seemed really well and thriving. He had taken over low-vision care for the residents, enjoyed his time there, and rehearsed twice a week in the semi-professional choir for their Christmas concert. We went for walks and sat together in the library, talking and exchanging memories long after midnight.

I met Manfred at the Optical Society Meeting in San Diego in 1984, where he saw my poster on steady-state visual evoked potentials and exclaimed, 'that notch in the spatial-frequency function looks exactly like the one in our monkey data!' (cf. Nakayama & Mackeben 1982, Vision Res.). It was my first vision science conference in the legendary USA as a young scientist, and Manfred and Christopher Tyler invited me for a seminar talk at Smith-Kettlewell. Imagine the excitement! Manfred took good care of me and made me feel at home immediately. He introduced me to everybody; I met Eric Sutter, Tony Norcia, and Bill Gerrey, the blind guy from their project (who recently passed away) who showed me how to solder a circuit board when you are blind. I marveled at the word processing capabilities for the whole institute based on WordStar under the CP/M operating system on special boards for a PDP-11 (in 1984!). Ken Nakayama sat in the hallway hunched over a Commodore PET computer, busy finishing an important section of code. I stayed in Manfred's home and one evening he conjured up a bottle of excellent Napa Valley red wine: Shall we have a little chat?" It was from Manfred's home that I phoned my new girlfriend in Germany (whom I married later) to impress her – overseas telephone calls from Germany to the US were outrageously expensive then. Manfred and I were friends ever since.

It felt like family, and only much later did I find out that it was more so than I had imagined. Manfred was born 1940 in Nazi Germany, in dark times, as son of famous German composer/conductor Theo Mackeben, conductor for the 1928



world premiere of the Brecht/Weill “Threepenny Opera” and composer of music scores for a long list of popular UFA film music, who took little time for his baby Manfred. Through his mother, Toni Mackeben, an actors’ agent, he got to know many famous artists, among them Zarah Leander, who was said to have sung Theo Mackeben’s lullabies to him in the cradle, among them the bitter sweet “Schlummerlied”. In those late- night conversations last October, Manfred confirmed that he appeared in the film “Das Herz der Königin” (1940) [The heart of the Queen] as a baby with said Zarah Leander.

The same magic must have happened to my mother in 1944, when war was raging all around and she, as an 18-year old girl, was required to sew sleeves onto military uniforms in a forced-labor factory (‘Reichsarbeitsdienst’) and heard one of the songs of Theo Mackeben. Shortly after the war, when people were hungry and desperate, she heard Theo Mackeben in Bad Ischl, Austria, in a bar playing the piano for American soldiers (Manfred confirmed his father was there at the time). Imagine how excited she was when she heard in 1984 that I had met his son and that he is a successful scientist in San Francisco.

According to Manfred, it was his mother’s involvement which shaped his youth. Toni Mackeben (she is in the German Wikipedia) was the very embodiment of a lady –“elegant, cultured, and endowed with great empathy” according to biographies. During the war she headed the director’s secretariat at the Berlin Volksbühne and was later a talent agent for many top actors, including Götz George and Horst Buchholz. The latter became a good friend of Manfred in his youth. Manfred told us that night he got his marked fondness for language and verbal wit from his mother. She instilled old-fashioned courtesy towards women in Manfred, sometimes with wonderfully dramatic warnings. As a nine-year-old, he was told that if he was not polite, ‘his hand would one day protrude from the grave, and dogs would pee on it’.

Another anecdote Manfred recalled: When he was a boy and he and his mother went out to a restaurant, she would discreetly slip him her purse so that he could learn how to treat a lady by paying for her meal like a gentleman. (To younger readers: this was what chivalry looked like in the 1950s.)

Manfred had all the qualities of a stand-up comedian. He was from Berlin but was raised in a Bavarian boarding school and thus spoke fluently both Berlin and Bavarian dialect. One day he treated me with a one-man sketch playing simultaneously a Berliner wisecracker (‘Berliner Schnauze’) and a Bavarian curmudgeon in an improvised heated exchange that had me rolling on the floor laughing.

Manfred’s email letters to me were always exquisitely crafted, humorous, almost poetic masterpieces of (German) prose. When we emailed last year of our fathers being drafted in Nazi Germany war time, he wrote back, "By the way, they also wanted to stick my father in the signals corps, but that was impossible because he knew nothing of Morse code. He had never learned to shoot, couldn't ride a motorcycle, and was too fat. That was enough for the powers that be, and after three days they promptly spat him back out as 'unfit for service'" (apologies that I cannot match these skills in English).

Manfred was an exceptionally warm, attentive, and caring person who actively supported younger colleagues in their professional development. In 2000, I had the chance to invite Manfred to the LMU in Munich, to co-supervise my PhD student Werner Eisenbarth. This led to a close and

fruitful lifelong collaboration on macular degeneration (AMD) and low vision, and Werner visited him every year shortly before ARVO. Dorothe Poggel, my post-doc in Bad Tölz whose work on hemianopia I had co-supervised, spent time as a post-doctoral fellow at Smith-Kettlewell, collaborating with Manfred on motion-induced attention in peripheral vision. Werner stayed in close contact with Manfred, collaborating on low vision and visiting him every year before ARVO. Werner was the last of us who saw Manfred alive in SF Towers (May 2).

One of those Manfred has left behind, is the artist and philosopher David le Viseur, who was like a second son to him. David's father, the well-known German journalist Raimund le Viseur, was an important friend of Manfred's from the early 1960ies onwards. On their wedding day, Raimund and Ingeborg flew to Berlin, overnight, to celebrate with Manfred. As a boy, David was fascinated by Manfred's stories about his chimpanzee – early glimpses into the magical worlds of science, computers – and the Bay Area. Later, he often

visited him in San Francisco and spent time at the Smith-Kettlewell Institute. In the early 2000s, David began research on Attention and Awareness in Blindsight and Riddoch Syndrome at our LMU institute in Bad Tölz. He also built Manfred's macular mapping website. David has many wonderful stories to tell about Manfred.



Around 1994 Manfred met his life-long partner Jennifer Herman. He introduced her to my wife and me in 1995 (have a look at the photo). She was a wonderful woman, a highly accomplished health insurance expert. They often visited Germany, meeting colleagues and old friends, and Manfred's son Benjamin. Below is a photo of Manfred and Jennifer coming to Werner Eisenbarth's wedding, Sep. 2004. Jennifer retired in Dec. 2018, starting a new chapter in her life, as Manfred wrote. I would love to tell more about her but it did not work out: I had planned a father-son visit to the US for March

2020, to introduce my son to long-time friends, and Jennifer had offered we see her. But the Corona pandemic changed life for three long years, right at the day of our flight. When it was finally over in 2023 and we made new plans, Jennifer, at Christmas 2023, received the shocking diagnosis of advanced cancer. A few months later she died.

Benjamin, Manfred's son from his first marriage, was an avant-garde musician active in the Berlin experimental hip-hop underground, where he engaged in DJing, scratching, and other forms of turntablism at dusk-to-dawn gatherings of heavy, bass-driven beats, flickering light shows, and experimental audiovisual improvisation. Benjamin died, unexpectedly and much too soon, a few days before the end of Nov. 2020, from heart failure. As Manfred had told me, Benjamin had consulted his physician



only a week earlier because of a cold, and nothing had suggested that his condition was serious. Manfred was a good singer, an extraordinarily knowledgeable Jazz enthusiast, and a lover of art and literature.

One reason for Manfred to leave Germany and move to California was, as he once told me, to step out of the shadow of being the child of one of Germany's most famous artists, and to live somewhere where nobody would recognize his name. In keeping with that decision, he eventually changed the spelling of his surname to *MacKeben*. He did, indeed, become a widely respected vision scientist, working alongside leaders in the field at one of the world's foremost vision research institutes. He is perhaps best known as the co-discoverer of the phenomenon of transient attention (Nakayama & Mackeben, 1989), at a time when attention research was still frowned upon in vision science. I still remember how excited he was to show me their new experimental paradigm at one of my early visits. It marked a turning point in the field, with attention research now being one of vision science's main areas. Yet this is only one of many important contributions he made to vision science. He conducted extensive studies on peripheral vision, became a leading figure in research on low-vision rehabilitation, macular vision loss, and the development of diagnostic tools for visual impairment like the Macular Mapping Test. He received the Constance Atwell Award from ARVO and the Lifetime Achievement Award in Low Vision Research from Envision University. Manfred was a caring mentor to young scientists. He worked productively to his very end. For those of us he has left behind, it will be upon us to retrace and document his lifelong scientific contributions.

Yet in his heart remained the love of art and music that he had inherited from his family. When we spoke with him that October night, I asked him about his father. After a thoughtful pause, he said that the song by his father he cherished most was the *Schlummerlied*, sung by Zarah Leander. It is heartbreakingly beautiful:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhWeaxhKJ-Q>

Manfred's comment: "I find the harmonic progression in this song utterly enchanting, and I also like Harald Braun's lyrics very much: '... and the silence hums ...' ['... und die Stille summt ...']"

It also struck me as a song of farewell. I miss Manfred terribly.

Hans

July 2026