

TRIBUTE

FRIEDRICH WILHELM MOHR: HOW I KNEW HIM

The Bonn era:

In 1978, in the wake of a German programme for academic advancement, I obtained an approval from the University of Bonn Chief of Cardiovascular Surgery, Prof. Gerhard Kirchhoff, to undertake my residency in that specialty.

It was on a warm summer morning in July 1979 that I arrived to the service. The Chief introduced me in rounds at 7.30AM. There he was, also commencing his residency, albeit German style, meaning before having undertaken general surgery, the slim, athletic and cheerful young man, on year after medicine school graduation, Friedrich Wilhelm Mohr.

I remember clearly Prof. Kirchhoff inquiring about my residence, which was the university guest accommodation, in the middle of the forest. I attended by foot, and so Fitty suggested I should get a bicycle. A couple of days later, one Saturday afternoon he offered to join me to the Ring, or downtown, to buy one. And so we did. I got a used Peugeot, he bought another one, and then he headed off to celebrate where one always does in Germany: the Kneipe, that is, a pub. He told me about his girlfriend, Anita, pediatry resident in the city of Cologne in that moment, and about his parents who had fled dramatically from East Germany towards the Bundesrepublik (Federal Germany). On that day, a friendship emerged that is still lasting.

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*Battellini at the day of
Mohr's farewell.*

At the beginning, we would speak in English. Although I had undertaken a one year German language intensive course at the Goethe Schule of Buenos Aires, I realised this only helped me communicate in a tourist way. Equipped with positive predisposition towards this stranger of the Rhine area, all members of service, headed by Mohr, kept tolerating and perfecting my “bad German” on a daily basis. I was already specialised in General Surgery with two years in Peripheral Vascular, which gave me an advantage in operations, and so I made the most to teach what I knew and strike up friendship with everyone.

Shortly after arriving to Bonn, thanks to the international mentality of Prof. P. G. Kirchhoff, I was invited, together with the German group, to a long weekend on board of a sailing ship, property of a friend of the Chief, Herr Kalender. With great agility, Fred climbed to the highest of the mainmast to photograph everyone. It was a “chique” weekend, strolling around villages of the Dutch IJsselmeer. Each one of these events would deepen our friendship, which later continued in the operating room. Myself at my 33 years gave my best to pass my knowledge to the youngest. Joint duty was a challenge for our youth. One time, after 36 hours without sleeping, we operated and reoperated a peripheral vascular patient whose bypass became occluded again and again, which we kept unclogging. As we left the operating room having successfully concluded the operation after the third time, we saw the female ICU physicians weeping for us. It is without saying that during these I taught him and let him do as much as possible. Very shortly after arriving to Bonn, Fred invited me to visit his parents one weekend. His father’s anecdotes about the war on the Russian front and his subsequent escape to East Germany captivated me. They lived in a village constructed in the 16th century, and which had survived Allied bombing. Those wood and mud constructions fascinated me. Fred told me that when women went to church on Sundays, men would wait for them having a few drinks at the bar around the corner. We travelled there in a Volvo sport, license plate BN-AN 12 that I will always remember. In Germany, one can have their own initials on cars, and I believe this ANone was because of Anita, his great love.

Once a week we went to play tennis with other friends (Walter Koch, Axel Buchmueller) indoors in a “Halle” in the winter, or at the outdoor University of Bonn courts in the summer, which were located in the forest. However, the beer after was more sought after than the competition, and we enjoyed it more than any other of the week.

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On Saturday mornings we went to the market of the main square, the Marktplatz, to do what in Germany is almost a religion for singles: to buy fresh vegetables for the rest of the week. Also, due to our working hours, this was our only chance to pre-emptively avoid having to rely on noodles for the whole week. We also frequently took our cameras, and played artists. Fred even bought a processor camera to start a photographic laboratory at his house.

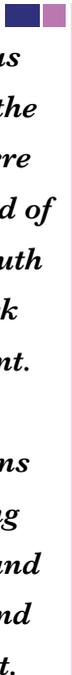
Carnival time in Bonn and the Rhine zone is something very special, and so it was to us. There was special food at the hospital, and after we went dancing to Stieffel, a Bierlokal where everyone danced with everyone, and one met new girls. Fred, always with Anita.

Bicycle expeditions were another highlight of life in Bonn. Not only among us, but also sponsored by the Chief of the Service, Prof. Kirchhoff, twice a year we would cycle 70 kilometres (43 miles) along the Rhine banks. Additionally, cardiac technicians would do a grill (barbeque) in the middle of the forest during a break. In other occasions, we would visit wine cellars for tasting. And so, at midnight, with everyone sober, of course, we would finish these Fahrradtours. Favourite routes were the banks of the Rhine, or towards Koenigswinter, a village in front of Bonn, reached by crossing the ferry.

Speaking of grillparties, this custom began in Fred's house at Haydn 55, on an excellent balcony. Of course, I offered my gifts as a gaucho, which were welcomed. Mohr senior, who was like my own "German father", was one of those who congratulated me.

It was winter of 1980, and I did not know how to ski. Fred proposed to go to Switzerland for 15 days together, to Berner Oberland. It was one of the greatest experiences in my life, the mountain, the snow and the falling down, until I finally learnt. Anita Mohr was my teacher after the skiing classes were over. It was the end of a golden era of youth mixed with work and life enjoyment. We also made various excursions to go windsurfing on the Konstanz and Bodensee seas, and the island of Sylt.

The reader might think there was more fun than work. We were both not married yet, although I was already divorced. Almost at the end of my stay Fred had to operate his first abdominal aortic aneurysm, and he asked for my assistance. It was a sign of friendship of his part, greeted by pleasure from my part to operate with this promising young man, still unknown globally.



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Intermezzo:

I returned to Argentina, because, although I had an offer from Prof. Kirchhoff, I had deep family responsibilities with my two older children. During those years, Fred visited the country many times, and visited me at Mar del Plata, where I had created the first ever Service for cardiac Surgery to the South of La Plata, near Buenos Aires. So we visited a few estancias (country estates), and went horseback riding, the only sport in which I fared better than him. All those years we kept contact through letters, telling each other how we were faring in our respective places. Until 1995, when I received a phone call from Fitty. After greeting me he offered me to visit him at Leipzig. It was during this visit that he offered me the post of Oberarzt, that is a Staff position, an offer I could not refuse after having seen the Herzzentrum.

In 2009, my hour had come: I won the competition for Chief in the Italian Hospital of Buenos Aires, thanks to my formation in Leipzig.

The Leipzig era:

Fitty was now married to Anita and had two wonderful sons, Maxi and Philip. I had married again, with Norma. Our hours of leisure became hours of family meetings. Laika, the dog Fitty bought for the children, became a family symbol. And it also became a symbol of the friendship between our families, as she was always there to greet us as we arrived for visits at the Mohr residence. The other hours, those of work, became geometrically increasing intense for us both. On many weekends, Fred would go back to his hometown Wichmannsdorf, a village where he inherited a house at a lake. There, our children fished together, and even pulled a fish so big that I insisted on eating it, despite everyone telling us it would not taste good at all. Even after my efforts with plenty of garlic and lemon, it tasted of mud, and so had to contemplate eating burgers.

One Christmas eve in Leipzig, we did not have a Weihnachtsmann (Santa Claus) for Mauro, so Mohr offered to dress up and bring the presents in from the back door. My son Mauro, of 7 years, recognized him: he was wearing the same boots from just before. We laughed about it many times later. Still, it was a great human gesture. In 2002, Fred gave me a special present: Anita's 1995 Volvo, which I complimented on many occasions. Despite having replaced it with a new Mercedes, Anita was not entirely happy, as the car was full of good memories. By the way, I still drive this car today on the streets of Buenos Aires.

In spite of the great seriousness imposed by our line of work, and our hours, Fred never missed the opportunity to

organise parties and events, with locations ranging from the local pub, the Kaiser Napoleon, to the Cospudenerlake, where the Herzzentrum has an annual bicycle race.

In 2006, he spearheaded the efforts to bring the Olympic Games to Leipzig. We organised public events (“Leipzig Hope”) and demonstrations all over the city. In the end, London beat us.

In 2009, my hour had come: I won the competition for Chief in the Italian Hospital of Buenos Aires, thanks to my formation in Leipzig. On the 9th of October 2009, with Fred, we attended the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall at Augustusplatz. It was a procession that included candles. For me, it also meant a high emotional goodbye to Leipzig.



Conclusion:

Fred is a leader, not only within hospital, but outside of it. The barbeques at his residence were a sign of his devotion to caring about his workers and guests. He is a master, not only of surgery, but of human relations, and I am honoured to say he saw the same quality in my father when he visited Argentina.

After a profound friendship in Bonn, we both showed wisdom to continue it in Leipzig, even when one of the friends was the boss. Mohr always pushed everyone to excel beyond the level of professional, leading but also inspiring confidence during the rougher times. It is for this reason that I owe my position as chief at the Italian Hospital to him, just as many others who are writing in this book owe him their new positions of leadership.

If we read Dale Winbrow’s great poem, “The Guy in the Glass”, I believe Fred has passed the test, he can look at himself. ■



“Mohr among greatest” (from behind), surrounded by Yacoub, Carpentier, Favaloro and Jatene, and Borst at the background.