

Memories of Herbert B. Eckstein

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I suppose decades of close friendship bound me to Herbert Eckstein; a friendship which went far beyond the usual relationship between pediatric surgeons. Admittedly, I can not remember when we met for the first time - it was, I suppose, at the end of the sixties - but the friendship which deepened in the course of meetings at numerous congresses in Germany, Europe and overseas, as well as at my home, started at that time. We quickly discovered that we had something in common: our families originated from Dresden. The name of Eckstein had a particular significance in his old home country and of course, amongst German pediatricians and had by no means lost any of this as a result of the wretched banishment by the National Socialists. Surprisingly, Herbert never complained of his particular fate, but rather he liked to remember his former home town, as well as his childhood in Turkey.

An agreement quickly developed between us: my English leaves much to be desired, as I only learnt school English in the GDR and later got no opportunity to practise my languages abroad. Herbert, on the other hand spoke a nearly perfect conversational German, but he lacked the medical specialist terms as he had not studied medicine in Germany. Thus we almost complemented each other. I still see him sitting many a time on a bench in the congress hall and correcting the last mistakes of one of my English lectures. He also checked my publications. I on the other hand could make up for this by translating his lectures. Thus I could not only improve my knowledge of the English language, but also profit from his extensive specialist knowledge and learn to understand his thinking.

The translation of his long lecture on "Ethical Problems in Paediatric Surgery", which he was to give about ten years ago in Northern Germany, was a particular honour for me. I had been concerning myself with this theme for some considerable time already, so that I read Herbert Eckstein's lecture with greatest interest. This problem was initially a taboo in Germany on account of the perversion of medico-ethical thinking by the considerations of National Socialism, so that I had to feel my way gingerly towards this sensitive material in order to start up once more discussions on this theme, which had become pressing. Of course, Herbert could deal with such questions in a much more relaxed manner and he also accepted this responsibility. For it is particularly necessary for pediatric surgery to have an upright personality with a clear objective, and in particular in the case of the many difficulties in the surgery of neonates, of the malformed child, as well as in the surgery of tumour and trauma in childhood. To find the right path between the objectionable extremes - euthanasia on the one hand and the regardless preservation of life on the other- that was what we were looking for and for which Herbert formulated the important thoughts and in which he gave help.

Thus he pointed out in particular that in life threatening situations it was not just the parents that should be burdened with the decision, but that agreement should be reached with them in patient and long discussions. He expressed my deepest feelings when he expressed doubt as to whether it was the correct path to summon a commission in each case for a difficult decision. There is no doubt that in our specialist area we can not manage without conflict situations, but to involve further persons, apart from the doctor, the caring staff and the family in a de-

cision would only be harmful. These were sensible thoughts, by which Herbert Eckstein achieved respect and agreement.

I mostly experienced Herbert Eckstein in discussion at congresses and within private circles as a taciturn and even silent man. But if he said anything and what he said was characterised by humility and tolerance. His greatness, his humanity, showed itself in this, even when in his fundamental lecture on ethical problems in pediatric surgery he observed: "Someone like me, who, as a result of his past, has never joined any specific religion will miss the help, which, I assume, grows from a firm faith in God". That was certainly not the ultimate truth about himself, but rather the voice of a humble seeker, a thoughtful man, who in the end does not wish to give himself up to pessimism. Even if it was not easy for a friend to exert influence on him, yet the heartfelt bond lived on hidden warmth and reticent trust.

His serious illness, his quiet suffering and his gentle death, in the end, shook me all the more. Our time together will not fade, in our grateful memory, in particular as his experience continues to live on in our actions.

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In 1964 C.E. Alken invited Herbert Eckstein as a visiting professor to the University of Homburg/Saar, the first German faculty of urology. For weeks complicated cases were collected during the pediatric urology conference in order to present them to Herbert Eckstein and hear of his ideas.

When the time had arrived, he briefly glanced at the huge number of x-ray films that had been meticulously placed in front of the viewing board and simply remarked: "I sure am glad that I am not confronted with this many problems on one afternoon at home".

His absolute honesty also convinced all during a case presentation. While commenting on the case of a patient with bladder exstrophy that had remained after bladder closure, he stated: "my own are no better". Later on, he was one of the first to report on the failures of this surgery during the SPUS meetings.

While in Mainz as a visiting professor, Herbert Eckstein incidentally remarked that to the best of his knowledge, no surgical atlas on pediatric urology existed. Not much time passed and D.I. Williams was recruited as co-editor, Günther Hauff as publisher and R. Brammer as artist. We withdrew for three days and the concept, volume, co-authors and number of figures were henceforth determined. Herbert Eckstein bore most of the workload, traveled with the artist from author to author and also organized the translation of chapters written in foreign languages. At the end of one year, all manuscripts were at the publishers office, ready for print, truly a time record that was unchallenged ever since.



Our photography shows Herbert Eckstein on July 10th, 1984 in the back seat of a single motor Beech Bonanza at Biggin Hill Airport just before take-off on the way to the BAUS meeting in Dublin. His co-editor and pilot is just assisting him in fastening the seatbelt and commenting on the (still) good weather condition - nevertheless his expression was highly sceptical. His feeling did not deceive him and the further flight (with instruments) brought about some turbulent surprises. Nevertheless, it turned out to be a lasting experience and shortly thereafter, Herbert Eckstein became an enthused pupil of aviation.

In a very close friendship lasting over a quarter of a century, there are many things one remembers, when the clock suddenly stops. The everlasting search for the useful, simple and reproducible, his profound aversion against every form of speculation and his perseverance and diligence characterized his professional career. The courage to even question dogmas reflected his personal courage and the other side of his character.

Both make him unforgettable.