

Franz Gerstenbrand (1924-2017)

The world ambassador of Neurosciences

In Memoriam Aeternam

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«εἷς ἐμοὶ μύριοι, ἐὰν ἄριστος ᾦ»

Ἡράκλειτος (fr. B 49a).

“One is ten thousand to me, if he be the best”.

Heracletus (fr. B 49a).

The Neurological sciences are deprived of the eminent professor of Neurology and honorary doctor of many universities Franz Gerstenbrand, who passed away peacefully on the 30th of June, 2017.

The late Professor was a prophetic authority in Neurosciences, who like the Pre-Socratic philosophers was characterized by a right and acute foresight in Neurology, having also the capacity to harmonize the precious deep knowledge of the classic Clinical Neurology with the rapid flow of the new data of the current clinical and experimental investigation, which by the support of the advanced technology has recently a vertically ascending course. Franz Gerstenbrand was also inspired by the Hippocratic medical philosophy, insight, ethics and aphorisms, which harmoniously amalgamated with the current scientific doctrines, proclaiming them all over the medical world with inexhaustible enthusiasm.

Franz Gerstenbrand, son of a district doctor (Distriktsarzt), was born on 6th of September 1924 in Hof of Northern Moravia (Nordmähren). He studied in the elementary school in Untertannowitz, and in the high school in Nikolsburg of Southern Moravia. His birthplace was sanctified by the mission of the brothers Saint Cyril and Methodius, the Thessalonian intellectual missionaries, who went in the Great Moravia from Constantinople in 862 AD, invited by Prince Rastislav (864 – 870) in order to evangelize his Slavic people. The enormous religious and cultural contribution of the Thessalonian saints, who devised the Glagolitic and Cyrillic alphabets for translating the Bible into the Slavic languages, was an important milestone in the European culture and spiritual course. The reflections of the inextinguishable light of St. Cyril and Methodius were obvious in the kind, mild, gentle and prudent personality of Franz Gerstenbrand and in his brilliant humanistic mind and spiritual culture,

Franz Gerstenbrand in 1942 was recruited into Airforces, (Luftwaffe), where he served until 1945. Then he graduated from Vienna University, “Cum Laude”, in 1950, after a very short period of 4 years studies in Medicine. Immediately, he started postgraduate training in Neurology and Psychiatry at the same University, under the directorship of Prof. Hans Hoff, who was an excellent clinician, tutor and

organizer, a very wide mind, and one of the most eminent Neurologists in Central Europe.

Franz Gerstenbrand was appointed “Dozent” in 1967 and Associate Professor of Neurology in 1972. In 1976, he was elected Professor of Neurology and appointed head of the University Department of Neurology at Innsbruck University, where he stayed until his retirement in 1994. Under his directorship the department of Neurology became one of the best organized and functioned university departments in Europe, since Franz organized intensive care units and founded the Institute of Magnetic Tomography.

After his retirement in 1994, Franz as Professor Emeritus demonstrated a unique continuous enthusiastic activity in the international field of Neurological sciences, being plenty of visions, perspectives and hope for an international collaboration for the progress of Neurology, the excellency of neurological education and the amelioration of the quality of life of the neurological patient.

Among the numerous awards and honorable distinctions that Franz Gerstenbrand have received for his very eminent scientific, intellectual and humanitarian beneficial contributions are his Honorary Doctorate of the Charles University (Karls-Universität) in Prague, in June 1997 and his Honorary Doctorate of the Medical School of Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki, the birthplace of his country’s patrons Saints Cyril and Methodius, on 27th of June 2003.

Franz was also the recipient of the Silver Medal for Achievements for the Republic of Austria (Große Silberne Ehrenzeichen für Verdienste um die Republik Österreich), of the Honorary Cross for Science and Arts of the Austrian Republic (Österreichische Ehrenkreuz für Wissenschaft und Kunst), of the Valeriy-Gagarin-Medal of the Russian Space Organization, of the Honorary Medals of the Country of Tyrol and the Medical University of Innsbruck, of the award of the Southern Moravia for the Culture (Südmährischen Kulturpreis). In 2014, Franz was awarded the Gold Medal of the city of Graz (Goldenes Ehrenzeichen der Stadt Graz). He was also the recipient of Lifetime Achievement Award by the WFN.

Franz Gerstenbrand was elected Honorary Member of the European Academy of Neurology. In addition, he was elected honorary member of the Senate (Senatus) of the University of Krems (Donau-Universität Krems) in June 2003. In November 2001, Franz was elected honorary president of the Austrian Society for Parkinson’s disease, honorary president of the Austrian Neurological and Psychiatric Society, honorary president of the Russian neurological Society, honorary president of the Polish medical Society, of the Czech Neurological Society, of the Hungarian Neurological Society of the Austro-Myanmarscientific society, he elected also honorary president of the medical Society «J.E. Purkynje». Franz was also member of American Academy of Neurology and member of the Royal Society of Medicine of the UK as well as of many other Austrian and international scientific societies.

Franz Gerstenbrand’s main noble ambitious vision was the unification of the European Neurology. He was endeavoring to increase a peaceful, friendly, respectful and sincere collaboration among the European neurologists, indiscriminately to their political, ideological, philosophical background, based mainly on the scientific enthusiasm, the medical ethics and their beneficial contribution for the amelioration of the quality of life of the neurological patient.

In 1962, Franz founded the Danube International Neurological Group, which late became a Society and started organizing annual symposia (Danube Symposia) with the participation of neuroscientists coming from western and eastern countries of the Danube region, giving them a unique opportunity of exchanging ideas and

developing collaboration at a period of strong political contrast between East and West.

In promoting a close collaboration of all the European countries in the field of Neurosciences, In 1989, Franz Gerstenbrandin collaboration with Daniel Bartko, and Alessandro Agnoli, founded in Prague, the Pan European Society of Neurology, which in two years in Vienna, was evolved to be the European Federation of Neurological societies (EFNS), of which he became the first President. EFNS linked harmoniously the Neurologist of Europe by annual congresses and scientific awards, inspiring them the principle of gentle and productive collaboration on the basis of equality, friendship, dignity and respect.

EFNS was later a strong background for the foundation of the European Academy of Neurology (EAN) in 2014, which unified all the European Neurological Societies in a common Forum.

In the wide scientific spectrum of the World Federation of Neurology (WFN), Franz promoted the organization of specific research fields, such as the space and under water neurology, the Neuroethics and the application of the hyperbaric oxygen in therapy. In addition Franz succeeded in creating a Scientific Society for Neurorehabilitation in Austria and abroad, resulting in the foundation of World Federation of Neurorehabilitation (WFNR) in Venice in 2003. WFNR established in 1013 “Gerstenbrand’s award” (worth £3,000), in recognition of Franz’ continuing contribution to neurorehabilitation. The award is open to WFNR members and non-members worldwide, who are clinicians, researchers and health professionals working in neurorehabilitation, preferably aged under 30 years.

Franz Gerstenbrand collaborated constantly with the Hellenic Society for the amelioration of the quality of life of chronic neurological patients, which was founded in Thessaloniki, in 2000. Franz Gerstenbrand was the honorary president of the ten international congresses, which were organized by the society and were held in Constantinople, Vienna, Alexandria, Odessa, Catania, Marseille, Thessaloniki, Delphi and Athens, cities where the Hellenic spirit and culture was flourishing.

Franz’ continuously increasing efforts for a serious and responsible education in Neurology and Neurosciences were justified by the foundation of the Neurological Academy for Young Neurologists in Southern Moravia, in collaboration with Pavel Kalvach and Uschi Tschabitscher. The Academy, during the summer months, were offering high professional knowledge on Neurosciences by eminent professors of Neurology, Neuropathology, Neurochemistry, Neuroradiology, Neuropsychology, Neuroethics, who released lectures, organized seminars and group discussions for a large number of young neurologists, derived from every European country.

Franz Gerstenbrand’s intellectual horizons were extended far beyond Neurosciences including philosophy, religion, politics, history, archeology, music, painting, eastern philosophy and culture, African studies and linguistics. He studied extensively Greek philosophy, he delved deeply in Aristotle and Stoics, he admired the classic Greek literature and art, the lyric poets, the ancient drama, the Greek science, he studied profoundly the scrolls of the Hippocratic collection and the treatises of Galen. He respected, preserved and practiced the Christian, Academic and Medical ethics constantly to the end of his life.

His gentle ideal to unify neurologist in a friendship, peaceful and cordial collaboration for the advancement of Neurosciences reached far beyond Europe, to North and South America, to Asia and Africa. He devoted much valuable time in Myanmar, organizing neurological departments in Universities, releasing lectures, supervising postdoctoral researchers, transfusing continuously his wisdom, his

illimitable experience and his high moral values to young neurologists. He was gratefully honored and awarded by the Republic of the Union of Myanmar and he was elected President of the Austrian Myanmar Society.

In addition, Franz introduced and organized many important programs for educational and technological support to African countries, elevating the neurological services and inspiring the wish for further erudition in Neurosciences.

Franz Gerstenbrand, as author gained a unique international recognition. He published 780 papers and 12 Textbooks and Monographs. In 1967 Franz described the traumatic apallic syndrome, in his habilitation treatise, which was published as monograph by Springer-Verlag, Wien entitled “Das traumatische apallische Syndrom, Klinik, Morphologie, Pathophysiologie und Behandlung”. This memorable treatise, which was the first important contribution in the pathophysiological and clinical analysis of vegetative state, made him very well known in Europe and America.

In addition his contribution in the treatment of Parkinson’s disease was also of substantial importance, since he was among the first neurologists, after George Kozias, who introduced levodopa therapy in Parkinsonian patients. In parallel, Franz studied and analyzed extensively the premorbid personality of Parkinsonian patients, including cases of personalities, who played a very crucial role in History, Politics and Church.

Franz harmonized perfectly the theory with the practice. By his high intelligence and immense experience Franz could find the right and most applicable solution in many complicated and thorny problems, being also able to foresee many scientific developments and to predict with prophetic accuracy the mission of neurosciences in the global society.

Franz’ personality was adorned with magnanimity, exceptional kindness, gentleness, politeness, inner harmony, prudence. He was characterized by profound respect to human dignity, devotion to righteous principles and genuine love and compassion to the patients.

For all those reasons, Franz was the invaluable mentor of many neurologists and researchers and the pure scientific and moral physician’s prototype for young neurologists in Europe.

For Franz Gerstenbrand the following Heraclitus’ axiom has an evident validity.

«αἰρεῶνται γὰρ ἐν ἀντὶ ἀπάντων οἱ ἄριστοι, κλέος ἀέναον θνητῶν»

(For even the best of men choose one thing above all others, immortal glory among mortals). Fragm. DK B29.

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