

Rudolf Hohenfellner, Chairman, Department of Urology, Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany, 1967 to 1996

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Rudolf Hohenfellner, or Rudy, as he is called by all his friends around the world, grew up in Austria, where, at the age of 16, he had the terrible experience of being conscripted for the last years of World War II.

He studied medicine in Vienna and started his training in the legendary Vienna Surgery, established by the famous Theodor Billroth, and then specialized in urology. During residency, he already showed a strong curiosity for external input and traveled to Paris to work with urologists like René Küss and Roger Couvelaire and to Munich to learn the new technique of transurethral resection of the prostate from Wolfgang Mauermayer and Ferdinand May.

It was not until 1962 that the first academic chair of urology was created in Vienna under the direction of Richard Übelhör, where Rudy worked as a senior physician until 1964. He then moved to the Urological University Clinic in Homburg/Saar as junior faculty to Professor C.E. Alken, the doyen of German urology and then the only chair of urology in Germany. At that time, urology as a specialty was usually under the difficult umbrella of general surgery, and the establishment of urology at German universities started from Homburg/Saar.

Rudy then moved to the newly created urologic chair at Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz in 1967 and retained this position for almost 30 years until his retirement in 1996, turning down various other chairmanships including in Vienna and Zurich.

Under his leadership, Mainz quickly became the premier address for excellent clinical surgical urological education in Germany. Rudy always saw the art and craft of operative urology as the central building block for the successful advancement of our specialty.

He traveled the world in search of new directions and advances in urology and found many friendly colleagues who subsequently came to Mainz as visiting professors to share their knowledge with us. The clinic had a clear international focus: staff meetings, grand rounds,



Dr. Rudolf Hohenfellner, a giant in urology

laboratory years for residents abroad, mostly in the United States, and journal clubs. This at a time when medical training was otherwise rather antiquated and boring. Rudy introduced 3-day assessment centers for new residents, probably before the term was even invented, and in these 3 days, the applicants not only got to know the clinic, residents, and faculty, but Rudy with his enormous knowledge of human nature got a feel for whether the newcomer would fit into the team at Mainz.

We as his students especially remember Rudy's annual return from the meeting of the GUSurgeons, which gave us new ideas, inspiration, and work that he distributed among his fellow staff members as projects. He truly and selflessly enjoyed it when he saw co-workers rise and prove themselves at international congresses and thus also increase the reputation of Mainz Urology.

Rudy delegated responsibility to his staff very early on. He was indeed a mentor and enabler in the best

sense, stepping back himself to further the careers of others. He was extraordinarily successful with this method: more than 50 chair positions were filled from Mainz under his aegis.

“The Mainzers” were not always viewed positively from the outside, but sometimes with envy and resentment, not only because they were lucky enough to work at this excellent institution, but also because they were sometimes endowed with a certain arrogance. This culminated in difficult situations in the operating room when Rudy had the Austrian song “Schickeria” played, the lyrics go something like this: “It must be something special, they don’t let people like you and me in, everyone plays a superstar, and sip champagne at the bar...”

Nothing was a problem for Rudy, and he even enjoyed swimming against the tide. This willingness, along with creativity and drive for innovation enabled the achievement of milestones in Mainz Urology, such as the development of percutaneous nephrolithotomy, the Lithostar for extracorporeal shock-wave lithotripsy, the

Mainz pouch for orthotopic and heterotopic urinary diversion, the introduction of nephron-sparing surgery, and the introduction of buccal mucosa for urethral reconstruction.

Rudy was president of both the German Society of Urology and the SIU, and he received numerous awards and prizes and was pleased with each one, but the most joyful thing for him in his humble way was to see one of his colleagues succeed.

Rudy also liked to push the limits in his private life: serious mountaineering, heliskiing, flying, and traveling all over the world. Rudy was never about luxury here, but about frontier experiences, and he would trade a luxury hotel for a lonely mountain cabin any day.

Now in his early nineties, he participates actively in the evolution of his much-loved urology. Mountaineers have a saying that the look back to the conquered summit in the evening twilight is the most beautiful thing and we wish Rudy many more years to enjoy this.