



Dorothea Liebermann-Meffert (*1930: †2020)—A Life Dedicated to Surgery

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Everyone, who knew her, will agree: Dorothea Liebermann-Meffert was a special person (Fig. 1). Doris, as she was called by colleagues and friends, passed away in September 2020 at the age of 90 in her hometown Opfingen-Freiburg, Germany.

Born to the surgeon Dr. Karl Peter Meffert and his wife Irene Wrede, she grew up amongst the turbulences of World War II in the southwest of Germany, close to the Swiss and French border. Already in her teenage years, she took classes with the then famous artist Ernst Honigberger and soon painted oil portraits of her family members, friends and classmates. After the war, at the age of 19, she started to study medicine at the University of Freiburg amongst only 30 other medical students. She graduated as medical doctor in 1955 with a doctoral thesis on the effect of adrenocorticotrophic and somatotrophic hormone on the thymus. Probably influenced by her father, who was then head of a surgical clinic, she started surgical training in Freiburg, Paris and Zürich. This was supplemented by a rotation into the anatomy department of the University of Freiburg. Although fully qualified as surgeon in 1965, she was rejected a position as a staff member by the Head of the Department of Surgery in Freiburg with the comment: “We need tough men in the operating room, not soft women“.

Little impressed by this attitude she continued her anatomic studies and started to publish on various surgically relevant aspects of the development of the human upper

gastrointestinal tract during embryogenesis. Martin Allgöwer, following Rudolf Nissen as chairman of the department of surgery in Basel, Switzerland, became aware of her work and offered her a position in his unit. In addition to clinical work in the operating room he encouraged her to continue her anatomic studies. She gladly accepted, since this allowed her to combine her unique interests and talents as surgeon, anatomist, embryologist, scientist and artist. After the retirement of Martin Allgöwer she was happy to continue this line of work in Munich with Rüdiger Siewert at the Department of Surgery, Klinikum rechts der Isar of the Technical University Munich and in Los Angeles with Tom DeMeester at the Department of Surgery, University of Southern California.

Her work, assessing clinical questions by diligent and meticulous study of human anatomy with the eye of a surgeon, resulted in several landmark publications for gastrointestinal surgery. Just to name a few:

- The first detailed anatomic/morphologic description of the lower esophageal sphincter in man with its “string-and clasp-fiber” components [1],
- A monography on the anatomy, physiology, pathology and surgery of the greater omentum, which she named a ‘forgotten organ’ [2],
- A detailed anatomic study of the blood supply of the human esophagus as prerequisite for safe transmediastinal esophagectomy [3],
- A beautiful description of the vascular anatomy of the gastric tube used for esophageal reconstruction [4],
- A surgical look at the anatomy of the recurrent and superior laryngeal nerve as they are at risk during esophagectomy [5], and

An Obituary by H J Stein

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Fig. 1 Dorothea Liebermann-Meffert

- A monography on the life of Rudolf Nissen with a detailed account of the development, international impact and evaluation of the Nissen Fundoplication [6]

Due to her almost pedantic diligence in performing her research, analysis of her data, graphic presentation of key findings, and preparation of her manuscripts each of these publications has become a timeless classic and can be considered a piece of art by itself.

Legendary was also her teaching of medical students and surgical residents in the manual techniques of performing sutures, tying knots, and creating gastrointestinal anastomoses. For many years after her retirement, far into her eighties, she continued to travel from her home town to Munich every few months in order to personally teach at yet another fully booked ‘Suture Course for Future Surgeons’.

In my opinion, her undisputed reputation in the surgical world is, amongst many other honors, best underlined by the fact that she was the first woman ever to be awarded a honorary fellowship of the International Surgical Society

(ISS), for which she has served as ‘Historian’ and Editor of the Festschrift on the occasion of the societies 100th anniversary [7].

Everybody, who knew her, will miss Doris. She is survived by her husband Eduard Liebermann (a former judge and administrative court president), three daughters, a son and six grandchildren. The inscription at the top of her tombstone in Opfingen-Freiburg reads: ‘Ihr Leben galt der Chirurgie’—‘She dedicated her life to surgery’.

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