



Inspirational Women in Surgery: Hildegunde Piza-Katzer; Professor Emeritus of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery in Austria

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Accepted: 4 November 2021 / Published online: 7 January 2022
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Through dedication, boundless humanity and a strong social conscience, Professor Hildegunde Piza-Katzer has overcome many obstacles to become one of the most renowned plastic surgeons worldwide and a pioneer in her field of reconstructive surgery. From 1999 to 2008, she was the first female Director of the Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, University of Innsbruck, Austria, which, under her leadership, became an international centre for surgical corrections of hand malformations in children.

Born in 1941 in Gröbming, a small town in alpine Austria, her mother was a nurse and her father a surgeon. It was a time of great hardship; she and her sister were often ill from the germs her father brought home from the

hospital. This experience, together with the deaths of two of her best friends of cancer, shaped her view of the importance of the medical profession. She learned embroidery, crochet and knitting, which gave her invaluable skills for her career.

In 1959, she started to study medicine in Graz, the second largest city in Austria. The inspiration she received at school from her teachers at a catholic gymnasium shaped her mentally and intellectually and fostered her moral and social values, especially the doctor's duty to extend life. In 1966, she moved to Salzburg where she was allowed to start basic surgical training, which at that time was unheard of for a woman. She completed her surgical training in Vienna and began to deal intensively with reconstructive surgery, which was just beginning. During this period, she also married Franz Piza, Professor of Vascular and Transplant Surgery and was happily married for 44 years until he passed away in 2016.

She was the first woman to be admitted to the First Surgical University Clinic in Vienna. Between 1970–1992, she researched and published extensively and introduced the microsurgery of vessels she had learned in wet laboratory. Her research focus was on tissue growth, regeneration of the sympathetic nervous system, and silicone research. She was co-founder of the first European Replantation Service. In 1992, she set up a plastic and reconstructive surgery department at Lainz Hospital in Vienna and was its director until 1999 when she was appointed to Innsbruck as the first full professor in a surgical subject in the German-speaking area to take over the University Clinic for Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery. She was also the founder of the non-profit organization “Kinderhände-Childrenhands” www.handclub.at to support children with malformed hands.

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2000 was a momentous year when she succeeded in transplanting two hands into a letter bomb victim, one of five people worldwide who had both hands transplanted. This successful operation received worldwide recognition and contributed to her being named Scientist of the Year by the Austrian Club of Education and Science Journalists. In 2002 and 2006 she performed two more double hand transplants.

Professor Piza-Katzer's work deals with both medical and social aspects. The return of physically damaged people to a normal life is not only medically and functionally important, but also psychologically and economically so. Reconstructive surgery has become one of the most important disciplines in surgery to preserve the quality of life not only in young trauma victims but also in the elderly. She is one of the rare personalities who has continued to work well after retirement. As a consultant, she still operates all over Austria on children with hand malformations.

When she embarked on her career, the field of surgery was a male domain. She repeatedly encountered male scepticism and resistance and always had to prove herself to others. Over the years, in difficult and almost hopeless situations, she learned to keep calm, internally and externally, by adopting the “eagle position”—rising above the turmoil to gain space and overview from which to observe, analyse, re-focus and gain new strength—like an eagle.

Looking forward, medicine in general and surgery in particular is becoming increasingly technical. Today, more than ever, we need social empathy, interaction and team spirit. We still need doctors who hold the hands of their patients. Both technical competency and humanity are personified in Dr. Piza-Katzer.

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