

In memoriam: Franz Seitelberger (1916–2007)

Kurt A. Jellinger

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“Per aspera ad astra”

In the present year, the international neuroscience community has lost two of its most important personalities who, due to a unique combination of intelligence, charismatic leadership and extraordinary research capacities, have made major contributions to the development of modern neuropathology and brain research: 6 months after his friend Igor Klatzo's death, Franz Seitelberger faded away after long and severe illness. About 21 years ago, a special issue of *Acta Neuropathologica* was dedicated to his 70th birthday, and as one of his oldest scholars and friends, the present author had the privilege to write the introduction and laudatio.

Franz Seitelberger was born in Vienna, Austria, on December 4, 1916. After graduating from Vienna University School of Medicine in 1940, he started his medical career in

a neurological hospital in Vienna and later in the special department for brain and nerve injuries at Bad Ischl, headed by the famous neurosurgeon Wilhelm Tönnis. From 1947, Seitelberger worked with Erwin Stransky and later, with Hans Hoff, at the Neurological Hospital “Rosenhügel” in Vienna, and was registered as neurologist and psychiatrist in 1950. A year later, he began to work at the Neurological (Obersteiner) Institute of Vienna University School of Medicine, then headed by Hans Hoff. In 1953, he accepted the opportunity to work with Julius Hallervorden at the Department of Neuropathology of the Max-Planck Institute for Brain Research in Giessen, Germany. During this period he developed a special interest in diffuse sclerosis, neuroaxonal dystrophy, and other neurodegenerative and metabolic disorders. In 1954 he became docent (reader) in neurology, neuroanatomy and neuropathology, and in 1958 was nominated extraordinary professor. In 1959 Seitelberger was appointed director of the Obersteiner Institute which, after World War II, he completely reorganized and converted it into a modern research institute for both diagnostic and experimental neuropathology and neurosciences that soon achieved international reputation. He remained director of this important research institution until his retirement in 1987, which is now the Clinical Institute of Neurology of the Medical University of Vienna (headed by H. Budka). In 1960, he spent several months as visiting scientist at the National Institute for Neurological Diseases and Blindness (NINDB) in Bethesda, MD, USA, where he worked with Igor Klatzo on brain edema. In 1964 Seitelberger was appointed Full Professor of Neurology at Vienna University School of Medicine.

In 1961, *Acta Neuropathologica* was founded as the organ of the Commissions (later Research Groups) of Neuropathology, Comparative Neuropathology, and Neurooncology of the World Federation of Neurology (WFN). Franz Seitelberger, one of the founders, was the first Managing Editor of this

K. A. Jellinger (✉)
Institute of Clinical Neurobiology,
Medical University of Vienna, Kenyongasse 18,
Vienna 1070, Austria
e-mail: kurt.jellinger@univie.ac.at

prestigious journal, devoted to the promotion of further development in neuropathology and related fields of the neurosciences. From 1959 to 1970 Seitelberger was Secretary-General of the Research Groups for Neuropathology of the WFN, and in 1964 he founded the Austrian Research Group, later known as Society of Neuropathology, whose President he was until 1986. In 1964 he was elected corresponding member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, and in 1970 a full member of this distinguished academy. In 1965 he became a scientific member of the Max Planck Society for the Promotion of Science, and since 1966 he was member of the International Brain Research Organization (IBRO). In 1968 he was awarded membership of the German Society of Natural Scientists Leopoldina. From 1970 to 1974 he was President of the Austrian Society of Neurology and Psychiatry, from 1973 to 1984 of the International Society for the Research of the Vegetative Nervous System, and from 1974 to 1978 of the International Society of Neuropathology (ISN). From 1970 to 1987 he headed the newly founded Brain Research Institute of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, which comprised a number of highly specialized and active departments. In 1974/1975 Seitelberger was elected Dean of the Faculty of Medicine of Vienna University, from 1975 to 1977 he was Rector magnificus (Rektor) and in 1977–1978 Prorector of the University of Vienna during an extremely difficult period of administration of the new university organization law 1976. In 1984–1985 Seitelberger was a scholar of the Fogarty International Center at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, MD, USA.

Franz Seitelberger had a wide range of scientific interests, covering many areas of clinical and basic neuropathology and special areas of basic and applied neurosciences. Much of his work has been devoted to degenerative and metabolic disorders of the nervous system, leukodystrophies, and problems of demyelination, aging processes and dementias. His earlier research focused on Pelizaeus-Merzbacher disease; one of his last papers on the neuropathology and genetics of this disorder appeared in 1995 in *Brain Pathology*. Other special fields of his research were neurolipidoses, myoclonus body disease, neuroaxonal dystrophy and genetic forms of prion diseases. His description of infantile neuroaxonal dystrophy (Seitelberger's disease) is a seminal work, and his research on rare neurological disorders, such as connatal Pelizaeus-Merzbacher disease and Gerstmann-Sträussler-Scheinker disease are to be emphasized. His more recent research, in addition to senile and presenile dementias, tau and Lewy body pathology, Rett's syndrome, experimental brain edema and problems of demyelination, has focused on the function and evolution of brain organization, neurobiological aspects of personality and neuroethics. Moreover, he dedicated much time to the history of brain research, with his final paper on Theodor Meynert, protagonist and visionary on brain research (*J Hist Neurosci* 6:264–74, 1997). In addition,

Seitelberger has pioneered many fields of neuropathology and has served as promoter of modern brain research and neurosciences not only in Austria but also all over the world. He published 380 scientific papers, including several articles in international handbooks. He has travelled around the world to many scientific meetings and conferences, to meet friends and colleagues. In 1982 he organized the 9th International Congress of Neuropathology in Vienna. His many academic and administrative occupations did not interfere with his scientific interests and teaching activities.

The general appreciation of his scientific work and extraordinary personality was demonstrated by awarding him honorary memberships of the ISN, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Mexican Academy of Medicine. In addition of having been a member of numerous national and international societies and committees, Seitelberger was elected honorary member of the American, British, German and Japanese Associations of Neuropathology, and the American, French and Polish Societies of Neurology. In acknowledgement of his many accomplishments Seitelberger received the Honorary Medal in Gold from the Federal Capital of Vienna in 1986. On account of his close and long-standing connections of his institute with numerous Japanese scientists, scholars and post-docs, in 1989 Seitelberger was awarded the Order of the Holy Treasure with star, gold and silver rays, one of the highest decorations of the Japanese empire.

Until a few years ago, Professor Seitelberger was a very active member of the scientific community, who had devoted his efforts to achieve recognition for neuropathology and neurosciences in general and to promote education, teaching and research in these fields.

All who had the privilege to work with him and to know him personally were impressed by his copious knowledge and widespread interests not only in basic and clinical neurosciences, but also in culture, music and philosophy. As a *polyhistor*, he was one of the last extraordinary personalities who dedicated his efforts to his institute, his co-workers, scholars and friends. He was a rare example of politeness and efficacy not only in his scientific work but also in his personal life which we will never forget. The many scholars, co-workers and colleagues of Franz Seitelberger are grateful for all that he has accomplished in neuropathology and brain research, for all his efforts in promoting neurosciences in Austria and throughout the world, and for all he has taught us as a scientist with great charismatic personality. He will be remembered not only for his visionary contributions to neuroscience but also for his strict and well organized style of life.

On November 2, 2007, Franz Seitelberger passed away after a long-lasting and severe illness, daily cared for by his beloved wife, Dr. Erika Seitelberger. He is survived by his wife, two daughters, a son and seven grandchildren along with whom we are mourning, but his memory will be cherished by all who had the privilege to be close to him.