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Obituary for Univ.-Prof. Dr. Jörg Böhler

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Professor Jörg Böhler passed away on December 11th 2005, 4 days before his 88th birthday. As a son of Professor Lorenz Böhler, who established trauma surgery as a separate medical specialty in Austria, Jörg Böhler was known as the “Young Böhler”. Though stricken with mortal illness, Jörg Böhler remained virtually unchanged and mentally sharp to the very end. In spite of severe dyspnoea, which kept him from walking more than a few steps at a time, he held his very last lecture on “state of the art in hand surgery” at his famous hand seminar only a few days before he passed away.

Born in Gries near Bozen in Southern Tyrol as the youngest son of Lorenz and Leopoldine Böhler, Jörg graduated in Vienna and studied medicine in Innsbruck and Vienna. Brought up to be physically active, Jörg Böhler remained an athlete during his years at medical school. Hans Hass invited Jörg Böhler to accompany him as a medical advisor on his first expeditions. However, in addition to being a highly qualified medical advisor, Böhler soon proved to be a most persevering apnoea diver. Together with Hans Hass and Alfred von Wurtzian, the founder of modern scuba diving and underwater photography, he helped develop the first lightweight diving and underwater camera equipment. Böhler and his friends were on a diving expedition in Bonaire and Curacao in the Dutch Antilles when they were informed that World War II had broken out. They left the Dutch Antilles and set out on the long and adventurous journey home via New York, Hawaii, China, Russia and Germany.

Though allowed to complete his medical studies, Jörg Böhler was assigned to the air force and was to be

drafted as soon as possible. Thus, very soon after his graduation from Medical School in 1941 and his employment by the Social Insurance for Working Accidents (AUVA) in its Webergasse Trauma Hospital in Vienna, he was ordered to go to the Russian front. In a military plane crash over Stalingrad, he suffered 14 fractures and was one of the very few to survive at all. On his return flight home, Böhler only survived another crash landing approaching Smolensk because he was catapulted out of the plane. After finally arriving in Vienna, he was initially treated at the AUVA Trauma Hospital and then transferred to the AUVA Rehabilitation Clinic in Stollhof.

Jörg Böhler was certified as a specialist for Surgery in 1948 and as a specialist for Trauma Surgery in 1951. In 1951 he also became the Medical Chief of the new AUVA Trauma Center in Linz, where he founded the first trauma intensive care unit and trauma burn unit in Austria. He was the first surgeon in Europe to have an operating theater equipped with laminar airflow. In cooperation with neuro-surgeons, maxillo-facial surgeons and ENT surgeons, he focussed on acute diagnostics and emergency surgery of traumatic brain injury and fronto-basal fractures. Jörg Böhler himself was an extremely skillful surgeon and developed new surgical techniques for the treatment of spinal fractures. In those days, some considered Böhler's techniques to be dangerous and his publications were thus rejected by high-ranking American journals. In the meantime, his techniques that have been fully acknowledged have long since become a part of routine trauma surgery.

Jörg Böhler was one of the founding fathers of AO in Austria. He introduced new minimally invasive surgical techniques long before MIC, and introduced the intra-operative microscope in hand surgery in the mid-1960s. On 1 January 1971, he became the medical chief of the AUVA Trauma Center Webergasse in Vienna, which moved into the newly built Lorenz Böhler Trauma Center in 1972. Böhler remained as the head of that trauma center until he retired in 1984. From the very beginning, he was a pioneer in the field of arthroscopy,

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inviting Professor Otto Wruhs to perform arthroscopies and educate physicians in this new field as early as 1973.

Böhler's initiative also led to the foundation of a research institute within the AUVA. This institute developed into one of the leading research institute for clinical and experimental traumatology worldwide. Research on shock, hypocoagulation, and fibrin sealant were merely a few of the topics initiated by Jörg Böhler. Jörg Böhler published over 360 scientific papers and book contributions and held more than 500 lectures, not including the lectures held during his courses at the trauma center.

In 1957 the *Venia legendi* for surgery was granted to Jörg Böhler by the University of Vienna for his extensive scientific work on "The early surgical treatment of hand injuries with particular consideration of tendon injuries". He became professor at the University of Vienna in 1964. In 1969 he was invited to hold the "Sterling Bunell Memorial lecture" in San Francisco, an honor only bestowed upon very few hand surgeons worldwide.

As a young man, Jörg Böhler had enthusiastically read Bunell's book "Surgery of the Hand" and requested Bunell's permission to translate the book into German.

From then on, hand surgery ranked among his top interests: from 1959 until immediately before his death, Jörg Böhler personally held 113 hand courses, teaching over 5,000 physicians, including some of today's leading

hand surgeons. Jörg Böhler was a charismatic leader. He held three briefings a day at the trauma center to ensure that he was always fully informed about every single patient.

Jörg Böhler was a demanding and extremely critical chief, yet was always willing to offer assistance in any way. He held subscriptions to 50 top medical journals and was an avid reader, marking every important article for his staff. His extensive collection of medical papers was always in perfect order and open to anyone who was interested.

In 1947, Jörg Böhler married Susi von Foest-Monshoff. Married for almost 60 years, they remained devoted to one another and had four children. During his last and most difficult days, Jörg Böhler's wife Susi never left his side.

Jörg Böhler was honorary president of the Austrian Society of Trauma Surgery. Additionally, he was a member, corresponding member and honorary member of countless national and international societies. We have lost Professor Jörg Böhler who was one of the great men of the medical profession. We are deeply indebted to him for providing us with both the theoretical knowledge and the practical know-how for our professional careers. In the hearts and minds of all those who had the honor to know him, Jörg Böhler and his guiding principle will live on—victory of the mind over the body.