

## My last visit with Friedrich Vogel: a personal remembrance

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It was an early summer day in Heidelberg with a magnificent blue sky, fresh forest air and brilliant light. From Friedrich Vogel's new apartment at the Augustinum, one had a view onto the wide open plain of the Rhine valley. Almost immobile, deprived of his voice for nearly a year, Friedrich Vogel could only respond with minimal gestures and the flickering of his eyes. Nevertheless, he could clearly signal which topics he considered interesting and those no longer of relevance to him.

Friedrich Vogel was born in Berlin in 1924. He belonged to our fathers' generation raised during the Third Reich and sent to war immediately after finishing school. He was 21 years old when the Second World War finally came to an end. After a period of captivity, until 1946, he had to make the decision between studying ethnology and medicine—and he opted for medi-

cine. For his doctoral work he was keen to move into genetics. This was a brave decision at the time coming directly after years of the Nazi practical application of eugenics leading, at its nadir, to the holocaust. Friedrich Vogel was an intellectual rationalist. Only someone like him could foresee that there would be a route from Eugenics to a new modern Genetics, which—by using quantitative and scientific means—would result in benefits for humankind.

Friedrich Vogel carried out his doctoral work at the *Max-Planck-Institut für vergleichende Erbbiologie und Erbpathologie* in Berlin–Dahlem. He was impressed by the level of independence and freedom that was granted to him as a young student by his supervisor Professor Nachtsheim. He completed his habilitation in 1957 on the heritability of the normal electroencephalogram. This topic remained his favourite project throughout his entire scientific life. He became interested in mathematical models and he deeply admired both the work and personality of J.B.S. Haldane. In 1962, he was appointed director of the newly founded Institute of Human Genetics and Anthropology in Heidelberg.

Friedrich Vogel's choices of scientific research topics throughout his career were broad and quite diverse. He published on the genetics of the electroencephalogram, on the mechanisms, frequencies and consequences of mutations for human blood groups and the origin of diseases, population genetics, pharmacogenetics, genetic family counseling, behavioural genetics, and the history and philosophy of science. A more detailed summary of his work is given by others.

There is no question that written language was his medium. Writing reviews and books where he could expand his ideas were the logical outcome of his

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compulsive drive to summarize and explain science. His prodigious memory was legendary. He liked to impress people by citing distinct facts from papers published some 50 years earlier.

A wealth of genetics and other findings were also summarized in Friedrich Vogel's seminal book "Human Genetics—Problems and Approaches", a transatlantic enterprise with Professor Arno Motulsky, an old friend who emigrated to the United States prior to the Second World War. He was also one of the founders of the journal "Human Genetics" and kept a very close connection to the Springer publishing house throughout his entire life.

I first met Friedrich Vogel in 1981 when I started my PhD with Thomas Cremer at the Institute of Human Genetics in Heidelberg. Vogel was an energetic man with a great sense of duty and responsibility. At the Institute, the University and at many scientific meetings, he loved to contribute in an outspoken manner. "Somebody has to speak out ..." was one of his favorite sayings—clearly, that "somebody" was him.

Friedrich Vogel was very much science-oriented. As director of the Institute, he reminded us about the challenge of a good problem and the delights of a surprising result. He was very supportive to young people and his (and his wife's) hospitality was remarkable.

"Approaching the truth through discussion", these words of the Heidelberg philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer also apply to Friedrich Vogel. He strongly favoured the idea of "think tanks", where people meet and discuss important topics. Sabbaticals for him were seen as a way to remain creative. He himself took several periods of leave: he was guest professor in the United States and India, fellow at the Center of Advanced Studies in the Behavioural Sciences at Stanford and at the *Wissenschaftskolleg* in Berlin.

After leaving the Institute to work abroad, I again met Friedrich Vogel in 1986 at the International Congress of Human Genetics that he organized together with Karl Sperling in Berlin. This meeting, the first international meeting of Human Genetics in post-war Germany, turned out to be a great success. It symbolized a coming to terms with the past, and for many was a new beginning.

I returned to the Institute in 1990, after he offered me a position. At that time, about 1 year after the fall of the Berlin wall, Friedrich Vogel was Dean of the Faculty and deeply involved in the restructuring and reorganization of the Sciences in the new *Länder*. Raised in Berlin, I think he had a sensitive understanding of the East, its inherent problems and of our fellow scientists in the former *DDR*. I am convinced that he played a major role in the reorganization of German science at that time.

Friedrich Vogel was a man with numerous pursuits. In addition to his love of science, he was interested in literature and modern art and Japanese lithographies were his special foible. He loved to travel to exotic places including India, Tibet, China and Japan and kept in close contact with many colleagues world-wide. For his 80th birthday, his children took him to the South Pole, an appropriate present for someone who enjoyed adventuring into the unknown.

With reluctance, Friedrich Vogel retired at the age of 68. By that time, he was a member of various scientific academies and had received international recognition through many honors and prizes (detailed in the other obituaries). In Heidelberg, his vision and drive greatly helped to shape the spirit of the University, its Medical faculty and the Institute of Human Genetics.

In the last years of his life, one of his pressing concerns was to have his private book collection along with that of Hans Nachtsheim made accessible to students with an interest in the history of science and genetics. When I promised that I would organize and help to take care of this, his eyes sparkled with joy.

Then the visit was over. When I turned around at the front door of his apartment to have a last clandestine look back into the room, I saw him only from behind, but his arm was lifted high and his hand waving a good-bye. He was always able to surprise.

On 5 August, Friedrich Vogel passed away. The end of life for a man on whose word one could rely. He was the key scientific and political figure for Human Genetics in Germany for many years and he will remain deeply respected and held in grateful remembrance by those who worked closely with him.