In memoriam

Homage to Ivan Kempf (1928–2018)

His professional accomplishments mirrored his personality, resisting all ordeals and exhibiting the signs of an altruistic dimension fuelled by his demanding personal sense of ethics.

Without diminishing his focus on orthopaedic surgery (the oldest among us remember the rotation osteotomy of the femoral head designed to treat avascular necrosis), Ivan Kempf resolutely committed himself to traumatology, a difficult discipline that requires a rarely found combination of organisational capabilities and tenacity. In 1962, with the support of local mayors, he drove the creation of ‘advanced rescue ambulances’, the precursors of the SAMU¹, to provide first aid and transport to traffic accident victims in the Strasbourg region.

Displaying admirable persistence, Ivan Kempf was the main force behind the creation of the Strasbourg Trauma and Orthopaedic Surgery Centre at Illkirch-Graffenstaden, which rapidly gained international recognition. He directed the centre from 1975 to 1994.

Despite his many organisational duties, Ivan Kempf kept a strong focus on improving everyday surgical practice. One of his achievements is the development, in partnership with Arsène Grosse, of locked intramedullary nailing.

Ivan Kempf created many other entities whose subsequent development and longevity attest to his broad and relevant vision of the future, including:

- the French College of Orthopaedic and Trauma Surgery (Collège Français de Chirurgie Orthopédique et Traumatologique);
- the International Association for Dynamic Internal Fixation (Association Internationale pour l’Ostéosynthèse Dynamique);
- the French-Language Association of Orthopaedic Surgeons (Association des Orthopédistes de Langue Française);
- and the Association for Orthopaedic Surgery Publications (Association des Publications en Chirurgie Orthopédique).

The loss of Ivan Kempf, and of other giants of French orthopaedic surgery and traumatology, should prompt the younger generation to cultivate the duty of remembrance, since the only valid foundation to a strong edifice is an in-depth knowledge of the past.

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¹ The SAMU (Service d’Aide Médicale Urgente) is the network of public hospital-based mobile physician-staffed first response units that handles emergencies in France since 1986.

Some men produce a body of work that is indistinguishable from the way they lead their lives. Ivan Kempf, who died in Strasbourg on the 23rd of July 2018, was without doubt one of them.

Born in 1928 to a family torn by the alternation of conquest and reconquest, Ivan Kempf passionately loved his native region of Alsace, which was annexed to the Third Reich during World War II. He was forcefully drafted into the Wehrmacht at the age of 16. In April 1945, he escaped, before being captured by the Americans one month later and, finally, released in June of the same year.

He enrolled in the Strasbourg school of medicine at the end of the war and obtained his medical doctorate in 1951 then qualified as a surgeon in 1958. Surprisingly, he also studied anaesthesia and intensive care, obtaining his degree in 1960, a choice that probably influenced the direction of his subsequent work.

At first glance, he emitted an aura of power that appeared indestructible. His straightforward and limpid gaze pierced his interlocutor, his exuberant mane of hair radiated vital energy, and everything about him immediately commanded respect. Ivan Kempf knew human beings and what they are capable of, and his pronouncements inspired dread. Nevertheless, during personal talks and in friendly discussions, Ivan Kempf revealed a deep benevolence and a desire to share the joys of life. At times, when he felt he could trust his audience, he manifested an irresistible sense of humour.