
IN MEMORIAM

Prof. Branka Pilar-Svoboda (1920-2005)

Farewell Speech at the Mirogoj Cemetery, 2nd March 2005

Esteemed members of the family, colleagues and friends!

News of the death of close relatives, friends or fellow-workers always comes as a surprise and finds us unprepared, and as we become older such news is more difficult to accept. So it was when the news reached us of the departure of the last of the generation which for decades represented the embodiment of maxillofacial surgery and the Clinic of Maxillofacial and Oral Surgery in Zagreb, Prof. Branka Pilar-Svoboda. All of us who worked with her for many years in the Clinic of Maxillofacial and Oral Surgery at Šalata, were aware that her health was very poor, and that at any moment her physical departure could occur. Nevertheless, nobody wanted to think of it. However, fate hardly ever considers our wishes and takes away at will, in such an order that nobody can explain and in which there are no rules.

It can be said that the departure of Prof. Branka Pilar-Svoboda marked the end of the period of formation and development of maxillofacial surgery in Croatia and that the firm foundations achieved facilitated the development of the profession up to its present level.

Although a considerable difference in age existed between my generation of oral surgeons and the generation of the founders of maxillofacial surgery and older generation of maxillofacial surgeons, I can with confidence and satisfaction say that there have never been better examples of mutual understanding and cooperation between two related professions and different generations. The younger generation respected the older generation, while the older generation recognised the values of the younger generation. We all knew our place and the basic aim was to help the patient. An impeccable 'teacher-pupil' relationship was established, which later resulted in excellent cooperation and understanding. We lived together for the profession and the Clinic regardless of which generation we were. This often had an effect on our families, who missed us but who accepted the situation, although often not completely understanding.

Prof. Pilar, our Pilarica, as we younger associates used to call her, was a physician of wide professional and general knowledge. In private life she loved her daughters and grandchildren, music, theatre, the arts, literature and her pets. In everyday life she preferred the company of a good book and her pets than people. In the profession she was assertive, which was occasionally incomprehensible both to patients and co-workers. However, that was only the impression of those who were unable or did not want to understand her. All those of us who succeeded in establishing cooperation and understanding knew that behind the apparent hardness was a very sensitive person, which we frequently witnessed when she cried or suffered together with a patient, or when she listened to our problems or during discussions on the profession, music, arts, family and children.

She dedicated her life to the Clinic of Maxillofacial and Oral Surgery, and worked tirelessly until her retirement in 1978.

She was born in Slavonski Brod on 30th November 1920. Matriculated in Slavenska Požega in 1939 and graduated at the School of Medicine in Zagreb in 1945. She later passed specialist examinations in Dental Medicine in 1951 and Maxillofacial Surgery in 1971.

She defended her dissertation thesis entitled "Growth and Development of the Jaw in the Innate Cleft Lip and Palate", in 1967 and subsequent habilitation study entitled "Hemihypertrophic and Hemiatrophic Deformations of the Face and Facial Bones" in 1972. In 1944 she began work as a volunteer in the Clinic of Dental Medicine at Šalata, which later became the School of Dental Medicine in Zagreb and the Clinic of Maxillofacial and Oral Surgery. During the last few years of the Second World War she assisted in the treatment of numerous wounded people, who at that time occupied the whole of the Clinic at Šalata. She was engaged in maxillofacial surgery, dental medicine and anaesthesiology, and acted as an anaesthesiologist up until the arrival of Prof. Vera Arko to the Clinic in 1964. At the time when Ivo Čupar was preparing his life work "Surgery of the Head and Neck" in 3 volumes Prof. Pilar-Svoboda helped with a large part of the work and publishing the books. After her retirement she was confronted with a disease which restricted her communication with people closest to her. As she was a dynamic person such a life was a particularly heavy burden, which at times was hard for her to bear. Fate prevented her enjoyment with Ivna and Mirna in the company of her grandchildren.

In the Clinic of Maxillofacial and Oral Surgery, located today in the University Hospital Dubrava, not much remains from that time not so long ago at Šalata. There is the furniture from the library where morning meetings were held and where important events for the Clinic took place, and just a few of us, who knew Prof. Pilar. The loss of Prof. Pilar marks the disappearance of a generation of doyens of maxillofacial and oral surgery, whose names and spirit will always be with us. It was a generation that, because of an overwhelming amount of work, hardly ever had time to look up at the stars, let alone to think of their own importance under the stars, as one Croatian poet wrote in his verses. All those of us who had the good fortune to learn from them and cooperate with them are aware of how great they were, and accept their transition into dust as transition into stars which will continue to shine in our hearts and in Croatian maxillofacial and oral surgery and Croatian dental medicine.

Dear Prof. Pilar. May you rest in peace!

Goran Knežević