FERDINAND SAUERBRUCH: PIONEER THORACIC SURGEON

Ferdinand Sauerbruch (1875-1951) was one of the most famous and fearsome surgeons of Europe. He is considered as father of thoracic surgery, who made thoracic cavity as approachable as the abdomen was, a generation earlier.

Sauerbruch graduated in medicine from the University of Leipzig in 1901. He assisted Von Mikulicz, Professor of Surgery at Breslau. Mikulicz, interested in thoracic surgery, suggested that a machine be devised to control pneumothorax during thoracotomy. This proved noteworthy, for Sauerbruch constructed a small experimental chamber for operating under negative pressure, after several successful surgeries it was judged sound, and the model, was demonstrated at the German Congress for Surgery in Berlin in 1904. Chamber, accommodated patient and surgeon under negative pressure, while anesthetist and the patient’s head were exposed to normal environment, the antique telephone communicating with anesthetist. However, his chamber was not the ultimate device. Simple and effective positive pressure ventilation replaced the expensive, cumbersome Sauerbruch chamber.

In 1910, Sauerbruch was called to the chair of surgery as chief of large clinic at the University of Zurich. Together with Mikulicz, he initiated procedures on the mediastinum, lungs, pericardium, heart and esophagus. The Mountains of Switzerland were dotted with number of TB sanatoriums, and patients in various stages of pulmonary diseases, flocked in. Sauerbruch made practical, the arrest of pulmonary excursion, and rest to the lung, in treatment of chronic pulmonary TB, by logical surgical procedures like phrenic nerve intervention, and thoracoplasties. He also removed a tumor of thymus from a patient of exophthalmic goiter and myasthenia gravis.

During WW-I he served as consulting surgeon to the 15th Corps of German Army. As a battlefield surgeon he developed several new types of limb prosthesis. In 1927, he was invited at the Charite Hospital in Berlin, and became best known surgeon in Europe. He was technically skillful, bold, arrogant, dominating, and a perfectionist. Among his famous patients were, young Lenin, financier Baron Rothschild, Greek King Constantine and Von Hindenburg. He was surgeon General to Adolph Hitler.

In his autobiography, it is difficult to determine whether he was Nazi at heart, or Nazi by convenience. In 1937, he became Reichsforschungsrat (Reich Research Council) that supported “research projects” of the SS, including experiments on prisoners in the concentration camps. After extensive research, however, it is clear that he has not been in connection with any concrete cases; in the opposite, he was one of the few University professors who publicly spoke out against the NS-Euthanasia program T4. In 1942, he was tried by the Soviet Army after the war, but on recommendation of Vischnevisky, he was appointed Professor at the Humboldt University. However, he was forced to resign from his post in 1949, and was finally restrained in his home, due to dementia praecox. He died at the age of 76 in Berlin. After the advent of the first safe thoracic surgery, the advances in technique and technology have been enormous. A great deal is owed to the inspiration and contributions of Ferdinand Sauerbruch.

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