

Rudolf Wiechert (1928–2013)

Rudolf Wiechert passed away on January 15, 2013, shortly before his 85th birthday, in Berlin. It was in this city that he lived for almost all of his life, had an outstanding career and numerous scientific successes, and made significant contributions to organic chemistry and natural product chemistry.

Born on March 3, 1928 in Stendal, he was called up to the military in 1944 to suffer the atrocities at the end of the war while still a sixteen-year-old schoolboy. As a soldier in the German army, he ended up as a Russian prisoner of war, and after being released in 1946, he dedicated himself to finishing his school education so that he could complete his Abitur in 1947 in Stendal. He initially began studies at the Freie Universität (FU) Berlin in the subjects geography and German, and, although he may have also made a good teacher, we can be grateful that after one year he switched to chemistry (1949). The Diplom exam followed in 1954, and he then joined the group of W. Lautsch at the FU. He completed his doctorate as early as 1956 on experimental work on the synthesis of polymers with preformed cavities, a topic that is still studied today for various purposes in many areas.

In 1957, he joined Schering AG, where he had taken over the direction of the steroid chemistry division by 1963. He then completed his habilitation in organic chemistry in 1968 at the TU Berlin on 1,2-methylene steroids, and was made professor in 1971. The pinnacle of his career was his being made Director of Chemical and Molecular Biology Research at Schering AG in 1991. For the research at Schering and for the scientists at the Berlin laboratories, Rudolf Wiechert really was a piece of good fortune. His impressive competence in the subject, together with his collegiality, quickly endowed him with a natural authority. His unpretentious nature made him easily approachable and allowed him to provide individually tailored motivation. Rudolf Wiechert also intensely cultivated all of the efforts of his colleagues towards basic research and found many ways to protect dedicated researchers from the demands of the project organization.

Rudolf Wiechert placed great value on the rapid publication of scientific results. There were times when the number of publications from Schering was much higher than those of other larger companies. Particularly important contributions from his laboratory, apart from the optimization of the established contraceptives, included the synthesis of cyproterone acetate as an example of a new class of compound with antiandrogen activity and thus the development of Androcur, which was used for treating both hypersexuality and hormone-dependent prostate carcinoma. Cyproterone ace-

tate also found use in the combination preparation Diane, which acts as contraceptive and acne treatment. The synthesis of the spiro lactone drospirenone was subsequently also achieved.

The development of new substances and therapeutic agents led to major breakthroughs in organic synthesis. An outstanding example is the asymmetric proline-catalyzed cyclization to the Hajos–Wiechert ketone as an optically active building block for rings C and D of steroids. This reaction, of which there are many examples, unlocked the field of research that is organocatalysis, which is intensively studied today by about 30 research groups worldwide. Further to the proline derivatives, other types of alkaloids have been included as chiral components, and the important contribution of urea and thiourea groups could be demonstrated.

Rudolf Wiechert's scientific output, which comprised 159 publications and 331 patents, has been honored with numerous awards and prizes, of which only the following selection are mentioned: the Adolf Windaus Medal, the Adolf von Baeyer Memorial Medal, the Grand Prix de la Maison de la Chimie, the Hans Herloff Inhoffen Medal, and honorary membership of the Hungarian Chemical Society.

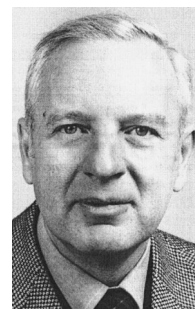
Rudolf Wiechert was a determined and responsible scientist. On his travels, which included visits to China, he made himself aware of issues of health and population and discussed birth control knowledgeably. He paid much attention to all facets of the education and research environments in Germany. He knew most institute directors personally and was well-informed of their research themes and special interests. In particular, he was active in the question of research funding and always kept an eye on the advancement of young academics.

At the time, there was rarely a discussion about the state of the German Research Council or natural product chemistry that didn't involve Wiechert's factual, well-thought-out, and scientifically valid opinion. Interest in these developments and such questions occupied him even long after his retirement. For Rudolf Wiechert the quote "Non Omnis Moriar" from Horace's ode is most apt. "I shall not wholly die", indeed. His work, his personality, and his example shall remain in the minds and the hearts of greater scientific community for a long time to come.

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