To the memory of Professor Singer

Professor Leonard Singer, the founding father of the European Psychiatric Association, died in Strasbourg on November 21, 2009.

Professor Singer was born in Neudorf, close to the capital of Alsace.

He pursued his high school education in Strasbourg before obtaining his diploma in Clermont-Ferrand, in the center of France, where his family took refuge during the Second World War. There, Pr Singer started a Bachelor’s degree in chemistry.

In 1943 he joined the French Resistance (Maquis d'Auvergne) and took an active part in the liberation of Clermont-Ferrand in 1944. At the end of the war he went back to Strasbourg where he resumed his university studies, changing his orientation toward a medical specialization. He completed his residency between 1948 and 1952, was nominated as Médecin des Hôpitaux in 1959 and became a full professor of psychiatry in 1969.

In 1973 he was chosen as the chief of the academic Department of Psychiatry at the Hospices Civils de Strasbourg and in 1982 he succeeded Pr Kammerer as chairman of the same academic department.

After his retirement Pr Singer was Emeritus Professor from 1992 to 1995 and an Honorary Professor from 1995 until his death.

During all these years Pr Singer developed an outstanding activity as a researcher, a scientist and, primarily, as a clinician fully involved in public health issues; for example, he was the main author of one of the first national reports requested by the Ministry of Social Security Affairs on the current status of psychiatric care in France (formerly under the presidency of General De Gaulle). Pr Singer was a pioneer in this field, as well as in fighting stigmatization and proposing pragmatic solutions for reducing the burden linked to psychiatric diseases.

In parallel, he launched the first research department specializing in biological psychiatry in Strasbourg, which can be retrospectively considered as a very successful academic cohabitation since a strong psychoanalytical orientation was firmly established as a tradition in this university. Pr Singer has conducted numerous well-known studies in psychopharmacology (among others, concerning the side effects and monitoring of lithium salts) and his research department played a leading role in implementing the first genetic psychiatric studies in France.

All these efforts have been rewarded by the creation of an INSERM research unit, the leadership of which has been given to his direct collaborator in clinical neurosciences, Pr Jean-Marie Danion.

However, the domain for which Pr Singer is best known at the international level is the central position he occupied during 20 years in European psychiatry. In 1983, as an active participant of the world congress of psychiatry in Vienna he very quickly realized the necessity for European psychiatry to be unified in order to remain a powerful partner in the international consortium. The American Psychiatric Association at this time had just released the third Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Psychiatric Disorders (DSM III) and its leadership role in the psychiatric community was more than obvious. Pr Peter Berner, who was the host of the congress, contrary to expectations, was not elected as the next president of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA).

Pr Singer and other European colleagues decided to convert this apparent defeat into a positive and very promising initiative, namely the creation of the Association of European Psychiatrists (AEP). The founding members were Pr Heimann, Pr Hippius, Pr Pichot, Pr Pull, Pr Berner and Pr Singer; the first meeting took place in Vienna. The AEP was officially created in 1984, the headquarters of the Association being based in Strasbourg, which is still the case today. Pr Singer was elected as the first president of the AEP (now the EPA) and he organized in his native city the first congress of the Association.
Everyone knows that the first years of an international society are the crucial ones and require from its promoter an outstanding level of both energy and efficacy and a total commitment to the project. Pr Singer succeeded in every respect and for 8 years was the key person for everything related to the EPA. The following congresses continued to be organized in Strasbourg before starting their rotation between the main European cities. But Pr Singer, with the help of his main collaborators, remained until recently a central actor for all the significant changes the Association went through. The administrative and legal aspects of the EPA were still ruled in Strasbourg, which allowed for the development of very close relationships with such European bodies as the Council of Europe, where Pr Singer was considered an expert of reference for mental health issues. In the late 1990’s the fame of the EPA was firmly established and the success of this endeavor can no doubt be attributed for the most part to the credit of Pr Singer.

As a consequence everyone will understand the huge debt we owe to Pr Singer and the gratitude we feel for this wonderful episode in the history of European psychiatry that he led toward complete success. In his personal life (thinking of the dark years of the Second World War) as well as in his professional life he was utterly capable of transforming negative events into the most generous initiatives. His human qualities were at the rarest level one can imagine, and all the members of the EPA sincerely share with his family the grief of having lost one of the major figures of European psychiatry.

Patrice Boyer, EPA President-elect.