

Walter Büngeler

1900–1987



In the winter semester of 1942–1943, I listened to a lecture on leprosy given full of verve by Walter Büngeler who had just been nominated professor to Kiel. It was remarkable how he defined the disease

according to pathological criteria by using the immunological reaction of Mitsuda. Up to this time, it was not always easy for a clinician to understand the diversity of this disease. His description of the beginning of the “uncharakteristisches Infiltrat” and the precise differentiation in “tuberculid” and “lepromatous” form of leprosy was new in Germany. After the war, these lectures stimulated me to get interested in this serious disease.

I hope Dr. Rabello, Jr. will forgive me for my description of the classification of leprosy according to the principles of Büngeler as given in the *Handbuch für Haut und Geschlechtskrankheiten* in 1970.

Admittedly, we owe the “polarization” to Dr. Rabello, Jr. and his co-workers. Rotberg also recognized the different forms of this disease based on the reaction of the lepromin test. We might say that in South America there was a special trend referring to the perception of the pathogenesis of leprosy. At that time Büngeler appeared. We owe a great stimulation to the understanding of the pathology of leprosy to him. He described, in many papers together with the unforgotten Fernandez, Martin de Castro, Nelson Souza Campos, and Alayon, his pathological experiences in leprosy. By 1939 he had already published them in the “*Revista Brasileira de Leprologia*.” During the war his research, published mostly in the German language, was kept in the background, but it was not forgotten. The expression “uncharakteristisch” used by

Büngeler was taken over into the South American classification as “uncharacteristica.” In 1948, Arnold proposed to use the expression “indeterminate” which was introduced in Havana. Büngeler understood the adjective “tuberculid” only in view of pathology. “Tuberculoid” was a more qualified term as used by Jadassohn since 1897.

Who was Walter Büngeler?

He was born on 30 December 1900 in Koblenz, Rhein, Germany. He became a pathologist with Fischer-Wasels in Frankfurt-Main. He was the first to succeed in producing leukemia by using Indol. At the age of 33, he was appointed to the chair for pathology in Danzig. In 1936, he received a call as head of the pathological institute of the Escola Paulista de Medicina de São Paulo and, at the same time, he became head of the pathology department of the Departamento de Prophylaxia de Lepra. There he had to work in a totally new field “which” as he wrote to me “occupied the biggest part of my research in Brazil. It was a new ground for me but I received full satisfaction.” He wished to gain more knowledge in pathology by using his experiences on leprosy. From today’s point of view and under the influence of immunology, we can concur with his ideas which are still effective.

Unfortunately he could not participate in the important congresses of leprosy, and Arnold regretted this very much. Those days were very unfortunate, especially for German scientists. In 1957, he was honored for his merits in Brazil by receiving the “Cruzeiro do Sul.”

In 1942, he was offered the professorial chair in Kiel and in 1956, in Munich. There he lived until he retired in 1970. In Germany he called attention to the research on leprosy in South America. He, however, concentrated more on the pathology of tumors and the fight against cancer. He was unusually able to look into the future con-

cerning scientific problems and their solutions. His capability of organizing was already admired by his co-workers in São Paulo. He was able to teach difficult matters in a way his students could easily grasp.

He died on 1 January 1987. His death is a great loss to all of his co-workers in Brazil

and to students and colleagues in Germany whom he greatly inspired. He is entitled to an honorable position in the history of pathology of leprosy.

—Georg Klingmüller