

Werner W. Franke: Retiring to the Technology Park 2007-2022

"If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change"

(Tancredi Falconeri in "Il Gattopardo" by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, 1958)

Prof. Werner W. Franke's group had shrunk considerably towards the end of 2007, when he reached retirement age. Retirement, however, was never an option for him, he wanted to continue researching: "I have learned nothing else, there is no age limit for researchers, just as there is none for artists and other freelancers". With a Helmholtz Senior Professorship generously awarded by the DKFZ, Werner Franke was then able to stay on at the Cancer Research Center.

He had joined the DKFZ in 1973. Of his group, which in the meantime had over 90 members, only a few remained:

- a few technical assistants (Christine Grund, Cilly Kuhn, Stefanie Winter, Yvette Dörflinger, Heide Schuhmacher, Edeltraut Noffz, Ralf Zimbelmann)
- one secretary (Eva Gundel)
- three PhD students (Sebastian Pieperhoff, Steffen Rickelt, Mareike Barth - later joined as the 100th and last PhD student of Prof. Franke, Lisa Domke),
- some Bachelor and Master students,
- one scientist (Hans Heid)
- from time to time some guest scientists from the USA (e.g., Prof. Thomas Keenan), Italy, Romania, etc.

In 2007/2008, we were faced with the task of moving out of the renovated DKFZ main building with this team. Before that, we had already mastered several moves/conversions within the main building for various reasons in all the "Franke years" since 1973. Now we moved, newly named as a group (A991), to the newly acquired building in the Technology Park (TP4) on Berliner Straße.

The rooms provided were, of course, much smaller in area than in the main building. Werner continued to sit engrossed in his typically huge stacks of publications and writings. He still threw himself into his work with a tireless, almost unbelievable, drive, as always "full steam ahead," day and night.

Now he had a small laboratory, a few freezers, centrifuges a Zeiss fluorescence microscope and, most important to him, his Zeiss electron microscopes. Sometimes he sat over prints of microscope images and looked at all the details for a long time with a magnifying glass. Nothing escaped him, not an artifact or a new structure. As always, when he discovered something interesting, he gave extensive instructions to us collaborators to confirm and check his ideas, to isolate and characterize protein candidates, to obtain antibodies, for special fixation and localization, and so on.

As always with him, when it seemed necessary, all species, all tissues - some fresh from the slaughterhouse - all available, hundreds of culture cells were used and tested "up and down" under all possible conditions and treatments. Everything had to be coherent. One became a "control freak" with him after a short time. His motto to us was always: "Either you do your work right, or you don't need to start at all".

We were supposed to reach our limits with him. He meant that in a positive way: you should consciously get to know your limits. You learned and discovered things and characteristics for your own life, you were shaped. As with his other passion, the sport, after reaching a 1st goal,

one should of course continue, apply new techniques, jump higher, jump further. In his mind, the world was only open to you with science. And as he himself exemplified, it was only through solid, evidence-based work and commitment that one could arrive at discoveries and truths.

In the end, one had to admit, Werner was right in the vast majority of cases!

He was also committed to the constant renewal of the scientific enterprise, got an incredible amount going with the congresses he organized, his numerous editorial & committee work, was constantly open to real innovation - hence the Tancredi quote at the beginning of my thoughts.

We thank him for his support, his generosity and his many inspirations and motivations.

Dr. Hans Heid (h.heid@icloud.com)

For other aspects about Werner Franke, about his academic beginnings, about a company foundation and about general scientific achievements and successes, I recommend in the appendix the laudations by Sitte (EurJCB, 2005), Bruder (EurJCB, 2005) and Unsicker (CTR, 2015), which are freely available via GoogleScholar.

As a further recommendation, how he always tried to make his gained insights and the following compelling conclusions understandable also to laymen, shall be shown here by only one example: In a speech given almost 40 years ago (!) to politicians in the parliament in Bonn in 1984, Werner Franke puts forward his far-sighted thoughts on the promotion of cancer research. Molecular biology is epistemologically without alternative for the "questions of life and survival on this planet". "It is the only light we have to illuminate processes of living matter and ultimately to convey them provably" (Münchener Medizinische Wochenschrift, 126, No.26, pp. 834-836, 1984; PDF-data upon request).

As examples of his extraordinary scientific achievements, I would like to highlight - out of his 32 publications listed in PubMed between the years 2008-2022 - 2 publications, one from the beginning (Franke, CSH Perspectives in Biology, 2009) and one at the end (Franke et al., CTR, 2020) of his "retirement time" in the Technology Park and invite you to re-read, rediscover.