

Otto Gerhard Prokop

Forensic scientist who left West Germany to work in East Berlin

There was something different about Professor Otto Prokop. In 1960, when he lectured students in forensic medicine, Berlin's Charité medical school was in the communist eastern half of Berlin. Many East German scientists were fleeing to West Germany and beyond, but Prokop had moved three years before from West Germany to lead Charité's Forensic Medicine Institute.

Prokop was not yet 40 years old but already considered one of Europe's top forensic scientists. He was an exotic sight in bleak and grey East Berlin, dressed in a well tailored business suit, with trademark bow tie, and he had a thick Austrian dialect.

"He was different," recalls Gunther Geserick, at the time a 22 year old medical student. "His lectures were fantastic. He was witty, lively, energetic. We were amazed at his encyclopedic knowledge. He was a master of Latin quotations and Greek mythology. His ideas were so original. I was enthralled."

So enthralled that the young Geserick, who had been aiming towards surgery, switched to forensic medicine. Two years later he joined the institute, becoming Prokop's protégé and then deputy director until Prokop retired.

Mythical status

During his three decades in East Berlin, Prokop achieved almost mythical status as one of the few scientists during the cold war to move from western Europe to the Eastern bloc. He was considered one of the world's leading specialists on violent death investigations. He participated in an estimated 45 000 autopsies, some on East Germans murdered by border guards while trying to escape to West Germany.

He was an expert on blood groups, blood plasma, and genetics, and he also conducted cancer research. In addition, he was an authority on occultism, superstition, and alternative medicines, often testifying in court against clairvoyants, fortune tellers, and faith healers. His textbook, *Forensische Medizin*, first published in 1960, is still considered a bible.

Prokop was born in 1921 in Austria. His father was a doctor and his mother a painter-sculptor. He began medical studies in 1940

in Vienna, lasting two semesters before being called to serve in the German army in the second world war. He was captured by US soldiers. After his release as a prisoner of war in 1945, he resumed medical studies at the University of Bonn, earning his medical degree in 1948.

In 1953 he earned the German title "habilitation," a step beyond a PhD. In the same year he married Helmi Cohen, with whom he would have a daughter and a son.

In 1956 he was offered the directorship of Charité's Forensic Medicine Institute, a position that had been open since 1949, when the previous director left for West Berlin. Prokop, debating whether to accept the offer, was emboldened by the director of the University of Bonn Hospital, Paul Martini, who told him, "Colleague, German students also live over there."

Prokop was ambitious, and by accepting the offer he became an institute director at 36 years old. The Berlin wall was not built until 1961, and in the 1950s Berlin was still an open city, with free movement between east and west.

Prokop was a tireless worker and never went on holiday. "He lived to work," Dr Geserick says. "Everything else was secondary." At various times during his time at Charité Prokop also held positions at other universities, hospitals, and organisations.

By the end of his career Prokop had written nearly 650 papers and 60 books. "He was a publishing machine," Dr Geserick says. He cowrote a book, *Grenzen der Toleranz in der Medizin (Limits of Tolerance in Medicine)*, with two of his brothers, Ludwig, a sports doctor, and Heinz, a forensic psychiatrist.

Prokop retained his Austrian passport and never joined the Communist party. His apolitical stance made his institute attractive to students and doctors not dogmatically devoted to the East German system, says Dr Geserick. Throughout Prokop's career, he was able to

travel regularly to the West because of his status, and people often visited the institute from outside the Eastern bloc.

Fall of the wall

In 1987, just two years before the fall of the Berlin wall and subsequent German reunification, he reached mandatory retirement age and was succeeded by Dr Geserick, who held the position until retirement in 2003. As emeritus professor, Prokop retained an office at Charité and continued researching and writing. However, despite German reunification some West German colleagues did not accept Prokop, feeling that he had indirectly supported the East German dictatorship merely by working at Charité.

"He was bitter," Dr Geserick says. "He was politically attacked and he was hurt by it." Furthermore, because he retired under the East German system, his pension was small, perhaps only a third of the generous pensions that West German professors receive.

Stefan Pollak, president of the German Society of Legal Medicine, says that the board in 1999 nominated Prokop for honorary membership. But when the assembly voted Prokop received just under the required two thirds majority. In 2006 the board again nominated him for the honour, and this time he received near unanimous support, says Dr Pollak.

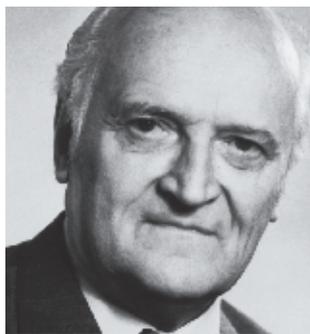
"Prokop accepted the honour with great pleasure," Dr Pollak says. "Without any doubt, he was one of the greatest scientists in the field of legal-forensic medicine."

Three years ago Prokop fell at the institute and fractured his shoulder. "After that, he was in ill health the rest of his life and never came back," Dr Geserick says. He died in a nursing home near Kiel, where his son is an orthopaedic surgeon. Those he leaves behind also include his wife, brother Ludwig, and half brother Gunnar.

Ned Stafford

Otto Gerhard Prokop (b Sankt Pölten, Austria 1921; q Bonn 1948), died 20 January 2009.

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He participated in an estimated 45 000 autopsies, some on East Germans murdered by border guards while trying to escape to West Germany

Gerhard Behr

Former consultant pathologist Burnley, Lancashire (b 1914; q St Bartholomew's Hospital, London, 1937), d 10 November 2008. Gerard Behr fled to England from Germany in 1934, interrupting his medical studies. He was required to sit the 1st MB before graduating from Barts, and was interned in the Isle of Man during his house jobs. In 1946 he was appointed director of pathology, venereology, and dermatology in Burnley, in 1948 becoming consultant pathologist until his retirement in 1979. He formed the first central sterile supply department and founded the Mackenzie Postgraduate Medical Centre—only the second of its kind in the United Kingdom—retaining a keen interest in it until his death. Predeceased by his wife, Bunny, in 1999, he leaves two children and four grandchildren.

Winston Turner

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Mary Corbett



Former consultant rheumatologist Middlesex Hospital, London (b 1933; q Royal Free 1957), died from cancer on 17 January 2009.

Mary Corbett won a scholarship to the Royal Free and was appointed registrar in rheumatology at the Middlesex Hospital in 1963. She became consultant in 1969—only the third woman to become a consultant at the Middlesex—retiring in 1994. She started and ran the rheumatoid arthritis prospective study (RAPS). She was one of the first clinicians to offer treatments to slow the inflammatory process, not simply to reduce symptoms, publishing seminal and influential papers. Inspirational, charming and funny, and a team player, Mary put rheumatology at the forefront in the merger of the Middlesex and University College Hospitals in the

late 1980s. She leaves a lifelong companion, Jean Colston.

Michael Shipley

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David Lockhart Cowan



Former consultant otolaryngologist Royal Hospital for Sick Children, Edinburgh (b 1941; q Edinburgh 1965; FRCSEd), died from a stroke on 29 February 2008.

David Lockhart Cowan was appointed consultant otolaryngologist in 1974 in Edinburgh, establishing the Paediatric Hearing Assessment Unit and retiring in 2006. Examiner for the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, he co-wrote a textbook on paediatric otolaryngology and was also a council member of the British Association of Otolaryngologists, president of the Scottish Otolaryngological Society, and ENT adviser to the chief medical officer of Scotland. He captained the team that won both the Scottish and British University golf championship in 1963, and was a successful member of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club. Predeceased by his wife, Eileen, in 2002, he leaves four children and seven grandchildren.

A I G Kerr

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Henry James Eastes



Former general practitioner Marshfield, Gloucestershire (b 1912; q University College Hospital, London, 1937; FRCGP), d 17 December 2008. Henry James Eastes and his wife, Zeta, took up practice in Marshfield in 1939, and for the next 43 years

Henry was the village doctor. At first he dispensed medicine from 12 stock bottles, with a bottle of M and B sulphonamide tablets representing a third of the capital value of the drug stock, and by 1982 he had expanded the practice to cover four surgeries in four villages with a doctor in each. Active in the local medical committee, General Medical Services Committee, and Medical Practices Committee, he was also a founder member of the Clinical Society in Bath and taught students from UCH. Predeceased by Zeta in 1999 (*BMJ* 2000;320:1149, www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/320/7242/1149#resp1), he leaves three children.

Peter Brunyate

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William Hartley



Former consultant radiologist Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals (b 1931; q Edinburgh 1955; FRCP, FRCR), died from metastatic thyroid cancer on 12 August 2008.

William Hartley (“Bill”) was born into a Hull trawling family, and his life changed dramatically when he passed the 11 plus, his headmaster thwarting his initial ambition to join the merchant navy. Having graduated with honours and trained in Edinburgh and Aberdeen, Bill returned to Hull as a consultant in 1966. He took up cardiac and vascular interventional radiology in the mid-1970s and breast radiology in the early 1990s, and was unanimously elected chair of the district medical advisory committee. On retiring Bill declared that he wished to complete his education, taking up Latin, painting, woodwork, and local history. He leaves a wife, Dorothy; two sons; and three grandchildren.

Richard Hartley

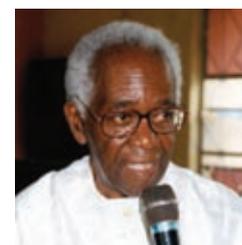
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Bee Hooi Tan

Anaesthetist Penang General Hospital, Penang, Malaysia (b 1971; q Sydney 1997; FRCA, FCARCSI), died on 26 March 2008 from complications of treatment for a complex cerebral arteriovenous malformation. Awarded an ASEAN scholarship to complete her A levels in Singapore, Bee Hooi Tan (“Bee”) won a further scholarship from the Australian government to study medicine in Sydney. She then trained in Wales as a senior house officer in anaesthesia for three years, gaining both the FRCA and FCARCSI. Heavily pregnant with her second child when she sat the primary examination in Dublin, she passed the viva two days after delivery. She returned to Malaysia and planned to open the first chronic pain clinic in Penang. In her final moments she donated her organs to help others live. Bee leaves two sons. **Tom Lee, Adeline Fong, Lee Tak**

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2009;338:b1987

Walter Chukwuma Uduku



Former chief medical officer Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Umuahia, Nigeria (b 1926; q Edinburgh 1958; FRCS), died from congestive heart failure on 11 March 2009.

Walter Chukwuma Uduku was a teacher in Eastern Nigeria before studying medicine in Edinburgh and becoming one of a pioneering group of doctors in the then Eastern Region of Nigeria. He worked as medical officer with the Nigerian government, leaving Nigeria in 1964 for postgraduate study in Edinburgh. He returned to Nigeria in 1973 as a consultant in general surgery at five hospitals. After retiring in 1985 he set up the Iona Clinic. He performed much of his work free. He leaves a wife, Dorcas; five children; and seven grandchildren.

Ola Uduku

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