

## Volker K. H. Sonntag, M.D.: Pioneer in Spinal Neurosurgery and Consummate Educator, Colleague, and Family Man

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### INTRODUCTION

With many accolades and friendships too numerous to recount fully, Volker K. H. Sonntag, M.D., retired from clinical practice at the Barrow Neurological Institute (BNI) in Phoenix, Arizona, in December 2009. We briefly present his life story, which epitomizes the American dream. Beginning from his humble roots in war-torn Germany, we celebrate the accomplishments, values, and visionary sense of direction that have defined his life and career. His roles as editor and reviewer of a host of scientific journals, as committee member and president of numerous national neurosurgical organizations, and as director of the neurosurgery training program at BNI have rightfully earned him renown among his peers as an advocate, leader, innovator, celebrated academician, and skilled practitioner. To the individuals who have been honored to train under his tutelage or to work with him, he is appreciated as a consummate educator, mentor, and role model.

### EARLY LIFE

Volker Sonntag was born during World War II on November 23, 1944, in what later became known as East Germany. As the Russian forces advanced toward Berlin from the East during the spring of 1945, the Sonntag family joined countless other political refugees in a mass exodus to the West. His mother Gisela, then pregnant with his younger brother, settled her two boys in temporary quarters at Camp Lockstedter Lager in Schleswig-Holstein in West Germany. Volker's father joined them several months later. East German refugees were largely unwelcome and faced considerable hardships as they struggled to find work in the West. The living spaces in the refugee camp were arranged into fairly rudimentary barracks and huts.

On October 22, 1948, Volker's father, Heinz, moved the family to Bad Hersfeld in Hessen, West Germany, to begin a dental practice.

His mother assisted in the family enterprise (**Figure 1**). His father, initially experiencing symptoms of an upper respiratory infection, was later diagnosed with a brain mass presumed to be a glioma in October 1952. In a nearby town, he underwent a craniotomy that uncovered a temperoparietal abscess. His treatment was followed by a 6-month hospital and rehabilitative course before he was able to return to his family. He was left with hemianopsia and apraxic deficits, diagnosed by Dr. Sonntag years later after he recalled repeated side-collision car crashes involving his father. Efforts by Volker's mother to keep the practice running with substitute dentists were unsuccessful, and the family soon faced hard times again.

Unable to retain steady employment, the Sonntag family decided to seek better opportunities outside of West Germany. After many years of searching, the Lutheran Church found a sponsor for the family in Phoenix, Arizona. In 1955, Volker's mother came home and announced that the family would move to Arizona. For the 11-year-old German boy, finding Phoenix, Arizona, on a map of the United States was an exciting task. Over the next 2 years, the family prepared for the trip, selling many of their belongings and saving for the move. Their journey started on March 26, 1957. Volker was 12 years old at the time.

Their trip began on the U.S. General Langfitt, a troop transporter. The boys and their father slept separately from Gisela as the ship ferried 1160 Germans, Poles, and Czechoslovakians toward New York Harbor (Gisela Sonntag, unpublished diary, 1957). An excerpt from Gisela Sonntag's diary describing the early part of their journey follows:

On Tuesday, March 26, 1957, after some last minute formalities, we left our temporary home in Bremen-Lesum around 10 AM. We were given food for our journey and, in brilliant sunshine, boarded modern buses, which took us to the train in Bremen-Vegesack. Following a half-hour wait and an approximate one-hour clean and comfortable ride, we arrived in Bremerhaven, directly at the Columbus Pier where we were greeted with music

### Key words

- History
- Neurosurgery
- Spine
- Spine instrumentation

### Abbreviations and Acronyms

**AANS:** American Association of Neurological Surgeons

**ACGME:** Accreditation Council of Graduate Medical Education

**BNI:** Barrow Neurological Institute



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**Figure 1.** Volker Sonntag (middle) as a child in Germany in 1952 with his mother and brothers. (Courtesy of Volker K. H. Sonntag, M.D.)

and immediately went on board. Once on board, we immediately went to our sleeping cabins, men and women were housed separately, which meant that Heinz went off with his sons and I went off by myself. When I first entered the large dormitory style cabin, I became frightened because all I could see were beds next to each other and stacked on top of each other and women rummaging through their suitcases. I don't know exactly how many slept in our cabin, maybe 100 (Gisela Sonntag, unpublished diary, 1957).

The family occupied countless hours on the ship attempting to find each other and to navigate the corridors of the immense vessel, which had been poorly retrofitted to accommodate civilian passenger travel. Volker slept on a hanging bed with five people above him and one below him, only able to slide into this space sideways with about 1 foot of space between beds. While on board, they dined on American fare and attended English lessons (although Dr. Sonntag frequently credits the Mickey Mouse Club and American cartoons for much of his English grammar). Volker and his brother Gunther were particularly prone to seasickness, and Volker spent most of the voyage in the sick bay with an intravenous line. They wore life jackets for much of the trip. Their primary entertainments were movies, which were played nightly. On April 6, 1957, 12 days after boarding, they sailed past Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty and made landfall outside New York Harbor. Gisela Sonntag wrote the following:

We got up around 4 AM! Around 5:30 AM we passed Long Island. We were very happy to see land again, America! Soon we are greeted by the Statute of Liberty and this cosmopolitan city awoke before our eyes in a veil of mist and rain. The sight of the sprawling buildings, the enormous harbor and the wide roads was overwhelming (Gisela Sonntag, unpublished diary, 1957).

Once through immigration and customs, the family boarded buses from Manhattan to the train station in New Jersey. From there, they traveled through Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Chicago and on the Sante Fe Sky Chief through Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico en route to Phoenix. Two weeks after the start of their journey on April 9, they arrived. Volker, who had only ever had oranges as a special treat at

Christmas, was amazed to discover that the fruit grew on trees (3). Mrs. Sonntag's described their arrival in Arizona as follows:

Around midnight we boarded the train again and spent our third night on the train. This morning we saw Arizona in the rising sunlight. The landscape is about the same as yesterday, but the earth must get a bit more water. We saw cacti, green trees and a lot of unknown. . . (Gisela Sonntag, unpublished diary, 1957).

Over the years, the Sonntags integrated into American society. Initially, however, work was difficult to find. First Heinz and the boys worked at a trailer park doing manual labor. His mother attended school to learn English. She later became a secretary and soon afterward a dental assistant again. His father was unable to return to work as a dentist because of health and licensure issues, but he worked several jobs. Over the next 4 years, the family repaid loans in full to the Lutheran Refugee Service despite tight finances. Volker contributed to the family by working at a chicken farm for 5 years. Throughout the latter years of high school and all of college, he worked as a short-order cook at a fast-food establishment (**Figure 2**). He became a U.S. citizen in 1966.

#### COLLEGE, MEDICAL SCHOOL, AND EARLY NEUROSURGICAL YEARS

Dr. Sonntag completed his undergraduate degree and thesis, earning summa cum laude honors, from Arizona State University in 1967 with a Bachelor of Arts in chemistry. He entered the first medical school class at the then newly opened University of Arizona School of Medicine in Tucson and served as the Class President. He obtained his medical degree in 1971 and completed his rotating internship there as well in 1972. He traveled to Boston for his neurosurgery residency from 1972-1977 at Tufts New England Medical Center as one of the first trainees under Dr. Bennett Stein.

He dated Lynne Twohig seriously during 1972, but they parted as he moved to Boston and she continued studying to complete her BS in Nursing at the University of Arizona. They reunited at a social event in Phoenix around the Easter holiday of 1974 after more than a year apart and were married 5 days later in Phoenix. Following completion of his training, Dr. Sonntag worked for a year in Youngstown, Ohio, doing a wide variety of cases before returning to Phoenix in 1978. The couple welcomed their first child, Alissa, in 1978 in Youngstown.

The early years in Phoenix were full of potential discouragements. Writing



**Figure 2.** Volker Sonntag at the time of his graduation from high school in 1963. (Courtesy of Volker K. H. Sonntag, M.D.)

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