

The World's Brightest Heads - A „Krone“ series by Conny Bischofberger

An Austrian and the most influential socio-cultural change of the 20th century

“Sex Relieved”

Mr. Djerassi, you like to be called a “male feminist”. What do you mean by this term?

I know: Many women say this is impossible! A male cannot be a feminist. I maintain that this is as possible as it is for a male to be a minister for female affairs. I see myself as a feminist, because the pill was a huge advantage for the feminist movement.

- To be honest, are there moments when you think of the millions of children you have prevented with the “anti-baby-pill”?

I hate this word! My invention is not a pill against babies, it is a pill for women! I would like to say we would have suffered a real tragedy, if we didn't have the pill today. Millions of abortions would have been the consequence – to say nothing of millions of unwanted children.

- How do come to that number?

According to reports of the World Health Organization every 24 hours about 100 millions of couples have sexual intercourse, which would cause about one million conceptions. From these, 50 percent are not planned and 25 percent are unwanted. The last number – 250.000 conceptions a day – are responsible for 150.000 abortions every 24 hours. 50.000 are illegal and result in the death of 500 women every day.

Are you at war with the church?

I was never at war... I always was of the opinion that preventing conception is one of the most private things on earth and should not be interfered with by anyone. Millions of catholic men and women are of the same opinion. In Austria the pill is also the most popular contraceptive. I don't want to offend the Pope, but what is his idea of birth control? Have no sex at all? Meanwhile, not even the priests obey this rule.

- What would the world be like today without the pill?

These “what would be, if” questions have occupied my mind for years. The fact is that the decision to reproduce is now a deliberate alternative, and not any more a sort of reproductive gamble. Viewed from this perspective, the pill has relieved sex of the burden... and couples, who hopefully love each other, can have fun and sexual pleasure, without being concerned about using either a pessary or a condom.

- As a scientist do you remember the moment when you made a sensational discovery?

In retrospect, I know that it was on 15th October 1951 in a laboratory in Mexico City. In actual fact, I wanted to find a remedy for arthritis. But this is very different from what an architect does

when he attaches the last window to his church. My church are chemical molecules, this a bit more complicated. It is a very slow process.

- Don't you think sometimes that you would have deserved the Nobel Prize?

This question has been put to me a thousand times. To be honest: Yes, of course the pill would have deserved the Nobel Prize. So what remains to me are 19 doctorates. One I have earned with my doctorate, and 18 are academic love tokens. You know, scientists are much loved...

- Has the pill at least made you rich?

Rich is relative. I am not as rich as Bill Gates. But today I can afford to write plays without having to live on it. I could become a different person.

- In 1938 you fled with your mother from Vienna. Still any "bad feelings"?

Today not any more. Since my 80th birthday in November I am an Austrian again. I was offered the Austrian citizenship – also my wife who is American and does not even speak German. For me the Austrian passport – I haven't got it yet – means a kind of return to the place where I have been born. As a precaution I did not burn my passport...

- When comes the pill for the man?

The pharmaceutical industry is not interested in this market. They rather invest their money in the research of Alzheimer's disease, cancer and heart failure.

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Father of the Pill

Dr. Carl Djerassi, Austrian emigrant, father of the „pill“. Coming from a Jewish family of physicians in Vienna, Djerassi was forced to flee from the National Socialists to the USA in 1938. He graduated in chemistry at the age of 21. The invention he accomplished in a small laboratory in Mexico City seven years later, on 15th October 1951, was a major step forward in the production of a steroid oral contraceptive, which allowed the development of the "pill". His invention brought lasting change into the lives of 20th century women. His enormous curiosity and vitality inspired his scientific research at Stanford University, as well as his achievements as a writer and as a collector of works of art, and were also the force motivating in an extraordinary life. Meanwhile, Djerassi is also a dramatist. He established a fund for the promotion of young artists.