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Individual in a Very Long Chain

Medicine Nobel laureate Günter Blobel to attend the Melk Meeting on spirituality and wisdom

By Susanne Bobek

„It is important that you have true role models in your lives“, says Medicine Nobel laureate Günter Blobel. Blobel is among the three Nobel laureates who will participate in September in the important Melk Abbey symposium on the meaning of life, spirituality, and wisdom. German born Blobel, who emigrated to the United States in 1962, is renowned not only for his scientific work on cell research. He donated a large portion of the \$ 1,000,000 prize to the rebuilding of both the church „Frauenkirche“ and the synagogue in Dresden.

A SENSE OF ART Before talking about his motives in our meeting in Munich 68-year-old Blobel takes us for a tour through a major work of European rococo not widely known, the Amalienburg in the Nymphenburg Castle's park. This remote small hunting seat, designed by Francois de Cuvillies, was built between 1734 and 1739; and Blobel takes advantage of each stay in Munich to study the precious carved work and stuccoes. „This morning I spent two hours in here.“

His passion for art and architecture, however, does not sufficiently explain why the researcher is also a patron. „It is a heart thing,“ he says almost incidentally. He feels an attachment to Dresden, he continues, because he was right in the middle of the city's bombing and the firestorm as a little boy. Because he was, contrary to others, so much more fortunate and more successful in life. Because he is fond of the old symbols. And because he considers himself an individual „in a very long chain, which started 3,5 billion years ago with a cell.“

Having earned his degree in medicine at the University of Tübingen he went to the University of Wisconsin at Madison to continue his studies. From 1966 he worked at Rockefeller University in New York under Romanian born George Palade, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1967. He was his true model, his mentor, who made him realize that „you can have fun with science.“

Blobel found out that newly built proteins have an address which leads them to where they are needed within the cell. Today he runs a small biotechnology company in addition to his laboratory at the university. „We sell cell-lines...“

„I try to make a contribution to lessen the suffering of people. This might sound banal, and possibly other people will say that this is their aim, too.“

In 1936 Blobel was born into a family of eight children in Silesia. They came to Freiberg (Saxony) in 1945, the father was a veterinary surgeon. „I have never liked animals very much, only in the past 20 years have I taken to animals. We have three dogs.“

All children of the family studied, one brother is now a microbiologist, three are veterinary surgeons, one a physician, one an engineer, and the sister holds a degree in business administration. Blobel is married to an Italian born New York art historian who owns a restaurant. They have no children.

„Usually, I work very hard,“ says the Nobel laureate who does not want to retire. „In the United States you do not have to become emerited at a certain age, you can continue with your research. Lucky me!“

PROFILE

In 1999 Günter Blobel, 68, is awarded the Nobel Prize in medicine for his groundbreaking findings on the basic human cells' molecule biology. „If we want to cure the great diseases we have to know more about the fundamentals.“ In 1962 German born Blobel from Silesia went to the United States. Very soon his talent was recognized and fostered. He teaches at Rockefeller University in New York and lives with his wife on Upper East Side. In 1987 he became a United States citizen. He loves classical music and art.

In science he has specialized in the proteins' transport routes within the cell. They contribute to a better understanding of certain diseases like Alzheimer's disease and possibly cancer, too.

WALDZELL MEETING

The Forum on Wisdom

From 10 to 12 September the first wisdom forum on the meaning of life is held in Melk Abbey. This event under the patronage of author Paulo Coelho can boast an illustrious guest list. Definite participants are Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi (peace), Nobel laureate Kary B. Mullis (chemistry), Nobel laureate Günter Blobel (medicine), Anton Zeilinger, Carl Djerassi, Stephan Reichtschaffen, and „Flow“ inventor Mihály Csikszentmihályi. Organizers Andreas Salcher and Gundula Schatz want to establish the question of meaning as an issue in our society, because due to personal crises a continually growing number of people face this problem at increasingly earlier points in their lives.