

## Biography

### CHARLOTTE C. BAER, MD

October 11, 1908 - August 15, 1973



Dr. Charlotte Baer was born into a medical family of Wiesbaden, Germany where her father was a practicing physician. He served with distinction in the medical corps of the German Army in World War I and was decorated for his services. It was perhaps natural that his daughter, an only child, would attend medical school. Her father saw to it that at an appropriate time in her life she also attended a cooking school, which, no doubt, accounted for her excellence as a cook, a trait which continued throughout her lifetime. In the European tradition, she attended medical schools throughout Europe and, more than that, lived for varying periods of time in countries other than Germany, giving her considerably more than an elementary knowledge of foreign languages. By the time of her arrival in the United States, she could converse not only in German, but also in English, French, and Italian.

As the result of her medical studies, she received MD degrees from the Goethe Medical School Frankfurt am Main and the University of Berne, Switzerland. Throughout her college and medical school years, she found time to continue her enthusiasm for swimming and, in fact, became the intercollegiate breaststroke-swimming champion of Europe. By the time of the Berlin Olympics, she was not permitted to compete for the German team by the Nazi regime because of her Jewish heritage. She did, however, attend the Olympic Games in Berlin and recounted with great pleasure seeing Jesse Owens receive his three gold medals for track and field events with Adolph Hitler being among those present in the stadium.

During her medical education in Germany, perhaps the two individuals having the greatest influence on her career were her famous professor from Frankfurt, Franz Volhard, and her friend and teacher Charles Hildebrand. During her time at the University of Frankfurt, she also became acquainted with our own Otto Guttentag who preceded her in her flight from Nazi Germany to the United States.

Dr. Baer arrived in the United States during the fall of 1938 and after a brief stay in New York where she had relatives; she traveled to California where other distant relations lived. In California, she found herself possessed of an MD degree but not a license to practice medicine in Germany. California law then required a degree from a United States university for licensure unless the individual had been licensed to practice medicine in their home country. How many, at age thirty, would embark upon unknown waters in a foreign country to obtain their third MD degree in a language not native to them? This she did and was admitted to January 1939 with advanced standing at the beginning of the second semester of the third year of medical school at the University of California, a curriculum which at that time required five years to complete. This meant she still had two and a half years of requirements to meet. Those of us who knew her well during these two and a half years were aware that all was not easy for her in a foreign culture and language. **To use Frost's words, she could be counted as "one acquainted with the night."**

She early became a member of the clinical faculty as a Clinical Instructor in Medicine and for many years was a devoted and faithful assistant in the old course of physical diagnosis under Professor LeRoy Briggs. One of the best known of her section members during this era was the future physician in charge of the astronaut program, Dr. Charles Berry. After the first U.S.

astronauts landed on the moon, she obtained from Dr. Berry an autographed photograph of the three men and sent it to her old teacher, Professor Hildebrand. According to Otto Guttentag this **photograph was still in Hildebrand's office at the time of Dr. Baer's death and the dedicatory inscription read "to the teacher of the teacher of our physician."**

Throughout her active professional life in San Francisco she maintained her practice in internal medicine, which was characterized by her devotion to her patients and tenacity, and vigor in her pursuit of obscure diagnostic problems. She was active both in the affairs of her California alma mater as well as in medical society activities, particularly the San Francisco Medical Society. For the period from 1966 to 1967 she was Chief Medical Advisor for California Blue Shield and was involved in the early peer review process. As a member of the Clinical Faculty she served on the search committee appointed by President Hitch to recommend a Chancellor for UCSF. This was in approximately 1972. This ultimately led to the appointment of Francis Adrian Sooy as Chancellor of the UCSF campus, a position he held longer than any other individual up to this point in time.

She maintained a diversity of other interests during her professional career, traits characterizing her during her lifetime. Prominent was her enthusiasm for classical music including symphonic, operatic, and chamber music as well as a broad interest in the visual arts. She enjoyed the outdoors, hiking, and traveling, and she was a frequent visitor to the Grand Teton Mountains and took more than one return trip to Europe. For many years she found time to continue her enjoyment of swimming and, in addition, recruited and directed swimming groups of young **women under the name "Surffins."** **Not only did she train these young recruits but laboriously searched for financial support to enable them to perform locally as well as elsewhere.** It is an interesting anecdote that at one of the Baer Award presentations approximately five years ago, the presenter was later approached by the wife of one of the UCSF alumni who inquired if by any **chance the award was named after the same Dr. Baer who coached the "Surffins" since she had once been a member and remembered with affection and respect Dr. Baer's devotion to the group.**

In addition to her outside interests, Dr. Baer also knew literature and as a true German she was **devoted to Goethe's works and regarded him as one of the world's greatest authors.** She frequently told the author of this biographical sketch that there was no adequate translation of **Goethe's Faust into English but finally gave him a translation she said was the best she could find.** She also introduced him to a translation of Christian Morgenstern's **Galgenlieder** she had thought to be untranslatable. In fact, it was translated by another Nazi refugee raised bilingually in German, Max Knight. He was employed by the University of California Press who published his bilingual translation of the **Galgenlieder**. **Galgenlieder** may be translated as **The Gallows Songs**. These were never intended for publication but are correctly said to create an Alice-in-Wonderland climate and are known to millions in German speaking countries. Dr. Baer also knew **Shakespeare's works through reading them in the German translation. She said other students who read the German translation thought the poetry was so good that they believed Shakespeare to be a German author. The author of this sketch is convinced that Dr. Baer's life epitomized to the fullest the truth of John Donne's line, "No man is an island."** She would have understood and appreciated this line.

Written by Leslie L. Bennett, MD  
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