Eulogy for Professor Christian Schreiber on the occasion of his funeral service on 17.07.2016, by Professor Rüdiger Lange
Dear Tania, Ella, Alma, dear friends and relatives,

Let us share some personal memories of Christian Schreiber. I have memories of Christian as his colleague on the one hand, but also as his friend. The thought that came initially to my mind was to speak first about the doctor Christian Schreiber, from the viewpoint of his colleague, and then about the man Christian Schreiber from the viewpoint of his friend. However, since one cannot consider the doctor and the man, separately, I have discarded this approach:

18 years ago, in January 1999, when I took up my position at the German Heart Centre Munich, Christian was not physically present. Christian had taken his exams at the Ludwig Maximilian University Munich in 1991 and then spent his practical year partly in the Dr. Hauner’s Paediatric Hospital and partly in Salvador de Bahia, where he got to know Tania. From then on he was able to speak Portuguese fluently, which opened many doors for him in the days to follow. After coming back to Munich in 1992 he applied to Christian Sebening at the German Heart Centre, as a young assistant doctor, and secured his doctoral thesis. He spent the year 1998 for special training in paediatric heart surgery at the famous Great Ormond Street Hospital for Sick Children in London and this was the reason why Christian was not in Munich upon my arrival in January 1999.

But on his return to the German Heart Centre Christian immediately seized my attention, because of his outstanding intelligence, positive energy and inexhaustible dynamic force. In the following years I observed an exponential rise in the career of this young doctor; in 2002 he achieved the status of a specialist in pediatric cardiac surgery and already by 2006 his Ph. D. Christian very quickly developed into an outstanding paediatric heart surgeon. Both the Anzhen Hospital in Peking and the Linyi’s People’s Hospital in Shenyang had already recognised his extraordinary talent by this time and in 2006 and 2008, respectively, named him an honorary professor. At that time Christian was just 41 and 43 years of age, respectively. An incredible honour and recognition of his work! By 2011 Dr. Christian Schreiber had got to the point where he was also made a professor in Germany and almost at the same time became deputy director of the hospital, and thus, my most important, trusted person in the German Heart Centre.

At this time Christian was already in high demand internationally and had special duties in the Cardiothoracic Surgery Network and in the European Association of Cardio-Thoracic Surgery, where he had a crucial role in the famous and renowned Techno College. Shortly after the start of his diease the President of EACTS even offered him the chair of the Congenital Domain, one of the very influential positions that this association has to offer. At that time I had tried to persuade him to accept this proposition. I was totally naive and helplessly unaware of the seriousness of his illness. He was more far-sighted at that time and declined the offer. Furthermore Christian was an active member with various duties in the German Society for Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery and its Working Group for Congenital and Paediatric Heart Surgery, on the Scientific Advisory Council of the “Heart to Heart” Foundation and in the World Society of Paediatric and Congenital Heart Surgery.

He was the Associate Editor for “Paediatric Cardiology” and active on the editorial boards of both the “Brazilian Journal of Cardiovascular Surgery” and the German Journal “Thoracic Cardiovascular Surgeon”. Apart from this he was a reviewer for numerous renowned technical heart surgery journals worldwide.
As a university professor he looked after numerous PhD students, trained the next generation of paediatric heart surgeons and published various different high-ranking publications. He was a totally committed teacher and made extensive training possible for “his” trainees. Meanwhile two of his former pupils have become directors of a pediatric program in large centres.

He was very committed to the cardiac project that promotes paediatric heart surgery across the two Universities in Munich, in order to improve patient care. He pursued this goal right to the end. Unfortunately, it could not be realized during his lifetime, but I hope to be able to implement the reorganisation of this structure, which was so important to him, during this year.

The treatment of congenital heart defects is the most difficult area that heart surgery has to offer. These operations are highly complex. But even more important is that they demand courage, discipline and creativity. Christian mastered all of this and thereby saved the lives of thousands of children with heart conditions. How grateful the parents of many of these children are, can be seen on the German Heart Centre’s Facebook page. As a result of the obituary, many have left distraught messages of sympathy there. Every message has “Thank you”! written on it - “Thank you to Professor Christian Schreiber for saving our child”.

But everything that has been said so far sounds rather like a sober bibliography and only incompletely reflects the extraordinary career of this great surgeon, scientist and researcher, and of the man Christian Schreiber. If I were to stop here with my memories, I would not do justice to Christian. So what was it that made Christian so special?

Essentially two characteristics:

Christian was a great promoter of harmony. Sometimes the behaviour of colleagues angered him. He would say to me “OK Rüdiger, let me deal with this; I will really take this person to task”. Christian’s “taking someone to task“ always went the same way. He would have a friendly conversation with the colleague and in gentle words would make him aware of his wrong behaviour. He was able to convince people of his way of thinking better than anybody else. This is what made him so well-liked by his colleagues. He never yelled at anybody! He never hit below the belt! He was never unkind! But for this very reason his criticism always hit the spot. His behaviour was completely the opposite of mine. And I will never forget how in later years he made me consider my own leadership style. He had the courage to do that, even long before we became friends. „Rüdiger, you cannot put people down like that in discussions“. As the years went by it became clear to me what an intelligent, sensitive and vulnerable person Christian was. I have since tried to change my leadership style completely, and I thank Christian for that. There is no one else I would have taken seriously enough to accept advice from.

Christian in his last years became more and more of an integral figure in our hospital. He had the trust of his colleagues. We all miss this integral figure very much now.

And Christian was very emotional. Once he had taken someone into his heart he was unbelievably loyal. Christian loved people! He was an extremely good “networker“. He just talked to people. „So you are Professor so-and-so? I read your latest article in the journal, or we met once before in Madrid“. Christian would pat people on the shoulder.
But the most important thing was that he gave every person the feeling of being very important; he himself stepped back, giving the other person a still greater feeling of significance. He made contacts. He touched the needs of people. Was he a particular friend of the Chinese? No only of the Chinese. Christian could put himself so precisely into the different mentalities of those in front of him that it made no difference if they were Chinese, Brazilian, American or Australian. Christian was an international “catcher of people” or “collector of friends”. Christian never flew anywhere without bringing a small gift for his hosts. I remember once when, far too late, we were running together towards the departure gate at Munich Airport, to catch a plane to Japan. Yet his greatest concern was not that we might miss our flight but that we had no gifts for the hosts. So we stopped at one of these Bavarian souvenir shops. At that last moment we were buying one of those tasteful souvenir neck-ties, a Bayern-Munich T-shirt and a small beer mug. My dear friends, if you had seen how grateful and thrilled our colleagues in Japan were about these materially not very precious souvenirs. They realized that these souvenirs came right from the heart, and this made them feel valued and cared for. This was typical for Christian. That is how he dealt with people. And this is the reason why hundreds of letters of condolence arrive from all over the world at his sudden death. The harmony-loving Christian had no enemies; he just had friends; he was extremely well-liked, and that was part of the world that he had created around himself.

I spoke at the beginning about one of two outstanding characteristics. What was the other one?

Christian had a never-ending, positive energy within himself. On one occasion he was in a situation that entailed an endlessly long journey. I remember it precisely; after he had finished an operation in the morning at the Cardiac Centre, he took a plane at 3:00 p.m. that same afternoon to Frankfurt; then at around 5:00 p.m. connected from Frankfurt to Peking and the next day at midday from Peking to Shenyang, all in order to perform operations in Linyi’s People’s Hospital, one in the afternoon and one the next morning; and then the next afternoon he flew back home. Christian had this inexhaustible energy and he had an unlimited lust for life! Christian loved life, and especially life in flux. His profession as a heart surgeon would often tie him to one place for hours; not infrequently daylight would fail him, demanding extraordinary calm and consistency from him. But on the the other this profession held a very special fascination for him. This profession entailed change, continual new challenges, adventure and constant uncertainty regarding outcomes. At the operating table the spirit and soul are plunged into a difference stratosphere, a condition in which the external world fades because only the moment counts, and because this moment demands everything. Christian loved being immersed in this world again and again. As a joke he loved to speed up the process even in the OR. I remember him sometimes, while making the skin incision, asking the anaesthetist: “Francesco, is the next patient already booked in?” Then there would be great laughter in the operating theatre. This sentence eventually became a “running gag” in our hospital. We all loved him just as he was, with all his technical competence and his humour. Internally he has set record times for certain surgical steps; he holds the record for arch reconstruction in Norwood’s procedure and for clamping time in the arterial switch operation.

Christian also patiently assisted me for hours and helped me through many difficult operations. He helped me at first only out of professional loyalty and only later out of friendship and mutual esteem. He liked to tell colleagues that they should not make the rows of sutures as close together as a postage stamp, and if someone made too many
knots, he would say after the 5th knot at the latest: “Get to the end please!!” Often he offered halfway through my operations to take over for me: “Look, I can quickly finish that for you, so you can go something more important to do”. Or, if I did not arrive quickly enough in the operating theatre, he might simply have started surgery without me, using the argument that the patient had now become too unstable to wait for me. As the years passed, Christian became a phenomenal surgeon, extremely safe, but never arrogant, instead concerned when situations became dicey, and very empathetic towards other surgeons. I loved performing surgery with him; his extreme assurance and his gentle way of leading me during the operation – even me as his boss and later his friend. Only he was sensitive enough to detect the slightest uncertainty and to gloss over it, usually with a joke.

I will never forget when we were together in Peking in 2006. Christian had received the honorary professorship from the University of Anzhen at that time. I had to perform a very complicated operation on a new-born baby in front of 3,000 onlookers. I cannot express how concerned I was of performing this operation. Christian assisted me. He tried to give me assurance. But despite this I had the feeling that I was trembling with agitation. When structures of just a few millimetres in size are televised on a 20x10 metre screen, trembling cannot be disguised. Christian perceived my agitation and he did what he always did when having to break through a tricky situation. He made jokes. He whispered to me: „Our host is pontificating down there in the auditorium about this operation in front of 3,000 colleagues. He had us flown in to get himself some applause and yet has never performed such an operation himself“. After that I was calm, and we performed the first successful ALCAPA operation on a new-born baby in China.

One of my loveliest memories of our time together was a trip to Sao Paulo to our friend, Jose Pedro Da Silva. We had undertaken to put an end to the primitive surgery method used for treating Ebstein’s anomaly. At that time Prof. Da Silva had developed a very complicated but extremely effective surgical method. This trip was so special to me because Christian and I had become friends by that time –the hierarchy between us had vanished and our relationship was characterised by mutual esteem and trust. We exchanged expertise in an intimate way, professionally and privately, and returned to Munich full of drive. We then developed this new method further together in our cardiac centre. We always alternated in performing surgery. By this method we had already made other highly complicated surgical procedures successful. So we were always both on the same level and could combine our experience. Of course Christian learned more quickly than I did and after a little while he began to use this surgical method successfully in China, England, Rumania and many other countries.

There are only two other things for me to mention about Christian.

You know what Christian really loved? Christian loved fake luxury accessories. During our visits to Peking and Shanghai Christian would drag me into these enormous, absolutely endless, plagiarist markets. Here you could find Louis Vuitton bags, Gucci shoes, Versace scarves, Bogner ski jackets or Rolex watches for 10-50 Euros. I do not know how he always found out the addresses of these markets, but he would shop here for himself and his whole family with great delight. Admittedly, I never – even in the most difficult of heart operations – saw him so nervous and bathed in sweat as when he was walking through German Customs! But presumably it was precisely this kick that he sought after.
And what else did Christian love? Football and Bayern-Munich of course. He had his annual season ticket and drove with his best friend, Professor Stefan Kellnar, to the Federal League games in the Alliance Arena. And he made it possible for hundreds of surgeons from around the world to see games in the Arena. Christian would get hold of the tickets, and his colleagues were eternally grateful to him.

Yesterday I was once again in Christian’s hospital office, to say goodbye. The room is legendary. A room of approximately 6 square metres, which he packed over the years with souvenirs from all over the world: photos of friends and himself from Australia to South America, certificates for his merits and distinctions, T-shirts with bizarre prints on them, Brazilian vuvuzelas, silk wall-hangings from China, miniature figurines from Japan, cans with quirky prints on them, surgical caps from Italy, cups from every continent of the world, Russian dolls from Siberia, etc., etc., etc. This small room is a museum of his memorabilia, international things of great significance and little trifles - extremely witty concepts. When you enter this room you are plunged into Christian’s world. You fall immediately into good humour and cannot stop being astonished at the things that people from all over the world have dreamt up. For Christian this place had a very special significance; he brought mementos back here from all of his travels. Because his pace of life was so fast, he was able to remember many individual episodes on the basis of these many mementos. What really struck me however, when visiting Christian’s room yesterday, was that the television was not on. When Christian was there it was always running in the background. This was when it really hit me that although this room still holds his spirit, it is no longer occupied.

Christian’s witty way of speaking and his charm will always be remembered and also his positive way of dealing with the difficult things of life, right to the end. He always felt a need to keep in contact with colleagues who had left our hospital. He urged all of his closest colleagues to install WhatsApp, if they did not already have it and then he would send them satirically comical bits of news on a regular basis.

When he first realised that his own life was at risk, he fought with all means available. He read all of the subject literature. He realized that there were great gaps in the research relating to ALS and founded together with Karl-Heinz Zacher a network of patients, doctors and researchers. This commitment was not in vain; the network “FACE ALS“ will continue to exist and will always be inseparably linked with his name.

On the obituary we chose the quote from Franz Kafka: “You watch the sun going down and yet are startled when it is suddenly dark.“ Despite his diagnosis of ALS and our knowledge about the outcome of his disease, Christian was always still there for us. The sun has now set, too quickly after all, yet Christian’s star continues to shine, through his nature, his work and, last not least, through his children. Since he realised that his imminent death was to be foreseeable and inevitable, all he could do for his beloved daughters was to give them advice for their future life. He felt incredibly responsibility towards the most important people in his life. Christian is no longer able to accompany the further development of his girls, but he knew he could confidently leave this in Tania’s hands. His positive spirit, his inexhaustible energy and his lust for life should be carried forward in you, his daughters. This is his legacy to you. I know that Christian’s greatest wish was that you carry his spirit forward. He wants you to enjoy life just as he did. Christian loved life. Enjoy it as he did.
I bow before a great surgeon and a dear friend. It is cruel that you have left us so soon, but we are happy that your devastating suffering has come to an end.