

Obituary

Eva Braak (1939–2000)



When I first met Eva Braak it was at the beginning of my postdoctoral training. I applied for a research position in the Braaks' lab. While Heiko Braak was talking to me about my CV and enthusiastically outlining potential research projects, Eva Braak remained quietly looking at me. She did not say very much but nevertheless I got the impression of being insistently examined.

At that time, not very many photographs hung along the walls of Heiko Braak's paper-loaded office, one showed a harmonious elderly couple, Cécile and Oskar Vogt. The picture illustrated what has been true for Eva and Heiko as well. They were a couple in private life and in professional life, being part of each other and sharing each other's love for plants and birds. Later I learnt that Eva received postdoctoral training at the famous Vogts' Institute of Brain Research which was then in Neustadt (Black Forest) and is now in Düsseldorf. Her PhD in biology was received from the University of Göttingen in 1967, and after her postdoctoral training at the Vogt-Institute (1967–1971) she moved to Kiel, where she started with a training in medicine. In Kiel, she met Heiko Braak, and after her Habilitation in medicine in 1978 she became a lecturer in the Department of Anatomy. In 1980, she and her husband Heiko moved to Frankfurt am Main when they were called to join the Medical Faculty of the Johann Wolfgang von Goethe-University.

It was about that time, when Eva and Heiko Braak entered the field of Alzheimer's disease research. It was particularly Eva's deeply anchored awe of life that was the reason they never performed experimental research on animals. Willingly, they restricted the approaches of their research group to descriptive analyses. Her systematic and thoroughgoing research practice, her extraordinary self-discipline and energy and her never-ending interest in all kind of neuroscience made her the perfect partner for Heiko Braak. When he talked to her about his innumerable ideas and observations, hypotheses and concepts, it was she who then started to underline, to precise and to prove. Recognizing the potential power of modern silver techniques, she proved their specificity and sensitivity and their applicability to relatively thick sections of the whole brains, i.e. up to 1000 microns, in a series of tedious and time consuming investigations. In the end, however, Eva and Heiko Braak were able use these techniques in order

to emphasize the occurrence of dendritic changes by tau-deposits (for which they introduced the term 'neuropil threads'), to identify a new tauopathy, argyrophilic grains disease or 'Braaks' disease', to recognize the typical spread of Alzheimer's disease-related tauopathy ('Braak-staging'), to hypothesize the relationship between tau's phosphorylation state and its argyrophilia and to achieve considerable new data and insights in Parkinson's and Huntington's disease. In 1998, Eva Braak was the first woman to receive an Award for Life-time Achievements in Alzheimer's Disease Research conferred on the occasion of the Sixth International Conference on Alzheimer's Disease and related Disorders.

Because of her discipline and strong sense of commitment towards her duties as a faculty member she was held in high esteem by her colleagues and her students. Apart from giving regular lectures in gross anatomy, she trained many generations of medical students in seminars and small groups during histology and dissecting courses. As an ever-present and dedicated academic teacher she encouraged her students to question and to deepen their knowledge about human anatomy. She was exceptionally knowledgeable and readily offered this knowledge to students and assistants.

Eva was born on 26 November 1939 in Schönwald (Sudetenland) and died on 25 August 2000 in Frankfurt am Main. Her life was much too short.

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