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André Wynen

Belgian surgeon and activist who was Secretary General of the World Medical Association. He was born in Uccle, Brussels, on Dec 8, 1923, and died after a motor vehicle accident on June 10, 2007, aged 83 years.

As an advocate of physicians, of medical ethics, and of justice, André Wynen did not flinch. When General Augusto Pinochet of Chile unjustly jailed physicians who were council members of the Chilean Medical Association, Wynen decided to fly to Chile, in 1986, to demand their release. The crime of the physicians? They had disobeyed Pinochet's decree that suspected opposition members should not receive medical treatment. Wynen travelled alone to Chile and helped secure their release.

Wynen's first major fight was against another dictator, Adolph Hitler. That fight began in 1940, when Nazi Germany invaded France and the Benelux countries. At an age when most future physicians would be finishing secondary school before starting university studies, 17-year-old Wynen joined the resistance movement, eventually leaving home and family to live underground. Michel Masson, a friend of Wynen and current Secretary General of the Belgian Medical Association (Association Belge des Syndicats Médicaux, ABSyM), says "André Wynen was a permanent enemy of totalitarianism. It was a personal obsession." In early 1944, Wynen was arrested by the Gestapo and spent the next 18 months in concentration camps, mostly at Buchenwald in eastern Germany. Nicole Wynen, who married Wynen in 1951, says her husband

initially did not talk about his imprisonment to their four children. Finally, in the 1970s, he began to open up and 2 years ago the Wynen family travelled to Buchenwald for a ceremony marking its liberation. The next day, Wynen led his family around the camp for half a day. "He talked to us", his wife says. "It was emotional."

After his release from Buchenwald, Wynen was diagnosed with tuberculosis. As he was to do later in life when illness struck, he regained his health. After completing medical studies at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, where he specialised in general surgery and later thoracic surgery, Wynen founded a 20-bed private hospital in Waterloo, Belgium, that over two decades grew to 250 beds and 80 physicians. During this time he became involved in medical politics, helping found the ABSyM. In 1964, he led an 18-day strike of many of Belgium's physicians to protest against proposed changes in health insurance.

In 1971, Wynen turned his attention to global medicine, becoming a member of the World Medical Association (WMA) Council and 2 years later its chairman. It was a time when the WMA was a divided organisation. When the then-Secretary General resigned, in 1976, Wynen stepped forward and took the job. He is credited with saving the WMA from disintegration and convincing members, such as the American Medical Association, to return. "He saved the WMA from falling apart and was a very strong and engaged leader working in very troubled times", says Otmar Kloiber, current Secretary General of the WMA. But Kloiber also acknowledges that "His outspokenness did not always make him friends. He was a very controversial person." Wynen had a strong sense of right and wrong and always followed his conscience. "Most of us say you have to be realistic when you are up against government, big money, special interests", Kloiber says. "But he would stand up against it and fight."

Wynen was vehemently opposed to euthanasia, foremost because "protection of life was very important for him", Kloiber says. In 1981, as the state of Oklahoma in the USA was preparing for the execution of a criminal by intravenous injection of a lethal dose of drugs, Wynen issued a statement saying: "...no physician should be required to be an active participant. Physicians are dedicated to preserving life". But Kloiber says Wynen also feared that legalised euthanasia would eventually be used to ration health care. "He felt if you open the door to euthanasia, then government and health-care systems can use it save money", Kloiber said.

In 1991, Wynen broke his neck in a bicycle accident, leaving him paraplegic, but he partly recovered and was able to walk with crutches. A year and a half ago, he had a stroke and again recovered well. When asked which accomplishment she believes her husband was most proud of during his life, Nicole says, without pausing: "First of all, the family."

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