JULIUS WAGNER-JAUREGG (1857 - 1940)
(NOBEL PRIZE FOR MEDICINE, 1927)

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Of the one hundred and thirty-four Nobel Prizes for Medicine and Physiology awarded since 1901 twenty are for research in the neurosciences, five of them for behavioural research and two for work related to psychiatry. Only one psychiatrist has ever been thus honoured: Julius Wagner-Jauregg of Vienna, for his achievement in the fever treatment of General Paralysis of the Insane. It is appropriate that his life and achievements be recalled on the occasion of the World Congress of Psychiatry in Vienna in 1983, one hundred years after Wagner-Jauregg's entrance into psychiatry.

Julius Wagner was born in Wels, Lower Austria, on March 7, 1857. His father Adolph, a senior civil servant in the Austrian Ministry of Finance, was ennobled for his service to the emperor in 1883, when he took the name Wagner von Jauregg. When the Hapsburg Empire came to an end in 1918, titles had to be relinquished but Julius Wagner-Jauregg was too well known. All his scientific contributions had been authored "Wagner von Jauregg" and he was thus allowed to remain "Wagner-Jauregg".

Julius was the oldest of four children, all born within a short time. The death of his mother, when he was ten, led to the children being separated for a while. Schönbauer, his biographer, relates Julius's taciturn nature to the early loss of his mother. Julius became known as a man of few but weighty words, never too expansive about feelings and emotions but strong on discipline and will power. During his adolescence he had typhoid fever and later tuberculosis. Circumstances did not allow his father to send Julius to a sanatorium. He pursued his studies with determination, spending recess periods resting in a neighbouring park in the air. From this time too dates his very keen interest in physical fitness.
In 1872, the family moved to Vienna where together with Sigmund Freud, he attended the renowned Shotten Gymnasium. Both passed their Abitur 2 years later, Freud with a better grade than Wagner-Jauregg, but both excellent students.

He toyed with the idea of studying philosophy but in 1874 he entered the Faculty of Medicine in Vienna, as one of the 145 students in the first year of a 7 year curriculum. Freud was again a classmate. Some of Europe's greatest teachers were among his professors, including the physiologist von Brücke, the internist von Bamberger and the surgeon Theodor Billroth. In his third year he became an unpaid research assistant to Dr. Solomon Stricker at the Institute of General and Experimental Pathology. Stricker was a lively and stimulating teacher, the only one to have mastered the difficult field of animal experimentation. It was here that Wagner-Jauregg carried out his first two research projects, on the excitation of cardiac muscle, and on the respiratory function of the vagus nerve. During this time he also did his military service in the Austrian Navy in the military hospital close to the University.

He graduated in 1880, and was quite disappointed not to be awarded his degree "sub auspiciis imperatoris", an honour reserved for those students who passed all their professional examinations with the grade of 'excellent'. Wagner-Jauregg excelled in all but the final two, ophthalmology and surgery.

Uncertainty prevailed for a while. He applied for various positions, including as ship's doctor with the Austrian Lloyd, as a member of Stanley's African expedition, as a dermatologist in the Gold Coast, but was rejected. He planned to emigrate to Egypt but the threat of war intervened. He worked in Stricker's institute for a further year and published on the pulmonary circulation. Various attempts to obtain a position in internal medicine also failed.

He ended up in psychiatry almost faute de mieux. He had never taken a course in psychiatry and had never expressed much interest in the specialty but in 1883 he became Assistant to Max von Leidesdorf at the First Clinic of the Lower Austrian Mental Hospital in Vienna. It needs to be appreciated that psychiatry 100 years ago was different from today. Wagner-Jauregg was on call for 24 hours every other day and looked after 150 patients. Mornings were devoted to clinical work which included neurology, and the afternoons and evenings to pathological studies of the brains and spinal cords of any of his patients who had died from general paralysis or epilepsy. Mortality in the psychiatric hospital was very much a part of reality. From the start he maintained a research orientation. He soon passed his specialty exam in neurology, began to lecture in psychiatry and was appointed lecturer in psychiatry in 1888.

At the age of 32 he became von Krafft Ebing's successor as