Fritz Sebening, the former Director of Cardiac Surgery of the German Heart Center at the Technical University of Munich, died on 12 July 2015 at the age of 85. As a graduate of the University of Heidelberg, he spent 2 years (1958–60) at Syracuse, University of New York, getting educated in experimental research and the use of the heart–lung machine. Back in Germany, he started his academic career under the supervision of Rudolph Zenker at the Surgical University Hospital of Munich. As a member of the first open heart team, he completed his habilitation in 1965 and became Professor of Surgery in 1970.

At that time, the capacity of open heart surgery at the universities in Germany was highly limited. The number of patients awaiting cardiac surgery increased rapidly and deaths on the waiting list were inevitable under these circumstances.

This situation of considerable emotional strain for all concerned stimulated the initiative for the foundation of the first German Heart Center in Munich. Fritz Sebening, as one of the founders, became Director of Cardiac Surgery in 1973. The idea to bring together all cardiovascular specialties under one roof, including experimental research, turned out to be very efficient and successful for treatment of the entire spectrum of cardiovascular disease by concentrating expertise and by facilitating lively short route interdisciplinary communication.

Owing to his initiative and by his powerful and relentless commitment, paediatric cardiac surgery at the German Heart Center Munich reached an outstanding position of international recognition. The arrangement of the hospital permitted the treatment of an exceedingly large number of paediatric patients at that time in Germany. Connected to the name Fritz Sebening are some firsts in Germany: the first mammary artery anastomoses (1971) and the first successful heart transplant (1981). He also was in search for several novel techniques to improve the results in surgery for congenital heart defects.

The number of his publications exceeds 400, including a high percentage of original experimental work.

As a pioneer of cardiac surgery in Germany, he promoted the creation of the German Society of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery, being its president from 1985 to 1987. With great enthusiasm he supported the foundation of the European Association for Cardio-Thoracic Surgery. During his time as president (1988–89), he intensified the exchange of ideas and close cooperation in particular with the US-, the Canadian- and French colleagues. As a token of recognition of his distinguished activities, he was awarded honorary membership of the ‘German Society of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery’, of the ‘Österreichischen Gesellschaft für Thorax- und Herzchirurgie’ and of the ‘College Francais de ChirurgieThoracique et Cardio-Vasculaire’. In addition, Fritz Sebening has received esteemed academic and public awards and prizes.

He has been awarded the Great Federal Cross of Merit of Germany (first class) as well as the Order of Merit of the federal State of Bavaria.

His precise and highly skilled professional expertise will continue to live on in his pupils who will perform his techniques and carry forward the scientific engagement and the truly candid veracity of a distinguished personality and outstanding cardiac surgeon.