

Joachim Sauer stands apart, but gives Germany's leader critical counsel

# Don't call him Mr. Merkel



WAVE THEORY: Joachim Sauer would rather be known for his science than as a politician's husband. Here, meeting the Obamas. **REUTERS/FABRIZIO BENSCH**

BY ERIK KIRSCHBAUM

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**P**olitical spouses sometimes provide a spot of glamour. Then there is Joachim Sauer, a professor of theoretical chemistry.

Sauer is the husband of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, arguably the world's most powerful woman. He never speaks to the media and only rarely appears in public with his wife. He skipped her inauguration in 2005, drawing media wrath for watching the event on TV at his Berlin university. A German newspaper once said he was as "invisible as a mol-

ecule." His surname means "angry" or "sour."

He has made headlines for his frugality, too. In April, he flew alone on a budget airline to Italy, where he and Merkel were to holiday, instead of paying a token fee to accompany her on a government jet, according to German media reports.

As his wife stands in the international klieg lights amid her long-running battle to tame the euro-zone's economic crisis, Sauer, 63, seems happy to remain unknown outside his field.

"Thanks for your interest," he emailed, declining an interview request. The government and Merkel's spokesman also declined to comment.

Friends and associates say the German media have Sauer all wrong. They describe not a grump, but rather a down-to-earth man with a dry sense of humour. They say his roots in a small mining town behind the Iron Curtain in the former East Germany underpin a grounded attitude that makes him a valuable sounding board for a spouse with one of Europe's toughest jobs.

"The cliches that circulate in the German media about Joachim Sauer are a total fallacy," says Reinhold Messner, a renowned mountain climber who has hiked with Sauer and Merkel in the Alps. "The fact is that he's his own man. He's witty, he's profound, he can be incredibly funny, and he's an extremely bright guy. He's an ideal counterpart to the Chancellor."

### A ZEAL FOR ZEOLITES

Sauer was born on April 19, 1949, in the small town of Hosena, in what just a few months later would become Communist East Germany.

He met Merkel in 1981. She was 27, a graduate physics student. He was 32, teaching at the Academy of Sciences in Berlin. Both were married. Merkel's marriage to Ulrich Merkel, also a physicist, ended in divorce in 1985. Sauer's to a fellow chemist ended in 1983 when he moved out of their flat; they divorced in 1985, after 16 years' marriage. They had two sons together.

Merkel has not commented on the origins of her relationship with Sauer, but it did catch the attention of the Stasi, the East German security police. According to biographies of Merkel, the Stasi noted frequent lunchtime meetings between the two when both were married to others.

In a foreword to her 1986 physics dissertation, Merkel thanked Sauer for his "critical insight." Her future husband was a prodigious student. He got his doctorate in

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**Reinhold Messner**  
mountaineer and friend

chemistry with the highest honour - summa cum laude - from Humboldt University at 25 in 1974, and taught there before moving to the Academy of Sciences in Berlin in 1977. His work won acclaim in the West.

But he was not a member of the Communist Party, which meant he was not allowed to leave the Soviet bloc until shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Reinhart Ahlrichs, who led a research group at Karlsruhe University where Sauer briefly worked, described him as one of the top 30 theoretical chemists worldwide but just below the rank of those who tend to win Nobel prizes.

"He's a major player in the category just beneath that level," Ahlrichs told Stern magazine in 2005.

After the fall of the Wall in 1989, Merkel moved into politics and Sauer spent a year in San Diego, where he worked at a biochemical institute called BIOSYM Technologies, a company that developed software to help test the molecular structure of drugs. He returned to Humboldt in 1992, and specialises in zeolites - porous minerals that can be used in everything from nuclear reprocessing to medicines.

Though he does not talk about life with Merkel, Sauer gave an interview to a university newsletter in 2010 reflecting on life as a scientist behind the Iron Curtain. He once was invited to the United States to give a lecture, he said, but his superiors said he couldn't accept, "because I wasn't a scientist allowed to travel to the West, and someone else would have to go in my place. That was frustrating."

It was always a challenge to strike the right balance between standing up to the Communist party and staying out of trouble. "The trick was to be able to look your-

self in the eye in the mirror each morning but without getting thrown out of university," he told the newsletter.

Sauer and Merkel lived together for more than a decade before marrying in 1998, after pressure from the church and some of her allies in Germany's conservative Christian Democratic Union. Many thought it was inappropriate for a conservative political leader to be living with someone out of wedlock.

Germany's first husband is an opera devotee, and shares his wife's affinity for Richard Wagner and long hikes. Messner says both are surprisingly fit considering their busy schedules.

Merkel is the pre-eminent leader of Europe, but on the international stage she usually stands alone. Sauer only accompanies her when protocol makes it unavoidable, and he rarely lets slip a public word.

When they do appear together, Merkel can sometimes seem to forget Sauer is with



WAGNERIAN LINK: Sauer and Merkel both like Richard Wagner and long hikes. Here, arriving at the Wagner opera festival in Bayreuth. **REUTERS/MICHAELA REHLE**

# Angela's Universe

The people that matter

## CHANCELLERY ADVISERS

**Ronald Pofalla**  
**CHIEF OF STAFF**  
CDU ally who took over the role during Merkel's second term

**Christoph Heusgen**  
**FOREIGN POLICY ADVISER**  
Recruited from Brussels in 2005

**Steffen Seibert**  
**SPOKESMAN**  
Former TV anchor at public broadcaster ZDF

**Nikolaus Meyer-Landrut**  
**EUROPEAN AFFAIRS ADVISER**  
Takes a lead role in debt-crisis talks

**Eva Christiansen**  
**MEDIA STRATEGIST**  
Behind-the-scenes adviser

**Beate Baumann**  
**OFFICE HEAD**  
Adviser, confidante and guardian of Merkel's office

**Kai Diekmann**  
**BILD EDITOR**  
Runs Germany's top-selling newspaper, whose support all chancellors cultivate

**Annette Schavan**  
**EDUCATION MINISTER**  
One of Merkel's closest CDU allies

**Peter Altmaier**  
**CDU PARLIAMENTARY WHIP**  
Has helped Merkel get euro legislation through parliament

**Wolfgang Schaeuble**  
**FINANCE MINISTER**  
Political veteran who was once Merkel's boss in the CDU; has played lead role in debt crisis

**Thomas de Maiziere**  
**DEFENCE MINISTER**  
CDU ally, Merkel's chief of staff in first term

**Joachim Sauer**  
**HUSBAND**  
Married Merkel in 1998

**Volker Kauder**  
**CDU PARLIAMENTARY LEADER**  
Traditionalist who has worked to keep CDU behind Merkel during euro crisis

**Joerg Asmussen**  
**ECB BOARD MEMBER**  
Key finance ministry adviser during the crisis; influential despite being a Social Democrat

**Jens Weidmann**  
**BUNDESBANK PRESIDENT**  
Was an influential economics adviser; less close in new role

**Herman Van Rompuy**  
**EUROPEAN COUNCIL PRESIDENT**  
Haiku-loving Belgian has had his run-ins with Merkel, but is a reliable partner in Brussels

**Francois Hollande**  
**FRENCH PRESIDENT**  
Crucial new partner after May election win

## MEDIA

## PARTY

## CABINET

## EUROPE

her. In 2011, when she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom at the White House, she emerged from her limousine and started walking up some steps before stopping, as if she had just realised she had forgotten Sauer, who was rushing to catch up.

While other “first spouses” such as Michelle Obama sometimes speak out on the issues of the day or support favourite causes, Sauer has no public opinions. His determination to stay out of the public eye can sometimes appear hostile.

“I am not going to say anything into your microphone,” he growled into a camera on the red carpet with Merkel at the Bayreuth opera festival in 2005, when she was still opposition leader.

Within a year or two of Merkel’s taking power, German journalists had already given up trying to report on the unapproachable man they call the “Phantom of the Opera.”

Sauer’s low profile means he can live free from bodyguards and journalists, both at his office and at home in the couple’s modest flat, just a few blocks east of where the Wall stood.

He has earned the respect of some in the German press for consistently refusing to open up.

“We had an expectation that if we kept at it, he would, sooner or later,” said political columnist Hugo Mueller-Vogg of mass-circulation German daily Bild. “But he stuck to his principles throughout, and there’s something about that you have to admire.”

After Mueller-Vogg attacked Sauer for missing Merkel’s inauguration, the Chancellor responded in person. “She told me that I shouldn’t worry about her husband, because he would accompany her to all events when his absence might cause a diplomatic incident,” said Mueller-Vogg. “And he has.”

For a transparent society like Germany, “it’s really quite remarkable” that Sauer has managed to pull this off for so long, said a former CDU minister who has spent time with both Merkel and Sauer at their weekend dacha north of Berlin.

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Sven  
student

Merkel has in the past described her conversations with her husband as “almost vital” and called him “a very good giver of advice.”

“Each of us goes about their job,” Merkel once told Bunte, a German celebrity magazine. “I’m not a housewife and he’s not a house-husband.”

When Sauer sits down to breakfast with her and reads the newspapers at their weekend retreat, he presses her on political issues like any ordinary citizen would, says a German official who worked closely with Merkel in her first term.

“He isn’t involved or interested in the latest political intrigue or machinations in Berlin,” said the official. “She has come into work a number of times and said, ‘My husband doesn’t understand what we’re doing here’. And then there’s a discussion. But I don’t see him as someone who actively influences policy. He is more of a reality check’ for her.”

A close aide said Sauer is “most definitely an important ‘corrective’ for Merkel,” someone she can talk to about other things than politics in the evenings. “He’s someone who’ll openly tell her what he thinks.”

And he does speak up when he feels like it. In August 2001, he caused a stir in Berlin when he filed a formal complaint about the noise of an open-air theatre group’s performances across the street from the couple’s central Berlin apartment.

He faxed the authorities to complain about ‘a noise nuisance’ one evening, says Adrienne Goehler, who was then a city government official, recalling how she intervened on behalf of the summer production of “Amphitryon”, a tragicomedy by Heinrich von Kleist.

The production was violating a 60-decibel noise limit by eight decibels. Goehler spent days calling various city agencies to find a way for the show to complete its run.

“He lives in the middle of the biggest city in Germany and was complaining about a bit of noise at 8:30 pm,” said Goehler. “That almost caused the whole production to be shut down. It was grotesque. If he wants the peace and quiet of a forest he should move to a forest.”

The dispute made headlines in Berlin, amid suggestions that political clout might have been used to try to silence the show. Merkel has made no comment.

At the chemistry department in Berlin’s Humboldt University, colleagues and students have been instructed to keep mum about Sauer. “He’s a guy who just wants to be recognised as a scientist but not as Merkel’s husband,” said Sven, a 29-year-old student who says he has known Sauer for about five years.

Others describe Sauer as a strict professor from the old school who forbids conversation, drinks, food or reading in his lectures. Sven said he once heard Sauer crack a joke, but it was so subtle and high-brow that only a few people got it. “It wasn’t even that funny. But a few people did laugh, more out of politeness than anything else.”

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