Gerald Malcolm Stern: 9th October 1930 – 9th September 2018

Gerald Stern, doyen of British Movement Disorders, died peacefully aged 87 on 9th September 2018 after a short illness. He had retired from practice as a consultant neurologist to University College London Hospital (previously also to the Middlesex Hospital, since demolished), but still attended grand rounds and CPCs for a number of years.

Gerald was born and grew up in the East End of London. His parents, Jewish immigrants from Lithuania, knew little English, so Yiddish was spoken at home.

“Entering medicine was really fortuitous. I had no desire to be a doctor. My father really wanted me to take over his cigarette shop. He was very intelligent, although uneducated, and he quickly perceived that I was innumerate. Selling cigarettes, he could effortlessly add up 20 items in his head. There was no prospect that I could manage the shop. This led to a family pow-wow: “What are we going to do with this stupid boy?” One thing a Jewish family in the East End of London really wanted was to have a doctor son, so I acquiesced.

During the war, like most East End children, I was evacuated to the countryside. I found that I had a good unconsummated memory, which I attributed to the unexpected advantage of not going to school from the age of 8 to 12 years.”

After the war, Gerald applied to all 12 London medical schools, but was only invited to interview at one—the London Hospital, 400 yards from his father’s tobacconist shop.

“I stuck out medical school, mainly not to disappoint my parents. It was only when we started clinical work that I became truly interested. From the start, I found clinical neurology fascinating.”

Once qualified, his first post was as House Physician to Sir (later Lord) Russell Brain. At the London Hospital, he also worked for Dorothy Russell in neuropathology, and for his general medicine was registrar to the great cardiologist Lord Evans.

After then serving a 2-year sojourn doing National Service in the Royal Navy Voluntary Reserve, he returned to London as registrar, again to Brain, at the Maida Vale Hospital (later incorporated with Queen Square into the National Hospitals for Nervous Diseases).

He then went to Columbia University in New York. There he engaged in research on the subthalamic nucleus, on acute lesions within the primate substantia, and on equine encephalitis, under the distinguished neuroanatomist Fred Mettler.

On his return to the UK, he worked briefly in Newcastle under Henry Miller and John Walton. Miller took him aside and said “Now, look here, Gerald, while you haven’t killed too many of my patients, you’ve let me down very much. You have failed to antagonize certain of my consultant colleagues. Your punishment—I’m sending you to Paris to learn some neurology. It’s about time you knew some.”

So Gerald then worked as an “externe” at the Salpetriere Hospital in Paris, where he wrote up his MD thesis on “The effects of lesions in the substantia nigra of the rhesus monkey,” sitting on a bidet in a very small room in a former bordello.

Finally, in 1965, aged 35, he returned to London as a consultant at St Pancras Hospital, a former workhouse attached to University College Hospital (UCH). There he was able to finance research thanks to several legacies from elderly ladies, and took on Donald Calne and Andrew Lees as his first fellows, followed by a succession of other very capable and enthusiastic young doctors. He famously wrote: “Surround yourself with young people brighter than yourself and always be nice to old ladies” (who might donate a legacy).

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Among other topics, he and his team worked on pathfinding studies on selegiline, bromocriptine, and apomorphine and with the neurochemist Merton Sandler, on catecholamines.

Gerald was the first in the UK to administer powdered levodopa, and established the first dedicated Parkinson’s disease clinic in the country. He was involved in the birth of the (International Parkinson and) Movement Disorder Society (MDS), describing himself as its midwife, and organized the WFN Extrapyramidal Disease Congress in London in 1997.

Personally, Gerald was a delight. He was loved by his patients and regarded as a favorite uncle by his fellows. Despite his early Yiddish upbringing, he became a most eloquent and erudite exponent of the English language. His delivery was a joy to behold—he could have held an audience spellbound even reading the London telephone directory. He was modest and self-effacing, a wise old owl, generous, gracious, kind, affable, cultured, and refined.

Outside neurology, he avidly frequented theatre and opera, and was devoted to his Australian wife Jenny, his three children, and six grandchildren. The last, adopted, grandchild arrived just in time to see him, and he her, in the hospital before he died.

On a personal note, I felt a particular affinity with Gerald for several reasons. First because, like him, I trained at the London Hospital and worked at the Salpetriere. And second because he was so much like my beloved father-in-law Hans, a Jewish refugee physiotherapy student who came to England from Berlin in 1936, also not speaking English, and was imbued with the same Jewish but agnostic/humanist wisdom, and the same endearing curiosity about other people and their lives. They shared a few patients, and the same philosophy of life.

I had the honor to interview Gerald at the MDS Congress in Buenos Aires in 2010 for the MDS oral history project from which I have borrowed quotations. I encourage you to play the video and enjoy Gerald in full eloquent mode!

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Reference