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Oscar Felsenfeld – personal reminiscences

W. BURROWS

It is an honor to be allowed to participate in this tribute to Oscar Felsenfeld. As all of us, he was inevitably in large part a product of cumulative experiences, and his was an unusually varied life and a truly cosmopolitan one. His wide range of interests can be encompassed only in the broad term tropical medicine, and his career spanned a period notable for marked advances in both research and application of scientific medicine. His many contributions are covered by other participants and, therefore, although we shared scientific interests including cooperative research, I shall confine myself to Oscar as a person.

It is doubtful that any one individual knew Oscar completely for he was a shy, modest, and intensely private person. I had the privilege of knowing him well, in many respects intimately, for many years and from time to time he talked freely about himself. So it is possible to put together something of the kind of person he was by assembling bits, pieces, and fragments that emerged from time to time over the years.

He was born in Wöllersdorf, Austria under the Habsburg monarchy on 21 May, 1906. Although his name is Jewish, it derived from his paternal grandfather, and the family was Roman Catholic. Almost from the beginning life was not easy for him, having passed his boyhood years during World War I in an area of active fighting and near starvation. Living through the readjustments and aftermath of war, he received his scientific education immediately preceding and during the politically turbulent and economically depressed decade of the 1930's. He received the M.D. degree from historic Charles University in Prague in 1930 and his medical internship and residency were taken at the University Hospital in Prague in the period 1931–1933. His consuming interest in research is evidenced by his publication of 14 scientific papers on tuberculosis and zoonoses in Czechoslovak and German journals prior to his completion of his medical training. The M.D. degree was followed by the Dr. rer. nat., also from Charles University, in physical chemistry in 1933. In subsequent postdoctoral studies he was awarded the D.T.M. & H. degree from the Institut de la Médecine of the Université de Marseille in 1936, and the C.P.H. degree from the Czechoslovak Public Health School in 1937. It seems not to be generally

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known that he was also an accomplished musician and played first flute with the famed Czech Philharmonic Orchestra in many of its performances and recordings.

He was destined to be inextricably involved with the military, not only in World War II and the Korean War but also in events leading up to the former. This relationship is only superficially indicated by his service as pathologist and epidemiologist in the Czechoslovak Public Health Service and Czechoslovak Army from 1933 to 1939, and his participation in war service by the record of his service, not only in the Czechoslovak Army, but also in the Polish Army, the French Foreign Legion, the Free French Army, and the Army of the United States. He once remarked to me that he must hold some kind of record for desertion from various armies.

Although it is not possible to reconstruct this period of his life in any detail, the bare bones may be filled out to a degree from fragments that emerged in personal conversations. Following the occupation of Eastern Europe, he eked out an existence by writing newspaper articles, eventually persuading the authorities to allow him to go to Austria to continue this activity. This provided an avenue of escape and he skinned into Italy. He narrowly escaped execution by Italian guards through the intervention of an old family friend, a monsignor in Milan. Through his good offices Oscar was put aboard a ship bound for America. The ship was unfortunately intercepted in the Mediterranean Sea by elements of the French Navy. It was escorted to Marseille where all the physically fit young men were forcibly inducted as common soldiers into the French Foreign Legion and sent to Africa for training.

With the growing seriousness of the situation, the Legion, for the first time in history, was sent to France to participate in the fighting in the European theatre. Oscar was among the Allied troops who retreated to Dunkirk. He and two companions were evacuated by a British ship by the strategem of commandeering a stretcher, two carrying the third aboard ship.

Dumped in England, he made his way to London where he was soon picked up wearing a tattered Legion uniform, and taken to General de Gaulle who personally inducted him into the Free French Army, still as a common soldier. Thus he continued in active military service in Europe. Among other experiences, he was parachuted into Norway in the abortive British invasion of that country, fortunately was not shot and fell into the sea to be picked up by a British destroyer.

Eventually, and by means unknown to me, he successfully deserted the Free French Army and made his way to the United States. By this time (1942) the United States had entered the war and he was quickly conscripted, but this time as a medical officer, and spent the remainder of the war in the Pacific theatre.

On demobilization he became Professor of Pathology and Public Health at the Chicago Medical School and was also Supervisor of Laboratories of the

Illinois State Welfare Department Hospitals, and Chief of Microbiology at Mount Sinai Hospital. He spent a sabbatical year in Puerto Rico as Research Professor at the School of Tropical Medicine in San Juan and Pathologist of the Presbyterian Hospital in Santurce. He returned to Chicago as Professorial Lecturer at the University of Illinois College of Medicine and Graduate School, and Co-Director and Head of Microbiology at the Hektoen Institute for Medical Research.

A year's leave of absence in 1953 as Visiting Professor of Microbiology at the Medical College of the West Indies in Jamaica was interrupted by a second induction into the Medical Corps of the United States Army for service in the Far East. During the following 10 years he occupied successive positions as Deputy Commanding Officer of the 406th Medical General Laboratory in Japan, as Technical Advisor in Pathology in Teheran and New Delhi, and as Executive Director of the U.S. Army-SEATO Medical Research Projects in Bangkok. While in Thailand he married Ambhan Dasaneyavaja, M.D. who survives him.

During this period he also served as chief of courses in laboratory methods, and organizing or re-organizing reference laboratories under agencies of the World Health Organization in Manila, Seoul, Calcutta, Baghdad, Ankara, and Rangoon. In 1963 he was returned to the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research as Deputy Chief of the Department of Experimental Pathology, and on his mandatory retirement from the Army as Colonel, MC, AUS, he went to the Regional Primate Research Center of Tulane University as Chief of the Division of Communicable Diseases and Professor of Tropical Medicine and Parasitology at the Tulane University School of Medicine. On his retirement from these positions he remained at the Center with the rank of Research Scientist. Despite continuous cardiac difficulties during his last few years he continued active work and was in his laboratory two days before his death of congestive heart failure on 2 January 1978.

His world-wide activities were continuous throughout his professional life, beginning in the 1930's with assignments to the Bureau International d'Hygiène of the League of Nations in Asia, and intermingled with his military work, and playing an active part in the World Health Organization following its formation under the United Nations. In his capacity as Consultant to the latter, he worked principally as an epidemiologist and establishing laboratories for microbiologic and environmental studies on loan from his employer at the time. In addition, he spent his vacations in Geneva in administrative and coordinative work. He was also active as an advisor, panel member, and consultant to the International Atomic Energy Commission on the in vitro use of radioactive isotopes for immunological purposes, and in this capacity contributed in large part to establishing the utilization of these techniques in Zagreb, Kingston (Jamaica), Teheran, and Columbia. The geographic range of his activities is also shown by the fact that he was licensed to practice medicine not only in Czechoslovakia but

also in India, the Netherlands West Indies, New York, Ohio, and the District of Columbia. There is hardly a place in the world where his name and reputation are not known and revered.

It is almost incredible that his bibliography includes 281 research papers, authorship of four books and co-authorship of three more and his contributed chapters or monographs in 14 books edited by others. He was the recipient of many honors, being appointed as early as 1926 as a Schröder Scholar and was awarded a Ferran Fellowship and a Schering Fellowship. He was awarded the Kitasato Medal, the Gamaleya Medal, the Order of the Quetzal, the Order of the White Lion, the Order of the White Eagle, and the Order of Roumania in addition to his several military decorations. He was honored too by being asked as Guest Lecturer repeatedly at various institutions, including the Calcutta School of Tropical Medicine, the School of Tropical Medicine in Lisbon, the Swiss Tropical Institute, and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

Throughout his life he was a quiet, modest person who retained, in spite of a physical and mental nerve-wracking life, a charming Old World courtesy and unfailing honesty. He demanded intellectual honesty in others and was deeply disturbed by hypocrisy and medical and scientific political activity. He did not forgive such things, did not dissemble well, and was considered by some to be cynical. Those who knew him well aware that his general attitude was a combination of sadness and skepticism. He expressed this to me at one time by the rhetorical question "are there no gentlemen left?" His loss will be deeply felt by many all over the world.