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The Handicap of the Great Father

By Erwin H. Ackerknecht †

A few years ago I dealt with the role of the son-in-law in medical history (From Barbersurgeon to modern Doctor. Bull. Hist. of Med., 1984, 58: 545). The sons-in-law seem in general not so mediocre and seem superior to the sons when compared to the “great men”. (There are, of course, exceptions, like in the case of A. von Graefe, when the son is superior, even to an eminent father.) This might, of course, be simply the result of the fact that the sons are more genetic accidents and are really mediocre like the sons, His and Romberg I knew, while the sons-in-law are choices. But there might be an additional factor at work: The handicap of the great father. The phenomenon become visible to me first in two cases.

As a young man in Berlin I befriended L. S., a Russian engineering student of my age. He was the son of L. T., one of the two authors of the Russian revolution of 1917, the founder and commander of the 7 million men strong Red Army, a most brilliant writer, but also, of course, responsible for the death of millions. I have the impression that L. S. was about as talented as his father. But instead of building his own life, he sacrificed it to his father. He was completely dazzled and paralysed by the brilliancy of his procreator. He started repeatedly, for instance, an article but stopped in the middle of it and destroyed the manuscript arguing: My father will write on the same subject, and will be so much better! (L. S. was killed by Stalin’s agents in a Paris clinic at age 32, 2 years before his father was murdered by the same.)

On a cargo going from Marseille to New York in the spring of 1941 I slept with 400 other refugees on straw in the belly of the boat. My neighbour F. H. was an amiable man of my age but constantly drunk. He was the son of a Nobelprize chemist, forced by his father to become a chemist, instead of a lawyer, as he wanted, and where he probably would have succeeded, as he was a very gifted man. He had “solved” his problem by filial obedience plus alcoholism. A few years later he killed himself.

I have known another son of a Nobelprize scientist (R. H.), whose achievement was mediocre, but who, like the sons of two famous psychiatrists, M. B. and W. K., the son of Charcot or sons of Trendelenburg and Cohnheim whom I have known, might have been more if they had not worn the name of their fathers and been obsessed by their images. Medicine is still

partly a craft and therefore men working in the most craftlike branches of medicine like surgery are least endangered by the “handicap of the father”. The phenomenon is, of course, by no means limited to medicine. It can be observed equally well e.g. in politics or literature. The saddest case is probably the one of belonging to the latter field. It is the young alcoholic whose grave in Rome does not even bear his own name but only the laconic sentence: “Goethe filius Patri antevertem anno LX.”