

Sam Seifter: A Personal Reminiscence of 60 Years

Irving Listowsky

Department of Biochemistry
Albert Einstein College of Medicine
Bronx, NY 10461

Sam has been my mentor, my advocate, and cherished colleague for most of my life. To write about Sam allows me to record events that span six decades from my early childhood until the present time.

COUSINS FROM CLEVELAND

My mother and Eleanor Seifter's mother were first cousins. Both were called Becky (Rebecca) possibly after the same relative. I recall the excitement in our household when we were told that the "cousins from Cleveland" were moving to New York. I viewed Cleveland in the abstract as the city of the Indians and the Browns. Little did I know that the move of Eleanor and Sam Seifter to New York would have a major impact on the rest of my life.

I recall our visits to their Ocean Avenue apartment in the heart of Flatbush, Brooklyn. The time was shortly after World War II (1946). The memories that linger include the trolley car ride to the Seifter's and the inevitable piano music that filled the apartment. I also remember Sam's frisky babies, Madeline and Julian, scampering through the apartment. I was an undignified, to say the least, kid from the schoolyards of Brooklyn, and I recall comments at home about our cultured, intellectual relatives. The intellect was clearly evident, but I was amazed by its scope and the warmth in which it was conveyed. Sam could provide a sportscaster's insight into particulars about the Brooklyn Dodgers or any other subject I was interested in, and Eleanor could expound about everything from the botanical gardens to our family history. Even then I thought – what a privilege to be related to these folks.

EXPOSURE TO SCIENCE AND THE LABORATORY

I was about 12 years old when Sam invited me and another cousin to visit his laboratory at the Long Island College of Medicine (Downstate). Needless to say, it was a meaningful experience. We arrived discussing the intricacies of stickball and other such matters, and left with a sense of awe. I remember a crude centrifugation procedure (separating blood plasma) with Sam's explanation that sounded to us like the most exciting thing imaginable. He always had the talent to inspire and teach at any level. He could explain concepts in terms appropriate for anyone from the novice to the most

advanced scholar. That visit left a lasting impression that probably drew me to science a few years later.

Sam's advice has always been indispensable and has influenced many of my major decisions. After high school I was persuaded by a very prominent rabbi to study Talmud full-time at the Telz Yeshiva – in Cleveland, no less. I asked Sam and Eleanor about their hometown and somehow – I'm not sure how it happened – Sam gently convinced me not to give up my secular studies entirely and to compromise by attending Yeshiva University. I'm still unsure whether my major in chemistry was also a subconscious result of Sam's persona. In graduate school, as well, I relied on Sam's guidance. I intended to join a close friend in Rudy Marcus' lab, even though I didn't really understand his theoretical treatment of electron transfer mechanisms (for which he subsequently won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry). I still don't understand that stuff. Sam gently guided me to a young up-and-coming peptide chemist, Murray Goodman. What wisdom on Sam's part? How did he know it was a perfect match? Sam also connected me to Sasha Englander for a postdoctoral stint.

THE EINSTEIN YEARS

My 44 years at AECOM have been special in terms of close-up, almost daily, contacts with Sam. I shall briefly summarize some of my impressions. Sam is the quintessential Renaissance man who can discuss literature, history, the arts, and almost any topic at a high level. As I mentioned at a recent symposium in his honor, he is one of those rare individuals who can tell you all about Grover Cleveland, Grover Cleveland Alexander, and Alexander the Great. In science as well, very few have his broad scope of knowledge in chemistry, biology, and medicine. His scientific work in diverse fields has always been first-rate. I suppose that his direct contributions (collagen, collagenases, complement, etc.) and the many instances in which he facilitated others (hemoglobin A1C, etc.) will be discussed by others in this volume. His scientific reasoning is always precise and clear. I have never heard any vague ideas from Sam.

Sam's teaching has been exemplary – it is the standard that we all strive to achieve. To cite a specific example, I was the course leader (in name only) for Advanced Medical Biochemistry, a course that Sam conceived, designed, and executed for about 10 years. It was an

Sam Seifter: A Personal Reminiscence of 60 Years

amazing experience perhaps far ahead of its time. We chose lecturers for diverse subjects connecting clinical medicine to basic science (translational medicine 20-some odd years before it became the craze). Although Einstein had a wealth of experts in many fields, whenever we needed to fill a gap, Sam did it himself. You name the field, from renal physiology to protein folding and disease (amyloid), and Sam gave clear, high level lectures on the topic. Moreover, he prepared most of the study questions – there were hundreds of them – for all the topics. Guess who graded most of the all-essay question exams? I occasionally encounter physicians who many years later fondly remember Sam Seifter's lectures and not much else about their biochemistry course at Einstein.

The years that Sam, as chairman, guided our department through tough times with wisdom, compassion, and fairness, set the stage for the subsequent achievements under Vern Schramm's auspices. Sam was directly involved in most faculty activities. I usually gave Sam drafts of manuscripts and grants to peruse before submission. Invariably, these were returned with so many hand-written suggestions – all substantive and incisive – that the final version was far superior. I later found out that Sam was doing this for many folks both inside and outside of the department. Sam fought for his faculty. When major issues or injustices occurred, Sam went to bat. Who can forget his oratory at Student-Faculty Senate meetings?

ME AND PAUL

Paul Gallop and Sam had a very close and affectionate friendship based on trust and mutual respect. In order to better explain their relationship, I often cited the relationship between the first "Dizzy" Dean (before Howard) and his brother Paul "Daffy" Dean, who pitched for the Cardinals in the 1930s. Dizzy's famous statement "me and Paul will win 45 games this year" (they actually won 49) and afterwards "it ain't bragging if you can back it up," seemed to also be fitting for our own "me and Paul." I recall Paul and Sam's scientific

and political discussions and their remarkable exchange of ideas. The notion of collagen cross-links, glycation of proteins, γ -carboxyl glutamate formation, and topics as diverse as blood clotting and physical chemistry were batted around at high levels.

His relationship with Ephraim Katzir is another example of the way in which Sam left a lasting impression on so many. Sam visited the Weizmann Institute once, and found many admirers. Ephraim always asked about Sam before anything, when we met during my many visits there. I recall a reception at the presidential residence during Ephraim's stint as president of Israel, when he approached me during the ceremony and asked "how's Sam?" Lasting friendships, respect, and affection are key features of Sam's relationships.

SAM'S SONG

This is a selective personal reminiscence; other contributors may elaborate on Sam's many scientific contributions. Speaking of his talents as the Renaissance man, Sam's book of poetry is masterful. And who can forget the skits that Sam wrote for departmental holiday parties. Those scripts can put Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, Woody Allen, and other comedy writers to shame. Sam's puns and wisecracks are also classic.

I recently had the privilege of hosting a symposium in Sam's honor. He wanted it to be all scientific; however we could not limit the spontaneous public outpouring of genuine affection by many colleagues. Sam is truly an inspiration to all who meet him. Sam and I are polar opposites in many ways. We inherently have divergent political and social views, yet he has drawn me from the extremes by his sincere humanitarian outlook. To this day I still cherish his advice. In fact a few days before I wrote this piece, I called to ask him about an offer that I had to serve on a study section. I said, "Why do I need this at this stage in my career?" He told me not to turn it down outright and to think about it. The next morning I found a voicemail from Sam suggesting that I do it. I shall serve!