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Editorial

Abecedarium: Who am I? L'...

A very good day to you all, dear colleagues,

If I say it myself, I was – and remain – a celebrity. My book on the applications of electricity in medicine, which came out in 1913, made my reputation as one of the most “modern” otorhinolaryngologists of the day. And yet, I did not really devote myself completely to your specialty before the age of 34. . .

To begin at the beginning, I was born in the city of Cambrai on July 24th, 1858, in a well-established upper middle class family of Northern France. My father was a product of France’s elite educational system – an engineer, obviously. Although he died on me when I was only 16, my grandparents took over where he had left off, with the help of an English governess and a German tutor. I was a star pupil in high school and my uncle, the Director of the Rome School of Archeology, wanted me to take the entrance exam to my father’s engineering school. I was not so sure, and the family in conclave finally agreed to let me go in for medicine. I began my internship in Paris in 1880, where my stay in Pr Gougenheim’s department, he introduced me to otorhinolaryngology and my time with Pr Laségue added to my already extensive general knowledge; as well as Latin and Greek, I was fluent in several languages, including German and English. I was equally well versed in music. In 1882, in my idle moments as an intern in the Saint-Louis Hospital, I composed what I entitled “The Polymorphic Opera”, resonant with innuendo. It portrayed one of our former kings, for whom our hospital was named, stepping down from his pedestal to be astonished by the world in which he found himself. The opera was staged as a charity performance, with the greatest musicians and singers of Paris, including Lucien Fugère, the star baritone of the Comic Opera, to whom I dedicated my 1891 doctoral thesis on phonation. My son-in-law, Maurice Chevassu, used to say that it was music that led me into your specialty. In the same year, I was appointed Hospital Physician, and was put in charge of the medicine department at the Sainte-Perrine Hospital. The following year, having little else to do, I went to Vienna to attend the course of the great Adam Politzer. On my return, convinced that otorhinolaryngology had a bright future and that high-quality teaching was needed in the field, I opened a free clinic in Rue d’Aboukir, dedicated to this new specialty that was emerging in Europe. In 1895, when I was transferred to the Saint-Antoine Hospital, I made it a condition that my department should specialize in otorhinolaryngology and offer a consultation in that field. Thus, was born the third ORL department in France, following that

headed by Moure in Bordeaux and the Lariboisière Hospital in Paris. Your specialty was well and truly launched in France. The teaching we provided reached a distinguished audience: Hautant and Sourdille were among my students. My own renown won me the offer of the Chair in Otorhinolaryngology in Paris, although I declined, being little drawn to administrative tasks: as I later wrote, “Some wicked tongues claim that, in Germany, administration assists the individual, in Britain it ignores him and in France hinders him”.

My writings cover the whole range of pathologies, both medical and surgical, that you encounter. Some of my articles, denouncing the misdeeds of my colleagues with mordant irony, are still quoted today. “*Castigat ridendo mores...*” The Academy of Medicine welcomed me, and I was one of the first otorhinolaryngologists to join its ranks. I was, as I say, a celebrity, and my family life was of the happiest, when the First World War broke out. In a matter of months, my life, like that of so many, was thrown into turmoil. My hospital department and its courses were run down as all resources were diverted to the conflict. We were too short-staffed to be able to



Fig. 1.

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cope. My son, Jacques, never recovered from the wounds sustained at the Front, and died of them in 1923. I was weighed down by grief, turned in upon myself and went into a decline. My death, in January 1929, was attributed to a bout of flu!

If you still do not know who I am, let me mention that, among other things, I described a particular form of Menière's disease (the vertigo that improves hearing. . .), which you very kindly named after me (Fig. 1).

With my best and kindest regards,

Marcel Lermoyez

Disclosure of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest concerning this article.

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