EDITORIAL

Abecedarium: Who am I? K’…

Dear reader,

I was born under the Austrian monarchy, on October 23, 1837, in the town of Kaposvar in the province of Hungary, youngest but one of a very poor Jewish family. I grew up with the loving support of my parents, who encouraged me throughout my schooling and studies. In 1856, I passed my doctorate in medicine at the University of Vienna, which was then among the greatest institutions of learning in the world—and changed my surname, Kohn, to that, inspired by my home town, under which you know me.

To make a living, I moved to Lwow in 1863, to run the sanatorium there. It was here that I met my mentor, Pr Ferdinand Ritter von Hebra, the leading light of Viennese dermatology. As it happened, we became good friends, and he appointed me as his departmental assistant in the Vienna General Hospital. Having published a monograph entitled “Syphilis of the Mouth, Throat, Nose and Larynx” and developed it into a thesis; I was named Specialist Professor of Syphilis in 1866, and later Professor in Dermatology. Hebra and I together produced almost all of the reference works in our specialty, and it is generally agreed that between us we founded modern dermatology. The twin peaks of my fulfilment came in 1869, when I married Hebra’s daughter, Martha, and when, on her father’s death, I succeeded by Imperial decree to the Chair of Dermatology on February 8th, 1881. This joy and achievement, unfortunately, did not always win me, friends. William Dubreuil, for example, who was the first to hold the Chair of Dermatology at Bordeaux, went so far as to say of me that “He took Hebra’s daughter, house, chair and clientele, and left the rest to his brother-in-law Hans’”. Others insinuated that I had changed my surname only so as to convert to Catholicism and marry my mentor’s daughter—whereas in point of fact, it was simply to avoid being confused with the many other physicians whose names were similar to mine. But I shall not dignify any of that with further mention; I prefer to return to the subject of medicine…

You should know that I was the first to describe, among other things, the butterfly-wing facial rash typical of lupus erythematosus, and also rhinophyma and rhinoscleroma, and notably a bizarre pathologic entity which, in 1912, 10 years after my death, the scientific community gave the name under which you know me. I published the first five case reports in the Archiv für Dermatologie und Syphilis in 1872, describing the very particular purplish lesions, which most often affected the skin of the limbs but could also sometimes involve the oral mucosa. It affected elderly males and particularly East European Jews; mortality was inexorable. The etiology of this disease, which was in my day extremely rare, was long unknown: only in the later part of the 20th century was the research effort to be increased, as the number of cases began to multiply in East Africa, reaching 20% to 50% of all cancers diagnosed, and especially within the gay communities of a number of North American cities, including New York and San Francisco. It thus came to be analyzed as a proliferative mesenchymatous process involving the cells of the blood and lymph systems, induced by viral growth factors and by the interleukin-6 of human herpesvirus-8, in particular. In case of AIDS, the risk of developing this opportunistic disease is estimated at 20,000 times that of the general population. As you will have guessed, we are talking about the notorious Kaposi sarcoma (Fig. 1).

I myself was appointed Hofrat or University Counselor in 1899, a signal honor at the time. I was an excellent teacher and a clinician of the highest order. I never ceased working,
training many future professors of dermatology who went on to practice in numerous countries. On March 6th, 1902, at 8 O’clock in the morning, I left my students, the medical school and this world. The obituaries issued by the scientific community all told of the loss of one of the great masters of the Golden Age of the School of Vienna. Auf wiedersehen…

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