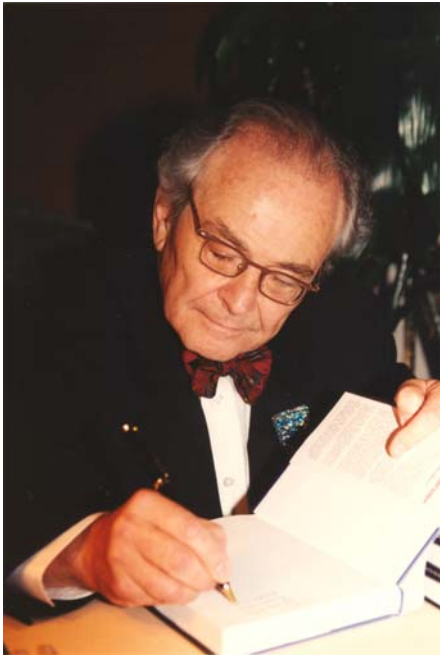


IN MEMORIAM: JOHN HANS MENKES

Contributed by Harvey B. Sarnat M.S., M.D., F.R.C.P.C.



On 22 November 2008 in Los Angeles, California, one month short of his 80th birthday, the world of paediatric neurology lost an icon and one its contemporary fathers, and the World at large lost a true Renaissance Man – physician; scientist; playwright; philosopher; connoisseur of good literature, art, music and food; humanist and liberal thinker who deplored discrimination, intolerance, prejudices and false values of all types. The life he lived was as interesting and inspiring as were his contributions to paediatric neurology and his understanding of the world around him, both medical and social. He succumbed to colonic carcinoma and complications of chemotherapy.

John Menkes was born in 1928 in Vienna, Austria; he faced years of discrimination and racism for being Jewish. In 1939, just days before Germany initiated World War II in Europe, John and his parents were fortunate to be able to go to Ireland, where John attended school. The rest of his family that remained in Austria perished. He eventually immigrated to the U.S. and graduated high school in California. He earned a B.S. and M.S. degree in organic chemistry at the University of Southern California and attended medical school at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. During his internship he clinically described maple syrup urine disease and later biochemically defined the disease in another patient while a paediatric resident at Johns Hopkins University.

In 1957 he began a paediatric neurology fellowship at the New York Neurological Institute of Columbia University under the direction of Sidney Carter and H. Houston Merritt. He continued biochemical studies as well and described a form of tyrosinosis and X-linked kinky hair disease, later to bear his eponym and initiating a lifelong interest in disorders of copper metabolism. Returning to Johns Hopkins, he pursued more clinical training in paediatric neurology under the tutelage of David Clark. In 1966 he was offered a faculty appointment at UCLA to establish the first Division of Paediatric Neurology on the U.S. West Coast, where he recruited many prominent researchers. There he spent the rest of his long career, actively practicing, taking call on the paediatric neurology service, teaching and also maintaining a small private practice until almost the end of his life despite a chronic terminal illness and with “emeritus” status since 1989..

John was an ideal role model for younger colleagues and trainees. His patience and firm but gentle manner with patients were legendary. He was always smiling and never angry. Despite what he and his family had suffered at the hands of a Nazi Austrian government in his childhood, when offered his Austrian citizenship back more than a half-century late, he graciously accepted it to become a dual U.S. and Austrian citizen and he even accepted an invitation to lecture at the University of Vienna Medical Faculty, to demonstrate that old wounds must heal and that the present generation not be blamed for sins of the previous, even if they were direct decedentes. Such was the generosity and lack of resentfulness of this man.

I first met John Menkes in Toronto in 1975, at the first congress of the new International Child Neurology Association (ICNA). We became close friends and colleagues despite our generation gap. It was a great personal honour to be invited by John in 1998 to co-edit the 6th edition of his textbook and subsequent editions; an even greater honour was John's friendship. John was always more concerned about the feelings and opportunities of others than about his own sentiments. He celebrated the successes of others, especially those of his colleagues and trainees, rather than feeling jealous or competitive. His scientific and medical publications, both original peer-reviewed articles and invited reviews and textbook chapters, number more than 200, but perhaps he is best known for his classical textbook, "Child Neurology", the first edition published in 1974. The 8th edition, still in preparation at the time of his death, will be published posthumously. He participated in many international and national professional meeting throughout the world and was well known and venerated in Canada and throughout Latin America, Europe and Australia.

Apart from his medical and scientific contributions, John Menkes was a published playwright. His novels and plays include titles, "The Angry Puppet Syndrome" (a story about adverse effects of a medication and how they affect people's lives), "After the Tempest" (a play about opposing sentiments amongst Jews in Vienna just after the War) and "Views of Fuji" (a love story about a man who developed cancer). He owned a house in Wales, where he used to isolate himself 3-4 months annually to do his creative non-medical writing. He was a voracious reader and a master chess player as well. He loved wildlife and was especially fascinated by whales. John favourite philanthropic organizations were Medecins sans Frontiers (Doctors without Borders), World Wildlife Federation and CalArts, a college for art students. He was devoted to his loving wife Myrna and she remained equally devoted to him.

One of the highlights of my own life is to have known this gentle, patient, authentic, sincere and brilliant man and to have been inspired by his life and work. The World, our discipline of paediatric neurology and I personally miss him greatly and remember him fondly.

Calgary, Alberta, CANADA

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An unabridged version of this tribute will appear in the Journal of Child Neurology.