Dr. Leo M. Davidoff
President of AANS, 1956–1957
Leo M. Davidoff, 1898–1975

JOSEPH RANSOHOFF, M.D.
New York, New York

“The potter and the clay are made of the same material”

Dr. Leo M. Davidoff died quietly in his sleep on December 24, 1975, while visiting his daughter and grandchildren in England after a long struggle with parkinsonism. His physical prowess was diminished, but his mind remained sharp and inquisitive to the end. For Dr. Davidoff, the patient was the focus of every resource the art and science of medicine could command to assuage pain and heal. He agonized over his incapacity to control runaway disease and to understand the meaning of suffering. That in his final years Dr. Davidoff himself suffered from a progressive neurological impairment was an irony probably not lost upon this preeminent teacher and healer. Even now as I put my thoughts together for our Journal of Neurosurgery which he loved so dearly, Leo’s picture faces me across my desk with that characteristic, piercing, but kind mixture of strength and gentleness that blended together so completely and best characterized his greatness.

Dr. Davidoff was born in a little town in Latvia in 1898, the son of a shoemaker and the seventh of nine children. Dissatisfied with the quality of the security and education he could obtain for his children, Dr. Davidoff’s father, after several abortive attempts in Sweden and Germany, moved to the United States with the older children to be joined shortly by his wife and younger children, among them Leo. The struggle was not over, unfortunately, as fire destroyed the entire town of Chelsea, Massachusetts, including the Davidoff’s home. The closely knit family did not lose their courage and optimism, which were based on a deeply felt religious philosophy. Young Leo worked daily after school hours in a factory whose manager, recognizing Leo’s intelligence and urge for knowledge, supported his college education.

After 2 years of premedical education at Harvard University, Dr. Davidoff was admitted to the Harvard School of Medicine, where he graduated in 1922 AOA. After his internship, Dr. Davidoff served as surgeon to the Byrd-McMillan Arctic Expedition in 1925. On his return from this famous adventure he was asked by a charming young lady to speak of his experiences at a literary circle. Ida Fisher, now a member of the faculty at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, and Leo were married in 1926 after completion of his neurosurgical residency with Dr. Harvey Cushing at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital.

After Dr. Davidoff’s formal surgical training and neurosurgical training at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital he was awarded a Peter Bent Brigham Traveling Fellowship. He served for 6 months at the National Hospital, Queen Square, London, on the neurological service of Dr. Gordon Holmes and 6
months on the neuropathological service of Dr. A. Jakob in Hamburg, Germany. By 1927, at the completion of his traveling fellowship, Dr. Davidoff had already authored 10 scientific papers, including a series of five on various aspects of acromegaly coauthored with Percival Bailey and A. Jakob and two with Dr. Cushing himself. The latter served as a basis for the classic monograph on acromegaly coauthored by Cushing and Davidoff.

In 1929 Dr. Davidoff joined the staff of the New York Neurological Institute. In 1937 he assumed the chairmanship of the Department of Surgery and Neurosurgery at the Jewish Hospital in Brooklyn, a post which he held until 1945 when he became Director of Neurosurgery at Montefiore Hospital, joining forces with H. Houston Merritt, who became Director of the Division of Neurology, and Dr. Harry Zimmerman, who became the Director of Pathology. These three men, working in close harmony, developed a magnificent division of neural sciences and fortunate were those of us who received our surgical training under this triumvirate.

Although he left Montefiore for a short period to become Director of Neurosurgery at Beth Israel and thereafter at Mt. Sinai in New York, it was during this period of his life that the ideas germinated which culminated in the establishment of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. A founding member of the faculty of this outstanding medical center, he was among the small group of physician scientists who planned the curriculum for this new school and helped set its high academic standards. In 1955 Dr. Davidoff became the first Chairman of the Department of Surgery at Albert Einstein College of Medicine. In 1959 he established the Department of Neurological Surgery where he served as chairman until his retirement in 1966.

Dr. Davidoff's earlier academic appointments include that of Professor of Clinical Neurological Surgery at New York University and at Columbia. In addition to his many international travels in the field of neurosurgery, Dr. Davidoff was head of the World Health Organization's medical missions to Czechoslovakia, Finland, Poland, Israel, and Iran. He was a charter member of the Harvey Cushing Society, and its president in 1956–57.

Dr. Davidoff's drive for perfection and his intolerance of human frailties in himself and his professional colleagues and students contrasted sharply with his great compassion for his patients, their families, and the everyday people with whom his wide-ranging interests brought him into contact. As a teacher and colleague, Dr. Davidoff was a hard taskmaster. He was punctual, demanding, critical, and at times even intolerant, particularly of mediocrity.

The Davidoffs' home, overflowing with books, music, paintings, and Dr. Davidoff's sculpture was an intellectual haven for their many friends. Ida Davidoff's career in marriage and family counseling, the children's interest in music and philosophy, and Dr. Davidoff's wide contacts in many fields of endeavor created an atmosphere of warmth and stimulation most appealing to both young and old. Helen and Frank have gone on to become physicians and Nora and Mary are busy raising children and pursuing the life style which was so much a part of their childhood. Although the cast has changed at the Davidoff home, the discussions on philosophy, politics, ethics, and art continue as a living memorial to this unique family group.

In our farewells to this man we honor Leo Davidoff as a surgeon, educator, and a citizen of the world dedicated to the very highest ideals of our specialty where compromise has no place. His memory will serve us well as we face the expanding horizons of neurosurgery, the field to which he so successfully dedicated his life.

2 J. Neurosurg. / Volume 45 / July, 1976