

Dr. William Dameshek: A Biographical Comment

IN 1955, while in Rome, I visited Professor Guiseppe Bastianelli, at that time 94 years old. A physician, malariologist, hematologist and a medical cosmopolitan if ever there was one, the old Professor was abreast of all that was going on. Our discussion touched upon the Congress of the International Society of Hematology to be held in Boston the next year, and Professor Bastianelli asked me what I knew of the plan for Dr. Dameshek, president of the Society, to travel around the world prior to the Congress. I told him what little I knew and he expressed a wish that Dameshek would include Rome in the itinerary. (Dameshek did, and he also included a visit to Professor Bastianelli.) Then the Professor said to me something that deserves to keynote this biographical note. "Your friend Dameshek is the ambassador of hematology." Bastianelli, a wise and perceptive gentleman, was not speaking only of a round-the-world trip of the president of an international society, he was placing a perspective on Dameshek's entire career: the many excursions beyond the United States; the founding of a journal of hematology with an international editorial board and an international editorial policy; the education in his laboratory of scores of hematologists from overseas; and the countless friends among the physicians, the educators, and, not least, his patients and their families in other countries.

Dameshek has always spoken out strongly, even urgently, on the necessity for international friendship and cooperation. Upon returning from his round-the-world trip, he wrote,

People are much the same the world over, whether they are Japanese, Indian, or Russian. They have the same desires, preoccupations, and probably the same degree of humanity. There is no monopoly anywhere of goodness or idealism or democracy. Face-to-face contact is a wonderful thing for breaking down misapprehensions and misunderstandings. Glaring at each other across a room or across an Iron Curtain is certainly not productive of anything except increasing animosity. When people have the opportunity to visit with each other, they see that fundamentally they are the same people with the same problems.

An outstanding characteristic of Dameshek's life has been his devotion to these ideas and his activity to implement them.

William Dameshek was born sixty years ago in the village of Semliansk near Voronezh in central Russia. He was called Ze'ev, a name which in English becomes William. In 1903, a time of anti-Jewish pogroms in Russia, his father and mother came to live in the United States in Medford, Massachusetts. He remembers himself as a quiet child. Certainly he was studious, as his record of straight A's at the Boston English High School testifies. After two years at Harvard College, which included a stint in the Army in 1918, he was admitted to the medical school. He was graduated in 1923 and went to Boston City Hospital for a two-year internship in medicine.

At this time, in October 1923, Dameshek married Rose Thurman of Worcester. Today, Ruddy Dameshek is almost as well known to the hematologists of the world as her husband. Tall, dark and lovely, filled with enthusiasm

and good nature, she is a superb housekeeper—a regular “balabusta”—and a cook of Cordon-Bleu caliber. She shares her husband’s enthusiasm for collecting, but while Dameshek covers the walls with modern art, Ruddy shops about for antiques. The combined collections, interestingly enough, are not incongruous. The Damesheks’ daughter, Elinor, is now the wife of Dr. Seymour Reichlin, a neuroendocrinologist (“whatever that is,” says Dameshek when he introduces Si), and there are three grandchildren.

The internship at Boston City Hospital brought Dameshek into contact with Dr. Ralph C. Larrabee, a man of hot and varied enthusiasms. The budding science of hematology was one of them, and in a corner of the basement at Boston City, Larrabee had established a “Blood Laboratory,” perhaps the first of its kind in this country. The occasional blood transfusion was set up there, and all the blood cases throughout the big hospital were seen in consultation. Here Dameshek unravelled his first case of acquired hemolytic anemia and completed and published his first hematologic investigation, “The Reticulated Red Blood Cells.”

After his internship, Dameshek continued the association with Larrabee and the Blood Laboratory. He commenced his teaching career by assisting Larrabee in the course on Laboratory Medicine at Tufts. He also began to work at the Boston Dispensary, and he set up an office for the practice of internal medicine.

In 1928 the new Beth Israel Hospital opened in Boston, and Dameshek went there to work as the hematologist. The next ten years were important and exciting. Hematology in the United States was growing up. This little specialty had been born in Europe as a by-blow of pathology, and it was an almost purely morphologic discipline. But in 1925 Minot treated pernicious anemia with liver, and after that everything changed. The physicians took over hematology, physiology supplanted morphology and experiment replaced description. Dameshek’s first experimental work, and some of his most important, was done at that time.

Dameshek left Beth Israel in 1939. He was invited to come to the Pratt Diagnostic Hospital, and there he set up the Blood Research Laboratory, an establishment which has grown in size and fame with the years. Today Dameshek is Professor of Medicine at Tufts, and he remains the Director of the Blood Research Laboratory.

So much for chronology. Now, what has he done? A man’s accomplishments are the measure of his worth. Besides the practice of medicine—private practice, hospital and consultations—Dameshek has worked continually in medical research, education, writing and in support of medical societies.

Over twenty years ago, in a classic piece of clinical investigation, Dameshek took the problem of acquired hemolytic anemia from the bedside to the laboratory, and demonstrated that hemolysis, experimentally provoked in animals by hetero-antibodies against red cells, produced a disease which closely mimicked the disease observed in his patients. He concluded that the cause of the hemolysis in the patient—as in the laboratory animal—was an antibody against red cells, but an antibody generated by the patient him-

self. The quality of this work firmly established the concept of autoimmune hemolytic disease, and it also established Dameshek as an imaginative and valuable clinical investigator.

Dameshek is first to point out that this experiment has colored his interests and attitude ever since. One of his most insistent efforts has been to achieve a synthesis or to establish a common denominator for the group of autoimmune disorders: the hemolytic anemias, ITP, vasculitis, disseminated LE, and he has even suggested the possibility that leukemia may be one of the group. Needless to say, the effort has not yet been successful, but his concepts are interesting and his arguments are provocative. They provoke not only intellectual activity, but also forensic. There have been some lovely squabbles: Dameshek has never backed off from a debate. Question: Which is more important in the pathogenesis of hemolytic anemia, stasis of red cells or antibodies? Question: Does the spleen in ITP sequester platelets or does it inhibit megakaryocytes by means of humoral factors? Question: Now that we have steroids, should we stop doing splenectomy? During these discussions it's impossible to decide who has the better time, the debaters or the onlookers. But no one gets trampled, and the arguments stimulate research which is needed to answer the questions.

A jovial manner does not quite conceal an undercurrent of urgency. Although Dameshek claims as hobbies music and modern art, his true avocation is hard work, and he is always at it. We youngsters shook our heads over his schedule: the laboratory in the morning, rounds at noon, the office in the afternoon, the briefcase in the evening, and at night, perhaps, insomnia. Some of his best papers were induced by insomnia. Travel might provide a chance to relax, but he takes his work with him. Ruddy tells the story of Dameshek's vacation in 1949. After the Congress at Montreux the two of them travelled south, on their way to Israel and Greece. But first, there would be a few days of vacation, complete relaxation. They stopped in the Italian lake country at a hotel on the hillside west of Lago Maggiore, overlooking the lake and Isola Bella. Next morning on the hotel veranda, confronted by this peaceful loveliness, Dameshek leaned back and crossed his legs. Relaxed. A few minutes passed and he crossed his legs the other way. His fingers began to tap. He recrossed his legs. Then he stretched and stood up. "Come on, Ruddy, let's get out of here."

Medical writing claims much of his "off-duty" time. At home, in the evening he goes to his desk and writes. The walls of his study are stacked with books on hematology; they comprise an important collection. Dameshek, himself, wrote six of the books—he and his co-authors. The shelves also contain several bound volumes of his reprints. His published papers number about 340. And there are the 14 volumes of *BLOOD*—the Journal of Hematology, founded and edited by Dameshek.

When World War II interrupted the publication of *Folia Haematologica*, Dameshek recognized the need for a new journal. The medical publishing house, Grune & Stratton, had several times asked Dameshek to write for them a book on hematology, but each time he had demurred. Then, in 1944,

he answered Henry Stratton's repeated query with a suggestion of his own. "How about a journal?" and so it was agreed. The name of the journal, *BLOOD*, was proposed by Dr. Minot, who was Consulting Editor. Publication began in 1946. Now in its fifteenth year, the journal continues to grow in size, circulation and prestige. Dameshek is proud of its international quality as well as its international reputation. The panel of Contributing Editors lists members from all parts of the world, and *BLOOD* was among the first to publish summaries in Interlingua, a sort of despeciated Spanish, the would-be lingua franca of twentieth century medical journals. But more significant than these adornments is the fact that 25 per cent of *BLOOD*'s subscriptions and 25 per cent of its published papers come from overseas.

Dameshek's concept of the Journal has dominated its editorial policy. He insists that the Journal must have an educational purpose, in addition to the reporting of research in hematology. Therefore, much of the space in *BLOOD* is given to symposia and reviews which are especially useful to young physicians beginning to learn hematology. This is consistent with Dameshek's attitude toward medical education. He devotes much of his life to teaching: in the medical school, where the course in Laboratory Medicine was long since passed to him by Larrabee; in his famous Saturday morning grand rounds; in his lecture tours, which are primarily an educational phenomenon; and every day in the laboratory and on the wards. He is a born teacher and he loves it.

For the hematologists at the New England Medical Center, the high spot of the day is rounding with the Boss. (Ruddy despises that title, but Dameshek doesn't seem to mind.) It used to be that rounds would start at noon-time and often, to the despair of the endomorphs, would last through the lunch hour. Nowadays they begin at nine and on three days a week instead of six. But the quality is unchanged. Dameshek and his platoon—fellows, housemen, students, visitors—move slowly from patient to patient, ward to ward, across the street to the Floating Hospital and back. It is an agreeable experience to observe him with the patient—his manner is bantering, teasing and yet sympathetic. Each question, even those which seem trivial, has a point and cutting edge designed to get information, and the questions aside to his fellows are equally searching. Keen questions may also be asked in the opposite direction. An atmosphere of informality encourages these exchanges, and Professor Dameshek is never professorial in the sense that his opinions are not to be challenged or that he hesitates to say "I don't know." His teaching, whether at the bedside or on the platform, is enhanced by an ability to grasp the intricacy of a problem and present it in clear, interesting discussion. His own obvious desire to learn stimulates the same desire in his students.

Dameshek is surrounded by his students. The laboratory is always crowded and busy. In 1949, I paused one afternoon and counted the people working in the main room. There were fourteen. During that year, the work space in the lab was shared by fellows (and girls) from Austria, China, France, Greece, Italy, Poland and Venezuela. The establishment has grown since then, expanding into other buildings in the neighborhood, but it remains crowded

and busy. The Boss transmits the undercurrent of urgency; he makes no secret of his admiration for hard work. The fellows make no secret of their admiration for the Boss, and even after they leave, most of them think of the Blood Lab as "home." If the question is asked, "Where did you train?", the answer is "with Dameshek." It never occurs to mention the medical school or the hospitals of internship and residency. Since the first fellow came to work in 1937, at least 100 hematologists from 20 countries have been trained by him. The members of this international fraternity are always much in evidence at Hematology Congresses, and during his round-the-world trip when president-elect of the International Society of Hematology, he was met at almost every airport by one of his "boys."

It was appropriate that Dameshek should have been elected to the presidency of this society. In 1946 an interesting, somewhat informal meeting of hematologists took place. Part of the time they were in Dallas, part of the time in Mexico City: an internationally-minded group. Out of this meeting—and Dameshek was one of the prime movers—evolved the International Society of Hematology. It is obvious that the Society has filled a need. Its membership grows each year, and each Congress becomes larger, more complex and more interesting. At the Sixth Congress in Boston, 1500 people attended and 700 papers were listed in the program. To accomplish this Dameshek mobilized all the hematologists, and their wives, in and around Boston. They labored mightily, and everyone, including the Communists, agreed that the meeting was a great success. The Communists were there because Dameshek had persuaded the State Department to allow 17 scientists from behind the Iron Curtain to enter the United States for the Congress.

Convinced of the importance of personal communication, Dameshek has been instrumental in accomplishing a similar organization for American hematology. In 1948, he established the Blood Club, which still meets every year in Atlantic City in conjunction with the American Society of Clinical Investigation. In 1956, during the Congress in Boston, Dameshek called together a group of American hematologists, and from this meeting evolved the American Society of Hematology, an international society of American nations which will meet this year in Montreal.

These are some of Dameshek's accomplishments. There is one more to mention, one that will occasion a gathering of hematologists—and others—on the 22nd of May 1960. It is a minor accomplishment, to be sure, marked only by celebration, birthday cake, speeches, and this special issue of BLOOD. Certainly it will *not* be marked by any altering of the unfolding pattern of major accomplishments. Sixty years is a good beginning.

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