

Sofia Ionescu, the First Woman Neurosurgeon in the World

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INTRODUCTION

As time passes, the privilege of stating that one is the very first to have achieved something, particularly in the field of medicine, seems to be wearing thinner and thinner. In a time when equality of sexes was only something to aspire toward, Doctor Sofia Ionescu (Figure 1), born Sofia OGREZEANU, became the very first female neurosurgeon, with a career spanning more than 47 years of devoted work, between 1943 and 1990.

Her status, although continuously debated for more than three decades, was finally acknowledged during the 13th World Congress of the World Federation of Neurosurgical Societies (WFNS) in Morocco, in 2005, crowning an evolution that could only be praised by the hundreds of patients who are still alive due to her wonderfully skilled hands (8). This official nomination as the first woman neurosurgeon was presented by Dr. Irina OGREZEANU and recognized by the president of the Women in Neurosurgery Committee of the WFNS, Yoko Kato. At this presentation the audience included Prof. Edward Laws as acting president of the WFNS at the time,

The authors present the activity of Mrs. Sofia Ionescu, the one female surgeon who was nominated as the first woman neurosurgeon in the world. Sofia Ionescu worked in the field of neurosurgery for 47 years, performing all the known neurosurgical procedures of the time. She made herself known through her incredible surgical skill and her enormous work power. Due to her incredible modesty and workload, she never participated at international congresses or manifestations. The nomination as first woman neurosurgery took place in Marrakech, Morocco, during the 2005 WFNS Congress. Although some claim that Diana Beck was the first woman neurosurgeon in the world, our theory suggests otherwise. The first documented surgical intervention performed by Diana Beck dates to 1952. Sofia Ionescu operated for the first time on a human brain as early as 1944. Furthermore, Diana Beck's actions surfaced in the year 1947, long after the war had ended and Sofia Ionescu had become a neurosurgeon.

Prof. Jacques Brotschi who was the president-elect of the WFNS, and Prof. Jose Martin Rodriguez (8).

Sofia Ionescu—OGREZEANU was born in Fălticeni, a small city located in the north east of a struggling Romania (Figures 2, 3, and 4), in the year 1920, a time that bore the stamp of the First World War. Although her father's wishes were for her to become an educated young woman, who would know how to sing, speak several languages fluently, and bear children, she decided that she wanted more from life, following the example of other doctors in her family. Thus, after attending the Girls' Gymnasium in Fălticeni, she transferred to Bucharest to the "Maria Brâncoveanu" Girls' School, from where she could apply to study medicine in the capital city. She attended the Faculty of Human Medicine of Bucharest between 1939 and 1945, a time providing the opportunity to study under great figures of medicine such as Francisc Rainer (anatomy), George Emil Palade (cell biology), Oscar Sager and Arthur Kreindler (neurology), Nicolae Cajal (pathology), Daniel Danielopolu (pathophysiology), Alfred Ruscescu (pediatrics), and Iacob Iacobovici (surgery).

Her early years in the clinic were under the influence of the Second World War whose casualties filled the beds of every hospital and required all available hands. The war found her attending patients in the hospitals of her native town. It was her

desire to better prepare for neurology, which she studied in her fifth year of medical school, that made her choose spending her summer internship in the neurosurgical unit of the "Central Hospital for mental, nervous and endocrine diseases" in Bucharest in 1943. This event marked her first contact with "the golden neurosurgical team," led by Professor Dimitrie Bagdasar, the founder of the Romanian Neurosurgical School, alongside his disciples Dr. Constantin Arseni and Dr. Ionel Ionescu, who would later become Sofia's husband (3).

Professor Dimitrie Bagdasar (1893–1946), was a neurology specialist, for several years he had trained in Professor Harvey Cushing's clinic in Boston at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital between 1927 and 1929. He had newly founded neurosurgery as an independent branch of medicine in south-eastern Europe (7). In a filmed interview, Sofia Ionescu tells of that one decisive moment that came to shape her entire future and the lives of the many she touched after first operating. It was under the supervision of Professor D. Bagdasar, who was unable to operate due to a wound on one of his fingers, that she performed her first surgery, saving the life of an 8-year-old comatose boy with an extradural intracranial hematoma—when no one else would even dare operate. Professor Bagdasar had just discovered a "diamond in the rough" and a great surgeon.



Figure 1. Portrait of Sofia Ionescu.

specialist neurosurgeon, a statement in the ongoing war with disease and death that would toward the end of her life culminate as chief of ward (2).

In her 25 years as chief of the Cerebral Tumor Department and the 22 years that followed as chief of the Spinal Pathology Department, Dr. Sofia Ionescu found the time to teach while always coming up with creative solutions to the ongoing challenges (4). One such account tells of an intervention to release the pressure caused by a blockage in the ventricular system (Figure 5). Having read about a drainage system imagined by a Norwegian scientist, she decided that she had to take the risk and perform a premiere surgery to save the life that lay in her hands. As the nurse walked by with a tray of Foley catheters, she felt that spark that encouraged her to try. She carved a groove in the bone, fixing the catheter between the cerebral hemispheres and the meningeal sheath (5). The patient lived.

The year 1970 found Dr. Sofia Ionescu facing yet another interesting challenge, as she was obligated to confirm the fact that she truly was a neurosurgeon. Accompanying one of her patients, a member of the French Embassy in Bucharest, to Paris and Lyon, she met a team of French doctors who were astonished to discover that the woman in front of them truly was a surgeon operating on the human nervous system. Undergoing the “gouge forceps test,” her hands undoubtedly stated what their true mission was, the callosity on her ring finger proved once more that she was the only woman to

He asked the young student to remain on his team.

Graduating in 1945, she married Dr. Ionel Ionescu around the same period. Her newlywed life had a strong connection to the profession, bearing the marks of self-sacrifice and devotion as one can rarely observe. The young couple lived for 7 years in the hospital, ensuring permanent watch in the emergency room. She had no rest leave for more than 15 years, and only 1 month maternity leave after her second daughter was born. She herself states that she had operated the day before giving birth to her first child. “My children had no mother. I was almost always tired, I worked extra hours in the pediatric clinic to supplement the family’s income” (9). The year 1954 marks her becoming a



Figure 2. Sofia Ionescu’s house in Falticeni.

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