

REMEMBRANCES OF THINGS PAST

RONALD FISHMAN, EDITOR

A Career in Eye Pathology

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Editor's Note

Dr. Albert is the Chair Emeritus of the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, University of Wisconsin Medical School and Founding Director of the University of Wisconsin Eye Research Institute. He is Editor-in-Chief of the Archives of Ophthalmology and co-author of the prize-winning Albert & Jakobiec's Principles and Practice of Ophthalmology. He has been a prolific writer in ophthalmic pathology and clinical ophthalmology, as well as the history of ophthalmology.

Two epiphanies occurred to me that seemed no less than miraculous and shaped my life. The first was when I was 7 years old and my father, a CPA with a love of science and nature, showed me a drop of pond water under a microscope. It introduced another world to me, another reality that could be seen only through this instrument. Soon after, I was given a Gilbert chemistry set complete with a small, single objective microscope and began my own “independent research,” which served to reinforce and extend that otherworldly experience. The second epiphany occurred during my senior year of medical school when I learned to use the ophthalmoscope with facility and could explore and admire the human fundus oculi. When I correlated what I saw through the ophthalmoscope with the histology of the retina, it extended and reinforced my wonderment and admiration for the eye.

While I was in high school, and between these two epiphanies, I experienced another life-changing event when my father developed cancer and became a long-term patient at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Hospital in New York City. Traversing the confusing maze of corridors to reach his bedside, I wandered through the wards and saw the cancer patients on litters coming and going to radiation or surgery. The realization of their suffering and dehumanization overwhelmed me, and I resolved to dedicate my professional life to try to study the cause and improve the treatment of this terrible disease. This was the 1950s when the golden knight of medical research was the pathologist—and a pathologist I resolved to be.

I attended Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, as a biology major. In my senior year, I traveled to the Wistar Institute in Philadelphia to learn tissue culture technique and

wrote my honors thesis on the effect of low doses of cyanide on HeLa cells. The results held a surprise: Minute concentrations of cyanide stimulated cell growth. Then—as expected—higher doses killed the cells. This was my first serious attempt at research, and I sensed there was more to come.

Following admission to the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, I spent my summers and free time in the pathology department and soon came to work closely with Dr. Irving Zeidman, a pathologist studying the mechanism of metastasis in cancer. He was a splendid mentor and teacher who demonstrated how effectively one could find research time and support as a full time clinician-scientist. At the start of my senior year I was accepted as a resident in Penn's pathology program. Conflict, however, loomed.

In my junior year, I found myself fascinated by a series of ophthalmology lectures given by Francis Heed Adler. The scholarly and dignified Adler, in his final year as chair of ophthalmology, was also a noted physiologist and a gifted violinist. Adler's widely read student textbook on clinical ophthalmology was a model of clarity and style. I read it piecemeal in preparation for his lectures and then cover to cover again that summer. I signed up for a 6-week elective with Harold Scheie, Adler's successor as chair, for the fall of my senior year. Scheie was a forceful, dynamic individual and a gifted anterior segment surgeon. He added me to his entourage during my elective, and I was gratified when he took a personal interest in my gaining skill in the use of the ophthalmoscope and slit lamp and allowed me to cut sutures at his surgery. Unexpectedly, one day I came upon him sitting in an examining chair refracting himself with a trial frame and loose lenses, and then and there I received my initial lecture on refraction.

On the final day of my elective rotation, Scheie called me into his office after rounds, where his secretary, Mrs. Buehr, was sitting with her dictation pad. "Albert," he said, "I want you to dictate a letter of acceptance for an ophthalmology residency here at Penn." A long discussion ensued in which Scheie convinced me that ophthalmology would be the ideal format for the study of tumors, allowing me to focus particularly on retinoblastoma and melanoma by observing them with the ophthalmoscope, have access to tissue, and easily accomplish clinical correlation. Scheie suggested that subsequent study with Lorenz Zimmerman at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology (AFIP) would assure me of a promising career in ophthalmic pathology. Convinced that what he proposed would indeed be an attractive plan, I dictated my acceptance. That evening my wife, Ellie, shook her head in wonder.

The husband who had set off that morning committed to a career in general pathology had returned home an embryonic ophthalmologist.

Ironically, soon after committing to an ophthalmology career, my left eye became red and was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. One of the residents made a handlight diagnosis of bacterial conjunctivitis and gave me some polysporin ointment for treatment. Nonetheless, the pain worsened and my visual acuity decreased. I returned a few days later and this time the resident did a more complete examination and told me: "You have iritis. We better get the Chief to take a look." Dr. Scheie briefly looked at me in the resident's room and then asked me to follow him back to his office for a more complete eye examination. On our way back to his office, Dr. Scheie was stopped by his technician, who said, "Senator Jenner is ready to be seen and is in a real hurry." "Tell him he'll have to wait," Scheie retorted. "I think medical students are more important than senators!"

I did in fact have iritis and learned something about being an eye patient from that experience. I learned something more about Dr. Scheie as well.

After my internship and residency at Penn, the Vietnam War still raged and I was given the opportunity to fulfill my military service as a clinical fellow at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Ludwig von Sallmann, director of the ophthalmology branch of the National Institute of Neurological Diseases and Blindness, predecessor to the National Eye Institute, was a white-haired septuagenarian who had been a chief in both Vienna and at Columbia's Eye Institute and was a thoughtful and gracious superior. He had won a gold medal as a fencer in the Olympics in the 1920s and his manner retained the elegance and grace of an earlier era—for example, regularly inviting fellows to have sherry in his study at his home. His wife, also an Austrian-trained ophthalmologist, baked cookies for the departmental Christmas party. The clinical fellows in those years included Dick Green, Brooks Crawford, Eliot Berson, Steve Podos, and Richard Smith, all of whom have had successful careers in academic medicine. Because of the abundance of fellows and the small number of patients, our clinical duties could be quickly discharged, and I was permitted to spend most of my time in the surgical pathology laboratory of the NIH Clinical Center. I came under the tutelage of Alan Rabson, the current deputy director of the National Cancer Institute, and began a lifelong friendship with Al and his late, distinguished wife, Ruth Kirschstein, a pathologist and eventual interim director of the NIH. Al was at the forefront of cancer virus studies and the knowledge and techniques I learned from him have been invaluable in my career. I also became well versed in

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