

The Errant Surgeon: A Memoir

by Moshe Schein

"Certain memories are what you long to take with you." James Salter.

Prologue

When we moved to Wisconsin two years ago I calculated that, since birth, this had been my 32nd relocation of address: Four changes of address in Poland, three in Haifa, Israel, four in Italy, seven in Jerusalem, five in Johannesburg, two in Leeds, UK, again two in Haifa, one in Milwaukee, two in New York, one in Keokuk, Iowa and now Wisconsin. And since graduating from Medical School I have worked in at least 13 different hospitals on four continents. Shouldn't experience accumulated over years of wandering around, globetrotting, and changing places be shared through a memoir? I asked myself. Sure, why not—today everybody writes or plans to write a memoir—but what kind of a memoir? To be of interest to you, dear reader, memoirs must be brief, and selective—unless one's name is Winston Churchill—it should evolve around a theme that is familiar or distinctive to the memoirist: *surgery* in my case.

This narrative, then, could be considered a "surgical memoir" but, I promise you, it won't be the typical "surgical memoir": a story of a great surgical life written by a distinguished retired surgeon, one of those who, after his eventual death, would deserve a glorifying obituary, written by yet another surgical giant, in a newspaper or a professional journal. I look at the "surgical" memoirs and autobiographies that occupy a few bookshelves in my study: whom do we have here? Edward Churchill, Francis Moore, Heneage Oglivie, Geoffrey Keynes, Max Thoreck, Allen Whipple, Thomas Starzl, George Crile, Jr., Arthur Hertzler, George Sava and many others—all famous. But no, this memoir will be different for its writer is definitely not an

obituary-eligible; while, at some stage, he strove to be an imminent clinician and a notable academician, he had never reached the top of his profession. But who would read, moreover, buy, a memoir of an ordinary surgeon? So, how should I promote this piece? "The surgical globetrotter", "Reminiscences of an international surgeon", the "drifting surgeon" or, perhaps, "Memoirs of an Errant Surgeon" would be the most accurate proposition?

But although "surgical" is its claim to fame, this memoir is aimed not for surgeons or medical practitioners medical only. I tried, whenever possible, to portray events and persons against the background, and perspective, of the various places and times. According to Gore Vidal "a memoir is how one remembers one's own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts double-checked." Cynthia Ozick agrees: "The approaches of a memoirist and a journalist can also be said to differ... memory, at bottom, is an act of imaginative re-creation, not of archival legwork." True, but I hope that the reader will agree that a selective use of dates, and relevant facts, could provide some orientation in time and convey a sense of urgency, when needed.

As many memoirists, I found it difficult to write about myself, to develop my own character—it is so much easier to describe others. Perhaps the ability to deeply expose oneself, to dwell on painful secrets, to self-analyze, comes to the memoirist only later in life. But at which phase of life should one compose a memoir? Most probably, if this is to be re-written at some time before my death, it will be more self-revealing. Mordecai Richler said: "if you caricature friends in your first novel they will be upset, but if you don't they will feel betrayed". And this is a common memoirist's dilemma: to write about intimate living friends? No one is perfect, and each of us could be easily caricatured, but in this memoir my close personal friends, even those who are friends no more, will be spared. This is also to some degree true concerning my wife and sons: they will have here occasional "guest appearances" but this manuscript is for them, rather than about them.

For obvious reasons the names of many people, but not all, who will come on the stage of narrative are fictionalized. Obviously, no one walks

throughout life with a tape-recorder in his pocket thus most of the dialogues presented have been reconstructed—some based on notes taken early after the described events took place. However, all patients' case histories, although blinded to preserve patients' privacy, are based on true cases. All documents presented are based on originals kept by the author. Many memoirists tend to exclude "daily life" from their narrative, leaping instead from one exciting anecdote to another outstanding experience or achievement, as if entire life is an ongoing series of grand events without the shades of gray or ordinary in between. This I have strived to avoid.

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This manuscript is a "manuscript in evolution". I have revised it—adding, deleting, pasting, and changing—too many times to suit my intrinsic impatience. And, most probably, I will decide to re-write it in the future—whatever that future would be. This manuscript, in its previous versions, had been submitted to numerous agents and offered to countless publishers. Typically, not more than a dozen showed any interest; a few even offered specific recommendations: expand; abbreviate; bend it to the general reader; focus on the medical reader; emphasize your American story; focus on Africa, tell us more about your inner self; develop the other characters; and so forth. A few of the previous versions of the manuscript have been professionally edited for style and language (thousands US \$ were invested but it did not make it more acceptable to the agents or publishers); whatever I added and revised remains purely my own original unedited "foreigner's English".

Anyone who writes—whatever it is that he or she writes—including me, would like to see their manuscript eventually transformed into a "real" commercial book. So why do I "publish" this manuscript on my personal web page rather than see it in print? Because, I have realized that in this day and age memoirs like mine are virtually non publishable (unless, of course, one wishes to "self -publish" them): to be considered by the "general" publishing market the memoir has to be written by a celebrity or/and include some "extreme" contents (e.g. "I was sexually molested by my

stepmother"). Even publishers focusing on the "medical readers" politely, or rudely, refused my manuscript explaining that it has little commercial potentials. But I hope that at least few surgeons would find this memoir instructive, if not entertaining, and, above all, that my sons, and perhaps their children, will have one day some family narrative to fall on— how I wish that my own parents had left behind a record of their tumultuous life.

Where, at what point, should I start? Like Vladimir Nabokov, Marcel Proust, or Leo Tolstoy starting their "memoirs" at the age when memories begun recording in their child brains? Or should I take the formalistic approach beginning with my parents or their parents? Should I proceed in chronological order or resort to today's prevailing gimmicky technique of jumping forward, backwards, until the reader loses orientation?

I will start at the beginning and proceed chronologically, more or less. So let us go back to 1950, to the green marches of the Island of Wolin, at mouth of the Oder River, where it empties into the Baltic Sea.

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