

Alain Pierre-Kahn

Jean François Hirsch

It is easier to present a scientific work than to pay homage to a man who contributed so much to the birth and development of pediatric neurosurgery and who has left us. Jean François Hirsch passed away in June 1999 after a long and incurable illness. He trained us for 25 years. Life with him was exciting, although not always easy. He was inflexible and did all that was possible to inculcate in us rigor and impartiality in analyzing scientific results.

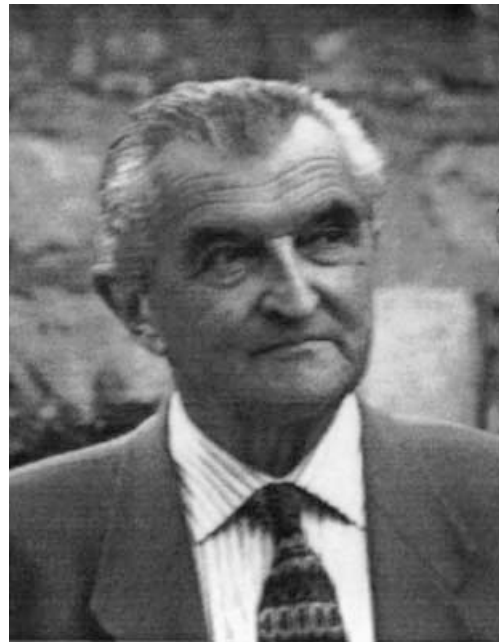
Jean François Hirsch could have been in the theater. His mother was an opera singer of renown. His father was Director of the Opera House in Paris for over 15 years. I remember he was talented enough to sing the whole of Don Giovanni during surgery! But his mother decided that he was not gifted enough to embrace opera singing as a career.

So what could he do, when his school work in literary subjects was as good as that in mathematics?

As an adolescent he admired Saint-Exupéry, the pilot and writer. Like him, his dream was a life full of both action and contemplation. That is what he tried to achieve with neurophysiology and neurosurgery.

When he started in the field of neurosurgery the main goals of treatment were to discover the lesion and to perform the surgery in such a way that the patient would survive it. Shocked by the poor functional results of neurosurgery at that time, he was obsessed during the whole of his professional life with the idea of developing techniques that would allow preservation of the normal brain and easy localization of deep intraparenchymal lesions.

After a year spent in Madison with Professor Woolsey to learn the techniques of evoked potential, he was the



first, in 1959, to apply evoked potential recording to the human cortex during surgery. To localize deep intracerebral lesions he had to wait for advances in neuroimaging computers, but here again, he was among the first to utilize ultrasonography and stereotaxy intraoperatively.

Pediatric neurosurgery came upon him by chance and without premeditation. When I met him in 1967 at la Pitié Salpêtrière, he was one of the only two pediatric neurosurgeons in Paris. The other one was Jacques Rougerie. At la Pitié Salpêtrière, children were hospitalized on the same wards as adults or crowded into four small, ill-equipped rooms. This was a long way from what Jean François Hirsch wanted for children with neurosurgical diseases.

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In 1970, after some straight talking with the administration and pediatric surgeons, he was nominated head of the first independent service of pediatric neurosurgery in France, at Necker-Enfants Malades. Actually, everything then still had to be done: finding money, building up an acceptable service with up-to-date equipment, and creating an academic team.

I had the good fortune to be involved in the creation of this Service from the very beginning. Dominique Renier, Christian Sainte-Rose and, finally, Elizabeth Hoppe-Hirsch joined us later on.

Professor Hirsch liked to say that among the many studies performed in the service, he would retain five: the clinical and experimental study on paradoxical sleep and intracranial pressure, the development of techniques of percutaneous ventriculo-cisternostomy and ventriculo-

cystostomy, the variable resistance valve for hydrocephalus, surgery for craniostenosis in infants, and finally, the deleterious effects of cerebral irradiation in the treatment of medulloblastomas in children.

Most of all, my dear colleagues, he was proud to have your recognition as one of the promoters of pediatric neurosurgery. As such, in 1987 you elected him President of the International Society for Pediatric Neurosurgery and gave him the responsibility of organizing the 1990 annual meeting of this Society in Paris. He retired in 1993, pleased to see his Service not only going on but also enlarging and diversifying its activities with the coming of Michel Zerah.

I would like to express to Elizabeth, his wife, and to his children the deep sadness that we, his colleagues, feel with regard to his loss.