

William Ganz: From refugee to world fame

Dr. William Ganz died in November 2009 at the age of 90 in Los Angeles, California. I had the privilege of knowing Willy personally and could even call him “my friend”. While I can describe his professional activities objectively, his life-story evokes my deepest emotions, because we, at a certain period in our lives, shared a common fate.



William Ganz was born in Kosice (Kassa) at a time when this small formerly Austro-Hungarian town was part of the newly-born state of Czechoslovakia. Willy’s childhood dream of becoming a doctor started to become a reality when he enrolled in 1937 at the school of medicine at Charles University in the capital city of Prague. However, when in 1938 Kosice became again part of Hungary (by Hitler’s infamous Vienna Award), not only had Willy to halt his studies, but, as he was Jewish, he was soon enlisted in the obligatory labor force, working under the brutal command of the Hungarian Army.

In 1944, the situation of the Jews in Hungary became tragic. At the time when the Jews of Kosice started to be sent to Auschwitz, Willy miraculously managed to escape to Budapest. Here started the period when the author of these words was living under similar circumstances as Willy, who in Budapest used forged identity papers to be listed as non-Jewish, was hiding and escaping under life-threatening situations and was waiting for liberation, which came in January 1945 when the Russian army took over Budapest. During those underground years, Willy met young Magda Weisz from Budapest, who hid there by pretending to be a Catholic refugee.

The liberation of Budapest meant Willy was able to marry his love Magda in 1945. As Kosice became again part of Czechoslovakia (these days Slovakia) Willy and Magda rushed back to Kosice and from there on to Prague and to Charles University, from where Willy graduated in 1947. Their two sons, Peter and Tomas, were born in Prague.

Life in Prague was not easy for Dr. Ganz. The communist regime put limits on Willy's scientific

work, and restricted all Jewish expressions of this community. In 1966, life took a fortunate turn, as the Ganz family got permission to go on a vacation to Italy, the whole family together, a true rarity in those days, giving them the chance to leave Czechoslovakia. They arrived in Vienna as refugees with only the clothes they were wearing, waiting for visas to emigrate to the

United States.

Once in the US, Willy joined relatives in Los Angeles and looked for a position at the Cedars Sinai Medical Centre. His meeting there with chief of cardiology Dr. Jeremy Swan was “love at first sight”. Willy, at the age of 47, was accepted immediately and started a most successful scientific career and co-operation, not only with Swan, but with his superiors, his peers, and later with his pupils as well.

Ganz became a ‘household’ name when he, together with Jeremy Swan, and based on concepts previously developed in Prague, introduced a catheter with an inflatable balloon at its end which enabled it to ‘float’ into the pulmonary artery at the bedside, without using X-ray. This Swan-Ganz catheter enabled measurement of the intracardiac and pulmonary artery pressures, thus contributing enormously to our knowledge of human circulation. No less important was Dr. Ganz’s pioneering role in introducing in 1982 the concept of reperfusion in the acute stage of myocardial infarction, by using intracoronary thrombolysis, which started a new era in the treatment of heart attacks.

Dr. Ganz became a highly respected cardiologist of international stature, a sought after lecturer and a brilliant investigator. Despite all the fame and worldwide appreciation, and having received many important awards, he remained modest in his personal life and in his relations with his colleagues and friends. He had a charming sense of humor and I remember his mischievous look when telling a joke, frequently in Hungarian, mother tongue for both of us. I cannot remember him without Magda at his side, usually arm in arm and smiling at each other.

Sixty years of happy marriage, achieving the most possible in his scientific career and seeing two sons becoming very successful doctors, made Willy's life a joyful one. But after Magda's death in 2005, Willy was no longer the same. Without her he became understandably depressed, and his joie de vivre was gone.

Let us remember Willy Ganz as one who had a fairy tale life, and let us cherish his memory fondly.

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