Remembering Louis N. Katz, MD (1897–1973)

The year past, 1997, was a banner one for century watchers, especially in music. It marked the bicentennial of the birth of both Schubert and Donizetti, the centennial of the death of Brahms, and the sesquicentennial of Beethoven’s demise as well. However, we in cardiology had another muse who should have been commemorated but somehow was overlooked. If he had lived until 1997, Dr Louis N. Katz would have celebrated his 100th birthday.

At a time when support for cardiovascular research seems to be dwindling, when public confidence in the powers of science may be wavering, when even the virtue of the scientific enterprise is occasionally called into doubt, it is important to remember Dr Katz: who he was and what he represented.

The numerous obituaries and reminiscences that appeared after his passing gave full emphasis to the esteem in which he was held by all those who had come into contact with him. The present recollection is from one of the many who admired him only from afar, most often during periodic encounters at scientific meetings and through the reading of many of the articles published by his very productive research group and by him personally. The fact that even such a secondhand knowledge of him by one of the budding cardiologists of his era remains so vivid after all this time is, perhaps, an even greater testimonial to his influence than the recollections that have emanated from his intimates.

It would be difficult for a neophyte today, when even subspecialities within the subspecialty of cardiovascular disease are part of the recognized order of things, to appreciate the breadth of Dr Katz’s interest and contributions to the field. Like a colossus, he bestrode the entire spectrum of his time: hemodynamics, electrocardiography, hypertension, experimental atherosclerosis, the coronary circulation, myocardial metabolism, and more. They all came with his “territory,” and his important publications, books, and other articles are simply too numerous to list in an article like this.

Born in Pinsk, Russia, in 1897, he emigrated to the United States at the age of 3 years and, after public school, attended Western Reserve, where he received his AB in 1918 and his MD in 1921. It was there that he first came under the influence of the great Carl J. Wiggers, who headed the Department of Physiology and who would be so influential in directing Katz’s future career. After working as an intern and resident at the Cleveland City Hospital, he returned to Western Reserve for an MA in Medicine, awarded in 1923. While still trying to choose between a career in either clinical or laboratory medicine, Dr Katz decided to spend a year with A.V. Hill at University Hospital in London. Finally, in 1925, Katz decided to cast his lot with Wiggers at Western Reserve, joining the faculty as an instructor but still maintaining his clinical interests in the post of consulting cardiologist at Cleveland’s St Luke’s Hospital.

The Cleveland experience came to an end in 1930, when Dr Katz accepted an offer to become head of the Cardiovascular Research Unit at Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago. It was there that he spent the rest of his professional life, with an additional affiliation in the Physiology Department at the University of Chicago. His own disciples, developed over a quarter century of teaching and research at his home base, were eventually estimated as numbering over 500.

Many honors came to Dr Katz, and he served with distinction on the editorial boards of many scholarly journals and committees within the American Heart Association and the American Physiological Society. But perhaps his greatest pride was in the influence he had in the advancement of cardiovascular research, pressing for the idea of established investigatorships and, later, career investigatorships sponsored by the American Heart Association. The latter, which had started out primarily as a public health organ, was turned toward its investigative mission primarily through the efforts of Katz, along with others who foresaw the importance of this for the future. Katz’s espousal of investigations by young researchers is memorialized in the Louis N. Katz Basic Science Research Prize for Young Investigators awarded each year at the national meeting of the American Heart Association. Ironically, these acolytes of medical science are unlikely to know anything about the man whose name is carried by this recognition.
Indeed, the Katz influence went far beyond his roles in officialdom, beyond his contributions to dozens of books and hundreds of research articles. It was, quite simply, a personal aura that was instantly apparent to any observer at any of the scientific meetings at which Dr Katz was present.

He looked and sometimes acted flamboyantly leonine. He was rather short but immediately recognizable by the two triangular tufts of the black, later gray, steel-wool hair that sprouted sideward and up from his temples. He squinted at you through rather thick glasses with a gaze that seemed designed to penetrate any artifice or confusion. He sported, for lack of a better word, a perennially developing moustache that never seemed quite able to flourish on his upper lip.

Year after year he could be observed attending the scientific meetings, always arriving at a session in ample time to obtain his favorite seat on the aisle in the first or second row. He would sit there, pad in hand, scribbling furiously throughout each and every paper. It was almost axiomatic that, after a presentation, he would rise with a question. However, unlike his unusually lucid written work, his detailed and convoluted queries often left the speaker in dismay. This was probably because Dr Katz was taking a bead on an implication three jumps ahead of the presenter and one that had not entered his consciousness. Thus it was that whenever one of our group was about to present a paper at a meeting of the American Heart Association or the American Physiological Society, the question frequently uppermost in our minds was likely to be, “But what will Louis Katz ask?” (It was always pronounced “Loo-ie,” but never in disrespect. His own subordinates in Chicago, in a mixture of awe and affection, simply referred to him as “The Boss.”) The same scene was, no doubt, repeated in similar laboratories throughout the country whenever Dr Katz’s presence was expected at an upcoming conference.

The Katz “Reign of Terror” at meetings was not only a spicy ingredient but, at times, a necessary one. Unimpeded by any distorted sense of decorum when he detected intellectual dishonesty, Dr Katz would rise to the occasion and set the record straight. Such was his reputation for erudition and integrity that his would frequently be the final word on such matters. Yet, despite the bristling and contentious exterior he sometimes presented, he was always gentle and considerate to newcomers to science and went out of his way to make them feel comfortable and unthreatened not only in public but on a personal level as well. I recall a private gesture of this type directed at me when, after being offered a position in Dr Katz’s laboratory following my medical residency, I decided (probably unwisely) to get my training in cardiovascular research elsewhere. Dr Katz responded to my letter with one of his own, wishing me only the best in my future career in cardiovascular medicine and research. It is only fitting that the Young Investigator’s Award bears his name.

His demise left a vacuum in our research community that has not yet been filled, but it is not this loss alone that has continued to occupy my thoughts about Dr Katz over the years. After learning of his death, I found it impossible to dispel a totally irrational scenario that unfolded in my mind and that has continued to haunt me ever since. I envision in my mind’s eye a scene at the pearly gates. There an archangel mentions to a visibly shaken St Peter that Louis Katz is on his way. “I know,” replies the distraught keeper of the keys, “but what do you think he’ll ask?”

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