

DAYS OF THE GIANTS

Early in the 20th century, an era when charismatic academicians stood out, two medical titans were Drs. Emanuel Libman and Isidore Snapper. What follows explains why.

EMANUEL LIBMAN (1872-1946) was the fourth of nine children of a prosperous picture-framer who emigrated from Prussian Poland in 1865. After studying at New York's City College, he graduated from the College of Physicians and Surgeons, class of 1894, and next served two years as House Physician at Mount Sinai Hospital. His mentors there, the pediatricians Henry Koplik and Abraham Jacobi, persuaded him to study abroad in order to develop his skills so off he went for a year of post-graduate work in Vienna, Munich, Berlin and Prague. Near the end of his tour he stopped in Graz, Austria to see the bacteriologist Theodore Escherich (of E. Coli fame) who convinced him to stay on for three weeks. Young Libman was installed in a new laboratory, shown fascinating new techniques for growing bacteria and in that brief time isolated a streptococcus strain which caused enteritis in children.



Back in America, Libman retained a network of European connections and studied briefly at John Hopkins where he developed friendships with William Osler and William Welch. Working as a pathologist at Mount Sinai, Dr. Libman promoted doing autopsies as often as possible in order to make clinical correlations. When the new hospital opened in 1904 he was instrumental in starting a bacteriology laboratory where he pursued his work with blood cultures. Between 1906 and 1912, he focused on the pathogenesis of endocarditis and published seminal papers on what he named "subacute bacterial endocarditis." Osler had described the clinical features in 1885 and sometimes the condition was called Osler-Libman Disease. In 1924, together with Benjamin Sacks, Libman described a non-bacterial form of endocarditis often associated with lupus and still known as Libman-Sacks Disease.

Emanuel Libman almost single-handedly founded the cardiology department at Mount Sinai. Libman's eminent friend William Welch noted, "So numerous, original, comprehensive and important have been the studies of the heart emanating from the wards and laboratories of the Mount Sinai Hospital that I think one can correctly speak of the Mount Sinai School of Cardiologists, of which Libman was the founder and guiding spirit."

"E.L.", as he was affectionately known, was a generalist in an era before specialization. He was legendary for his brusque, dazzlingly fast and unorthodox diagnostic methods. Some attributed his talent to a sixth-sense ; skeptics said that he was superficial or merely a good guesser. Always a better observer than a listener, he claimed to be able to smell certain diseases and sought the smallest details. He developed a unique method of suddenly applying strong pressure over an unprepared patient's mastoids (behind the ears) to ascertain their pain threshold. Libman explained that 60 to 70% of his patients were hyperreactors to painful stimulation, the remained were hypeqractors, and then explained in detail the significance of the finding and other pain patterns. Reviewing this thirty year experience with what others called "Libman's Sign," this is how he described the technique in "Observations on Individual Sensitiveness to Pain."

The simple test that I employ is carried out by first pressing the thumb against the tip of the mastoid bone and then slipping the finger forward and pushing against the styloid process. Pressure on the normal mastoid bone causes no pain and therefore serves as a control. It is important not to rub the bone, because rubbing the periosteum of any bone is apt to evoke pain. Pressure in the direction of the styloid process is painful to some individuals and not to others. (JAMA 102: 335-341, 1934.)

An examination by the great diagnostician could be harrowing as described in the following graphic account written by playwright S.N. Behrman in the *New Yorker Magazine* in 1939:

A patient visiting Dr. Libman for the first time is likely to find his method of examination bewildering and incoherent. To go through such an examination is quite worth the price of admission. After he has given you The Libman Test, he will jump from one part of the body to another, rapping hard in one place, lightly elsewhere, pulling down eyelids, pressing under ears, running his thumbnail across the chest. He eyes shift everywhere, his movements are jerky, his speech rapid, his questions staccato and continuous with no time out for answers. It is only when he reaches auscultation that his tempo becomes slightly legato.

Then, like as not, the telephone rings. Someone wants Libman's advice about a student who has been sent to Europe with money from the Emanuel Libman Fellowship Fund, set up some years ago in his honor by patients and former pupils. "I cannot," you hear Libman say, "take the responsibility of sending the young man to Istanbul. However, I've been thinking about him. I have a feeling he should go to Vienna." He returns to his thumb-nailed torso, acquiescent on the sofa, taps and pokes, asks a few more questions without waiting for answers. The telephone rings again. This time Dr. Libman only listens. He returns, picks up a Derby hat and claps it on his silver-gray head. "Sorry, Have to go to Brooklyn. Very interesting case - suppuration behind the ear." And he is gone. You get up to put your shirt on, disturbed by the suspicion that without suppuration behind the ear, you are an egregious bore.

S.N. Behrman described another patient who went to see Dr. Libman almost daily over a period of several weeks because of some obscure symptoms. The two became fast friends and E.L. sometimes invited this man to accompany him to medical meetings and on visits to celebrity patients. It was all very exciting but there was one problem: the doctor never got around to telling his friend what was wrong with him. Finally, a day came when the patient had to depart for the West and announced this to E.L. At that very moment, the telephone rang and Libman was summoned to a consultation at the Waldorf. The man threw on his clothes and hurried after him, catching up when Libman's foot was on the running board of a cab. He repeated that he had to leave the next day: the response, "You can't do that. I haven't given you my diagnosis yet." Nonetheless, the man left and didn't see Libman again for five years. When they next

met, E.L. nonchalantly said, "It was esophageal diverticulosis. What have you done about it?"

Physicians from all over sent Dr. Libman their most baffling and hopeless cases and he had many famous patients — the likes of Fanny Brice, Thomas Mann and Chaim Weizmann. When he heard that his friend, the great French actress Sarah Bernhardt was desperately ill on an island off the coast of France and too poor and proud to ask him come, he invented the myth of a pleasure trip and arrived posing as a tourist to meet her. When the composer Gustave Mahler was thought to be suffering from advanced endocarditis, Libman confirmed the diagnosis with a blood culture. E.L. bought a German joke book to find stories to amuse Albert Einstein during examinations; in turn, Einstein sent him an autographed photograph with the inscription, "To the noble minded Dr. Libman with the secret-divining eyes." Many others also commented his penetrating eyes; pathologist Ludwig Aschoff called them "infallible physician's eyes."

Those gray eyes saw fine details that others missed — as if Libman was a medical Sherlock Holmes. It was said that he prophetically diagnosed President Warren Harding's fatal illness six months before the event. He saw him at a dinner party and the next morning asked a friend, "Who's the Vice-President?" When asked why? "Whoever he is, he will be President within six months. The President has a disease of the coronary arteries." The story's accuracy may be suspect because the same description was told concerning his correct prediction of Franklin Roosevelt's imminent demise: when asked how he knew, Libman confidently replied, "I saw him only in the newsreels but I've seen that wasting look many times. He couldn't last six months."

Still another variation was told by one of Libman's nieces in the popular *Reader's Digest* series "My Most Unforgettable Character." She recalled how once when her uncle attended a family wedding, he noticed a young man paying court to the bride's you're sister. Uncle Manny warned the girl's father, "Don't let Edna get seriously interested in that boy. He won't live a year." The youngman died of an inoperable brain tumor the next summer. This is how Dr. Alexis Carrel explained his friend's remarkable skill:

He is analyzing and reasoning — but with the speed of a thunderbolt. The magic of his diagnosis is due to the faculty of interpreting details that seem insignificant, to his knowledge of a vast number of similar conditions, to his uncanny power of observation and to his long hard studies. He has consecrated himself to medicine like a monk to God.

Manny Libman led an eccentric and solitary life and it was rumored in those closeted days that he was homosexual. He lived modestly and charged little for his services — the better to approach his wealthy patients later to ask them to generously support one of his “young geniuses.” He crammed private practice, hospital and laboratory work into 24 hour days, sometimes holding meetings well after midnight. Long hours were spent on autopsies where as one pupil recalled, “He was a living pathology lab.” Always devoted to his students, E.L. was a stimulating teacher in an era when a flair for the dramatic or flamboyant in teaching style was in vogue. On ward rounds he created an atmosphere of excitement and, very often, intimidation, relentlessly questioning students; as one recalled, “Everything else is easy once you get past Libman.” His knowledge was encyclopedic and he missed nothing. Once when he entered a ward, he sniffed the air and declared furiously, “There’s a case of typhoid fever here — get him out!” Of course, he was right.

During his long career, Libman published more than one hundred papers but no books for, as he told S.N. Behrman, “I don’t write books. I don’t have to. My proteges write them and send them to me — many copies.” He was responsible for important initiatives in education and was an avid student of medical history. An early advocate for continuous medical education both at Mount Sinai and the New York Academy of Medicine, he gave or raised funds to support numerous lectureships, fellowships, medical libraries and exhibitions. Libman was an ardent Zionist who served on the Hadassah Medical Advisory Board and encouraged developing a research institute at Hebrew University specializing in bacteriology and parasitology. He visited Palestine only once for several months in 1926 and was impressed by the beauty of the country and the enthusiasm of young people. Noting that the level of medical care was much higher than he’d expected, he remarked on how malaria and typhus were being eliminated. He consulted on cases, gave several lectures and contributed books from his own collection to the Hebrew University library.

To memorialize his 60th birthday, 147 of Libman’s former pupils, friends and colleagues from 18 countries, the elite of the academic and research worlds, dedicated a three-volume anniversary book to their mentor. Six hundred guests attended a dinner at the Waldorf and a decade later when another celebratory dinner was held for his 70th birthday, his friend and former patient Chaim Weizmann, who was unable to attend, wrote a letter of regret to the organizer Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, noting how Libman had been one of the staunchest supporters of medical science in Palestine and had lent his prestige and influence at a time when it was not fashionable to be a Zionist.

During the 1930s he paid tuitions for many promising students and worked tirelessly to help German scientists escape and then find suitable positions in safety. According to Chaim Weizmann, "More than any other individual in the profession, he has been responsible for aid and encouragement to young physicians and scientists who have themselves made permanent marks in their respective fields of scientific endeavor." Shortly before Manny Libman's death in 1946 at age 74, he summed up his lifelong mission: "The physician, as of old, is the students and even when he becomes the teacher, [he] remains the student." But perhaps the finest tribute came from his friend, the Nobel Laureate Alexis Carrel: "Libman is medicine itself."

ISIDORE SNAPPER (1889-1973) was born and educated in Amsterdam. Early in his career he performed significant research in bilirubin metabolism and at the age of thirty was appointed professor of medicine at the University of Amsterdam, unprecedented given his age and religion. For two decades he was recognized as a superb teacher and researcher. In 1928 "the traveling Dutchman" spent two months touring medical centers throughout the United States. In his memoirs Snapper remarked on "peculiarities" of American life such as the lack of servants which allowed only the very rich to be able to live in their own homes. He noted that women spent their time at daily bridge parties and were overly concerned with dieting and counting calories.



He speculated that this, combined with “the excessive possibilities of ventilation of the modern woman’s clothing,” accounted for the fact that women are overly sensitive to cold. As a result American apartments are over heated which, in turn, seemed to lead to an excess incidence of sinusitis. Among other observations, Snapper was intrigued by the fact that “nearly all chemists sell besides medicines – sandwiches, ice cream soda, cigars and other things”; that in hotels boots are never cleaned but there is always soap in bathrooms; the knife is always put on the plate when eating and on no account used together with the fork; newspapers resemble books but contain little else than exceptional cases of murder and sport news; professors of pharmacology are adept at distilling alcohol during this era of prohibition; and that in their automobile culture, Americans seemed nearly to have forgotten how to walk.

Dr. Snapper was especially impressed at how American medical schools were associated with private universities and how basic scientific research was sponsored by large industrial companies. Unlike in Europe, medical educators worked full time and were not distracted by the exigencies of private practice. Although he found these academicians to be enthusiastic teachers who stressed practical bed-side training, he felt that they were often “led into the temptation” of over-reliance on laboratory tests that were readily available in hospitals. Snapper remarked on the American talent for organization and commented that most institutions had modern well-equipped wards: “Everywhere there are secretaries, librarians, record offices, telephones, Dictaphones, in many clinics type-written histories of diseases...”

When Germany invaded Austria in 1937, Snapper recognized that it was time to seek safe haven in the United States. Upon arriving in New York he received a telegram from the Rockefeller Foundation inviting him to meet with them. Foundation leaders wanted Snapper to head the Peiping Union Medical College, the American-style school they sponsored in China. By the time he arrived in January 1939 the country already had been occupied by the Japanese for two years but the invaders didn’t interfere with activities at the school. All told, his Chinese adventure lasted nearly three years and was a revelation both to him and to his new colleagues. He was highly regarded in China not so much for his erudition as for his appearance. As later explained in his memoirs, he was considered to be a “true professor” because he had a bald head, indicating that he read under a lamp every night, wore spectacles which suggested that he even read the small print of articles, and his round belly clearly proved that he’d been invited to many great consultations about rich patients. Dr. Snapper was fascinated by how cultural and dietary differences impacted on medical care and later wrote a book about his experiences titled *Chinese Lessons to Western Medicine*.

After Pearl Harbor, Dr. Snapper was captured by the Japanese and placed in military custody for eight months until the Dutch exchanged him for six Japanese diplomats. He went directly to the United States serving for two years as a consultant to the Surgeon General of the Army. After the war, he was appointed Director of Medical Education at Mount Sinai Hospital where he stayed for eight years. Because of what he considered administrative meddling, he moved to Cook County Hospital but couldn't tolerate Chicago's extremes of weather and concluded his career at Beth El Hospital in Brooklyn where he worked for twelve years until he retired at age eighty in 1965.

A master both of laboratory and clinical medicine, in the introduction of his book *Bedside Medicine* (1960), Snapper lamented that modern medicine had departed from the tradition of careful observation of the patient. His words resonate even today:

The example of their elders must have persuaded most neophytes in medicine that, because of modern chemical, physical and physicochemical laboratory methods, the empirical approach to clinical medicine as advocated by Hippocrates has become superfluous. The opinion is often heard that clinical problems can be solved much more easily and efficiently by the application of laboratory methods than by clinical acumen. Although no one would deny that our diagnostic ability has been increased considerably by the introduction of these methods, every true clinician will add that for diagnosis and therapy, optimal results will be obtained only if these laboratory methods are used solely to complement Hippocratic empirical medicine...Fortunately, there is no reason to despair about the future, because the history of science in general and medicine in particular, is characterized by cyclic changes. Facts and theories which for many decades have been generally accepted suddenly vanish into the background and are gradually forgotten. After half a century, the cycle changes and the old concepts return in the guise of new discoveries. It is necessary to be conversant with these historical cycles because 'those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it'....I can only hope on behalf of our patients that we will not have to wait much longer before this reversal will take place.

Dr. Snapper was famous for his imperious and authoritative manner. If brilliant and provocative, he also could be arrogant. A former student recalled that once when Snapper was asked, "How can it be that you are not certified by the American Board of Internal Medicine?", the great man replied, "Who on the Board would dare to examine me?"

Everyone who knew him liked to tell “Snapper stories” but his son Ernst described an unexpected side which only a family member could know. In Amsterdam before the war, Dr. Snapper was a well known soccer referee, equally as fearless on the playing fields as he was in the hospital. He seemed to revel in standing up against hostile crowds and after making one particularly controversial which decided a game adversely, the home fans booed him off the field, yelling “Go home and amputate a leg” – and much worse. In the locker room afterward, young Ernst asked whether taking such abuse bothered his father? The response was surprising: “Ernst, during the week I am always flattered and praised for being the kind of Professor of Medicine I am. But on Sundays, I am yelled and cursed at when I make a decision on the soccer field which displeases the fans. Those offensive derisions are just what I need to stay modest.”

In fact that was uncharacteristic of Snapper’s public image. He always signed his papers “I. Snapper” which some believed typified his personality, as if it meant “I am Snapper” or *I, Snapper* - like *I, Claudius*. Late in his career, after he’d made a particularly obscure diagnosis at a conference, a persistent medical resident asked how despite all evidence to the contrary, he’d arrived at this conclusion? The great man replied: “I, Isidor Snapper say it is.”

The famous pathologist Hans Popper summarized his friend’s accomplishments in these words:

Snapper combined better than anyone else supreme bedside management and clinical diagnosis with an inquisitive scientific mind. Helped by a memory of almost absolute recall, he developed both brilliant and challenging diagnoses and concepts...His colleagues and students will speak of him with awe and respect for years to come as a man for whom the word “charisma” might have been invented.

Michael Nevins, MD