THE LIGHTER SIDE OF SAUL JARCHO, NEW YORKER

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Among the many scholarly works of Saul Jarcho is his translation and annotation of clinical consultations and letters by Ippolito Francesco Albertini and other physicians.¹ In his description of Albertini's otherwise wide-ranging experience, Jarcho notes the unusual absence of consultations regarding appendicitis or peritonitis. He considered this surprising in context of the respect held for the insight of Albertini in this area by no less an authority than Morgagni, which he recalled from an otherwise obscure paragraph of the third book of *The Seats and Causes of Diseases*.

Indeed, if one examines Morgagni's letter 35, article 21, there is an astute description of the acute abdomen, an emergency situation in which the lining of the belly has become inflamed by infection or by rupture of an organ: "I asked Albertini, that very attentive physician and diligent observer, from what signs we might judge the danger in cases of pains of the intestines," Morgagni reported in his text. "He answered: 'from the pulse, the abdomen, and the face. For the pulse is low and rather weak, and if you attend to it closely it has some little irregularity, which makes it not quite similar to itself. And the abdomen is tense, hard, and attended with some pain. And, finally, the face has something unusual in its appearance, as if the patient were frightened.'"

Some years ago, on my way through a busy hospital emergency room, I chanced upon Saul Jarcho in a scene almost, but not quite, taken from this chapter of Morgagni. He was in obvious distress, with abdominal pain that worsened with motion and touch. He knew that he had peritonitis that required surgery. Although his pulse may have been weak, there was one feature reported by Albertini that was missing. The face had something unusual in its appearance, to be sure, but it was not fright. Rather, it was angry bemusement, with a new insight into the relationship of disease and the metropolis that framed the features of an otherwise distressed Saul Jarcho.

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There is a distinctly lighter side of Saul Jarcho that complements his medical and historical expertise. Here is how he later described, in a wonderful letter to the editor of the *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine*, the onset of his symptoms and their worsening by a New York taxi ride to the hospital: "On a quiet day in April I was happily transcribing a collection of Italian medical manuscripts with which the Fates had favored me," he began, describing a typical scholarly morning. "There was a growing sensation of pain in the right lower quadrant of the abdomen, which increased in severity and was worsened with motion and with pressure over the area. At the corner of the street I caught a cab driven by a slender young Pakinstani," he continued, "who drove his juggernaut southward along Central Park West without missing a single fissure, pothole, hiatus, or aberrant manhole cover."²

What so intrigued Saul about this jolting trip to the hospital was the way in which the diagnosis was confirmed in his own mind by a newly evident sign of peritonitis, specifically, the increase in abdominal pain that was elicited by each bump in the road. Although eponyms in medicine can be abused, perhaps this should become known as "Jarcho's sign" and taught to students as a regular part of the introductory course on diagnosis. As related in the letter, the taxi driver's skill seems to have been just above average, for New York. "He slipped past rival taxicab Houdinis by fractions of a nanometer. Careening into the crosstown tunnel with a screech of tires and brakes, he struck additional geologic faults, loose bricks, orphaned hubcaps, and broken bottles. Impromptu help from ectopic rocks bounced me skyward, endangering cranial architecture." Recalling a prior episode of abdominal pain precipitated at least in part by a rough ride over a stony road in Rome, Jarcho concludes: "We need not censure the Romans, ancient or modern, for roughness of roads. Our own neglected streets and highways are sometimes able to shake tooth from tooth and vertebra from vertebra." This letter was brilliantly titled "Problems of Urban Health," to conform with the newly restated mission of the re-founded academy.

Another example of acute and incisive perspective on New York City life is provided by "Linguistic Diversity in Six City Blocks of Manhattan, With Map," also published in the *Bulletin*.³ Here, Jarcho examined and tabulated the ethnic origin and languages spoken by the employees of 68 ground-floor or street enterprises found between Broadway and Columbus Avenue from 68th to 72nd Streets. Each establishment was carefully placed on an accompanying map of the area. By way of example, with reference to location 8, a supermarket with approximately 50 employees: "Manager, a Sikh, speaks Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Marathi, Gujarai, and Sindi. Five employees speak Hindi and Urdu. About 40 are Latin Americans, mainly Caribbean and Central American (Puerto Rican, Dominican and Salvadoran) and speak Spanish." Another example, Location 17,

was a pizzeria: "Manager, Italian. Three cooks: Albanian, Serbo-Croatian. Two Mexican attendants: Spanish." As finally tabulated, "The total inventory for the small area surveyed proved astounding: Albanian, Arabic, Chinese, Coptic, Farsi, French, German, Greek, Gujarati, Hebrew, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Kachi, Korean, Ladino, Marathi, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Pushtu, Russian, Sarakole, Serbo-Croatian, Sindi, Spanish, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, Tukulor, Turkish, Urdu, Yiddish, and Wolof—34 in all, other than English."

It should come as no surprise that Jarcho used his survey as a vehicle for additional social commentary: "Since the shops are situated along the streets and avenues, the center of each block of buildings appears blank in the map. Other large [blank] spaces represent the Ansonia Post Office on Broadway and the areas occupied by the ABC television stations on Columbus Avenue." Then, unable to resist a swipe at popular culture, he suggests that "at present it is expected that ABC will continue to expand, increasing the size of the blank area." This Jarcho tweak, of course, reflects the typical attitude of the confirmed bibliophile toward television. As Marx (Groucho, not Karl) observed: "I must say I find television very educational. The minute somebody turns it on, I go to the library and read a good book." It goes without saying that Saul Jarcho's life has been focused on good books. He has been a leader of the library committee of the New York Academy of Medicine and of the Friends of the Rare Book Room. For years, he has provided wise counsel, quiet expertise, and subtle humor to deliberative activities in the library.

Saul Jarcho is the quintessential New Yorker, and to be a New Yorker, one must be a bit of a curmudgeon. As Santayana observed: "To knock a thing down, especially if it is cocked at an arrogant angle, is a deep delight of the blood." A wonderful definition of a curmudgeon is provided by John Winokur: "Curmudgeons are mockers and debunkers whose bitterness is a symptom rather than a disease. They can't compromise their standards and can't manage the suspension of disbelief necessary for feigned cheerfulness. Their awareness is a curse; they're constantly ticked off because they're constantly aware of so much to be ticked off about, and they wish things were better." Winokur adds: "Perhaps curmudgeons have gotten a bad rap in the same way that the messenger is blamed for the message: They have the temerity to comment on the human condition without apology. They not only refuse to applaud mediocrity, they howl it down with morose glee."⁴

When Sir William Osler wrote puckish or satirical papers for publication, he chose the pseudonym of Egerton Yorrick Davis, and at times he used the initials E. Y. D. Osler was not a New Yorker, and he certainly was not a full-fledged curmudgeon. When Saul Jarcho chose a pseudonym, he picked something that was superficially equally innocuous—S. N. Gaño—innocuous, that is, unless you

said it rapidly and happened to be conversant with German or Yiddish and Spanish. "The World of S. N. Gaño," a series of articles that were originally published in *The Leech*, a journal of the Cardiff Medical Students Club, was republished without additional commentary by the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.⁵

The first title in this series is called "Books and Their Enemies" and relates the terror and destruction brought to a personal library by a part-time maid, who was described as "a smiling middle-aged Latin woman of incredible girth, and in profile shaped like the map of Africa mounted on the forelegs of a Steinway grand piano. Her name was Aida." Over a series of visits, she was able to disorganize an entire collection, while at the same time ripping the spines from a quarter of the volumes: "I have already mentioned that Aida had conscientiously dispersed all books which came in sets. At first it seemed that she had done this in a completely random way, but gradually traces of a system became apparent. When a set consisted of only two volumes, these were separated by a distance averaging 18 inches, volume II being placed to the left, with volume I a foot and a half farther along the shelf. . . . With many-volumed sets the forces of chaos had ampler opportunity to play. The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, volumes 1–7, were in the following order: 4,2,3,1,7 (upside down), 5, 6. This was not a case of simple reversal, nor had the odd-numbered volumes been segregated from the even, nor was it a simple selection of alternate volumes. My friend the mathematician could find no formula which would account for this layout."

A second paper from this series deals with "Deficiencies in the English Medical Vocabulary," which satirically deflates the pomposity of medical linguistics: "Suppose that a woman is admitted in heart failure. Since the weather is bad, his majesty the chief is in a didactic and Socratic mood and wishes to demonstrate the physical signs, inquisitorially. In cumbrous contemporary English, he asks: 'Is the patient dyspneic?' How much more concise it would be to ask, 'Does she *dysp*?' How felicitous to reply, 'She both *dysps* and *orthops*!'"

Another paper dealing with books appeared in *Punch* in 1960.⁶ Here, Jarcho used the results of a competition at Harvard to identify the worst poem in the world. This is then used as an alternative way to induce sleep without the use of somniferous drugs. For routine cases of insomnia, he recommends Dante, with the following apology:

"The appropriateness of Dante for the treatment of insomnia cannot be doubted. I speak here only of the *Inferno*, since no one ever reaches the *Purgatorio* or the *Paradiso*. The narcotic properties of the *Inferno* depend on the theme and structure of the poem. The reader is first led gently downward and is then drawn round in circles—all this in gloom and darkness—until consciousness vanishes. The same introductory cantos have the same hypnotic effect night after night. It is easy to prove that the *Inferno* is an effective remedy for sleeplessness. Look at any copy of the book and you will observe that all the wear and tear is in the first few pages; the later pages look fresh and new."

A final comment on the practical value of preserving books is appended as an anecdote to his paper titled "Historical Perspectives of Medical Intelligence."⁷ Jarcho was head of the army's Division of Medical Intelligence during World War II, and he provides the following example of spycraft, which combines the deductive cleverness of Sherlock Holmes with the swift implementation of James Bond: "During World War II, when our forces captured items of enemy equipment, samples were sent to technical intelligence agencies for examination and record. Medical equipment came to the Medical Intelligence Division, Office of the Surgeon General of the Army. It immediately became evident that the Japanese preferred to receive medicine by hypodermic injection, even when oral preparations were available. One of our officers, skilled in medical Japanese, faithfully transcribed and translated the labels on the ampules. He also noted the maker's mark on the bottom of the ampule. He noticed that all Japanese ampules came from one factory. Finding the address in the Tokyo telephone directory, he transmitted it to the Air Force, which destroyed the factory." As Jarcho concludes, "I hope that we are preserving telephone directories."

And I hope that we are preserving New Yorkers like Saul Jarcho.

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