

# Dr. Árpád Gerster, 1848-1923

By H. E. VARGA

Among the many prominent doctors of Hungarian birth or descent, there is one — of blessed memory — who became a leader in the medical profession in this country.

His name was Dr. Árpád Gerster. He was a professor of surgery and chief surgeon of one of New York's largest hospitals. He died on the 11th of March 1923 after having lived a truly rich life. For this doctor was not only a medical craftsman, he had the soul of an artist. He was not merely a healer of diseases, but a reincarnation of the great minds and souls of the Renaissance. Dr. Gerster was a learned man. He was on familiar terms with the best literature of all the ages. He was a pianist of no mean accomplishments, a true lover of chamber and orchestral music (as so many doctors are.) In addition to this, he was an able draftsman, a painter and an etcher. He appreciated fine paintings. He loved the outdoors. He was a fisherman, a hunter, a good horse-man and a fencer. He was skilled in canoe-sailing.

His book, a record of his life (in a sense an autobiography) is truly fascinating reading. The man's modesty, and simplicity makes one conscious of a great personality. He had an accumulation of traits that may briefly be called as force of character. His great insight into human nature and his penetrating intelligence were coupled with tolerance, charity and good-will.

The title of the book is: *Recollection of a New York Surgeon*. (New York, 1917. Paul B. Hoeber, publisher.) He gives as one of his reasons for writing the book, a saying of Martial: "To enjoy what is past, is to have lived twice."

And he has lived his useful life with great gusto. He was a delightful companion and enjoyed every waking hour of the day. A good friend who has known him rather well has told me that Dr. Gerster was in his element when he retired after a meal to the smoking room (pipatorium) where he selected one of the many long-stemmed pipes and engulfed his friends and himself in a thick cloud of smoke. His conversation was animated and sparkling. He was justly known for his hospitality, his generosity and kindness. His twinkling eyes radiated good cheer. His sense of humor was rare. He enjoyed a good story and could tell one. His anecdotes and jokes, whenever the occasion warranted it, were without any false prudery. He was a real man. A great soul and a fine intellect were united in him.

And he was a linguist too.

Besides English, French, German, Italian and Spanish, he read Siemkiewicz's fascinating historical novels in the original Polish. He admits: "Since leaving school, the Latin authors have never ceased to exert on me their strong, durable attraction..." Authors known before were, according to opportunity, re-read; others were added from time to time. He says that his Greek was never sufficient to permit of current reading. It could not have been so bad, if he was able to read — even in his ripe old age — Herodotus, Xenophon, Thukydidēs, the dramatists and Lucian in the original, and of course, Homeros. He aptly says: "Nothing will relieve the weariness caused by the grind of a laborious day more promptly than the solace

found in the wisdom, incomparable elegance and energy of the ancients."

His Magyar (Hungarian) was to the end of his life impeccably correct. He did not forget his native tongue — Hungarian.

Dr. Gerster was of German-Swiss origin. His grandfather was a cabinet maker by trade, and a volunteer in Napoleon's first Italian campaign. He left the army after the peace of Campo Formio in 1797, and settled in Northern Hungary, in Kassa, where he died in 1844. His great-grandfather was killed by some roudy mill-hands in the sight of his own son, in Győr (Raab), in 1783.

Dr. Gerster's father was a master chandler and became a "burgher" (citizen) of Kassa in 1841. Among Dr. Gerster's uncles one was an architect in Budapest, another fought through the Hungarian war of revolution in 1848—49 (under Kossuth) then came to America as an emigré and served as captain of Engineers during the Civil War, under Rosecrans and Grant. He died in California in 1897.

The Hungarian revolution must have impressed itself on his keen mind. He was a child of the revolution. He was born in 1848. The entry in the family bible reads:

"On Friday, December 22, 1848, at half past two in the afternoon, my son, Arpad Geyza Charles was born. May the Lord lead him to the good."

And the Lord did. Young Gerster was a keen, intellectual, curious student. His father was a patriot and was made a political prisoner for a short while. Of him he has this to say:

"...He was just and wise, never scolded, but preferred to reprove by witty irony. Though irascible, he was quickly and easily appeased. He was extremely fond of music. A healthy humor made him ever ready for song, jest and merriment."

Of his mother he says that she was a "dear, wise, soft and yet strong soul." He loved her deeply. "Her power of persuasion — he says — was irresistible, because it was rooted in sympathy and in clear-sighted common sense."

Dr. Gerster was one of eight children. The three boys were well educated and made names for themselves in the scientific world. Bela was a graduate of the famous Polytechnic Institute in Vienna. He was an engineer and architect, a builder of railroads and canals. He prepared the dissenting report in 1876 on the Panama Canal-project (Lesseps' colossal swindle.) He spent two years in the jungles of Central America and returned to Hungary in 1876 by way of California and New York. For twelve years he has built the Canal of Corinth. It was opened for traffic in 1893.

The youngest child, Nicholas, was a graduate in chemistry of the famous Polytechnic School of Zurich and became a famous professor. He later organized the "Institute for Industrial Experiment" in Hungary of which he became the first Director and remained its head until his death in 1916.

Among the sisters, Etelka Gerster became a prima donna of worldwide renown. Her voice was an uncommonly even, pure, high soprano. After triumphs in Italy, in Berlin and London, she appeared in New York and continued to en-



joy the favor of the American public for a number of years.

Berta became the wife of Stephen Kausser, a graduate architect of the "Ecole Polytechnique," Paris. He was an artillery officer during the war of revolution of 1848, later as an emigré, a surveyor for the U. S. Government in Kansas. He served during the early 1870-s as American Consular Agent in Budapest.

So here was another contact of Dr. Arpad Gerster with America. "In his office (Kausser's) I had my first contact with people speaking the English tongue," he writes.

His childhood was rich in quaint episodes. During vacations — in high school — he took walking trip with other boys, "at first to the beautiful and picturesque environs of Kassa." Most of the trips were made in the company of Géza Horváth who became curator of the Museum's Entomological Collections in Budapest. We read with interest:

"Our friendship was not diminished by the great distance interposed between us in later life and has survived in its boyish frankness and fervour. In 1907, just before the Entomological Congress met at Boston, he paid me a fortnight's visit at Long Lake, N. Y. Rambles through swamps and thickets were resumed as naturally as though they had never been interrupted. And yet more than forty years had passed since the habit (of walking trips) was broken."

His uncle Charles, the architect, was directing the repairs of St. Elizabeth's Cathedral in Kassa in the 1860-s. Of this he says:

"I was permitted to the stone cutter's and sculptor's studio, erected near the church, to see the cautious skill employed in hewing the icelike tracery of a Gothic win-

ow out of rebellious stone."

The inquisitive boy paid frequent visits to the shops of blacksmiths, locksmiths where one watched the artful forming of wonderful "grille" destined for a church to the saddlers, to coppersmiths, rope-makers, weavers, joiners, etc. "Then came the revelations of pottery, the pressing of embossed stone tiles, the potter's wheel, the deft and tasteful decorations of these humble ceramics, and the firing of the Kiln."

And further: "The making of combs out of ox-horn, the preparation of tinctures, plasters and drugs in my uncle Wandrachek's apothecary shop; the making of soap and candles in my father's establishment — all brought pleasure and instruction. Spur-making, shoe making, the knitting of braid, the making of hats from rabbits' hair — were all eagerly observed."

How different and distant this sounds in our age of mass-production in industry.

He had to grind colors for his teacher in painting and drawing. "This (it must be confessed, was not very diverting" — but he remarks with true wisdom in later years: "Yet I am glad to have had the experience."

From his 16th year of age, he kept a diary for eleven years and continued it with some interrup-

tion. He received a sound education in literature, mathematics, natural science, music, art and philosophy.

He states his ethical concept — as developed during his many years of experience, in this manner:

"The acute realization of one's own imperfection forms the living source of that limpid stream, charity, by which the scores of our fellow men are washed, soothed and healed."

Then he entered the medical school of the University of Vienna. While there, he learned how to fence with the foil and saber. He attended the opera and symphonic concerts and took an active part in a student society. During the next seven years, he received a thorough training in all branches of medicine. Vienna was then the medical center of the world. After graduating, he practised medicine in the hospital of Kassa, for a short while, then he served as an army surgeon for a year in Vienna.

After a brief visit to his home, and additional surgical practice, he decided to try his luck in New York, which was a rather venturesome decision in 1874.

The young doctor was destined to achieve fame in the New World. He reached Brooklyn on March 9th, 1874, after a tempestuous voyage of sixteen days.

"To learn to know God, one must be at sea during a storm in a small vessel, low down and close to the waters," — he writes. "The ship, a mere nutshell among the mountains of foam-covered water, was creaking and groaning in all her seams, now traveling up, up, then plunging down, down — big seas sweeping her decks from time to time."

Arriving in America, he was not struck by the beauty of its archi-

ture. He attributed this to the natural characteristic of every recent settlement. "What struck me most favorably" — he writes — "was the enormous contrast between the ceaseless hum of activity and toil in this human bee-hive, and the languid, contemplative and indolent ways of the Austria-Hungary of those days. My predilections were all in favor of the bee-hive... The waterside was lined by a forest of masts, belonging mostly to square-rigged sailing vessels. Even in those days street life at Broadway and Fulton Street was like an ant hill in full commotion."

The young doctor spends his spare time in getting acquainted with the leaders of the medical profession, visiting hospitals, observing the work of eminent surgeons and reading Carlyle, Walter Scott, and De Toqueville's famous book on American democracy.

He attends a political meeting and his "exalted ideals about the sublime character of the popular elements of democratic government" thus received a gentle shock. "When the company adjourned to the bar, I experienced the first example of artistically articulated swearing and the form of the habitual, calm, passionless blasphemy which makes up half of the conversation of the political healer, the thug and the gambler."



His first few years of practice, — first in Brooklyn, then in New York. — were those of the general practitioner who is doing some surgical work too.

He was greatly aided by colleagues who loved and respected him, — for his diligence, skill, knowledge and character. "It was a glorious and hopeful time, with hard work coming daily thicker and thicker," he recalls.

His sister Etelka, makes her triumphant appearance in New York in 1878. The members of the Italian opera become his patients and Dr. Gerster learns to speak their melodious language.

He was a hearty eater. Recalling a vacation spent on an island, he remarks (with Martial) "The decoration of the table were gorgeous, but the food beggarly."

He gradually forges to the front rank in the profession. He confines himself to surgical cases and becomes one of the best surgeons of New York. He takes a leading role in scientific work and reads important papers at meetings of medical societies.

And while he remarks with some truth that "America is the graveyard of the talents of many disappointed foreigners," — this does not hold good for Dr. Gerster. He took a vigorous part in improving hospital services, in training a large number of excellent young surgeons and in raising the standards of medical education.

In some important branches of surgery (cancer, f. e.), he was among the pioneers.

He became a member of the New York Surgical Society, a professor of the N. Y. Polyclinic School, and later on professor of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of New York. (1910.)

And then, in 1912, the highest professional honor was awarded him. He was elected president of the American Surgical Association, one of the most important professional societies.

His scientific papers, books, lectures and his public service have created for him a deserved reputation.

With all these duties and his many professional endeavors he did not refuse help to his countrymen. He participated in all worthwhile causes.

As president of the Hungarian Aid Society of New York, he appears before the Board of Pardons of Pennsylvania in 1895 and pleads the case of three Hungarian Slovaks, convicted of first degree murder. The governor presided over the session and Dr. Gerster succeeded in his task. Their sentence was commuted.

He was a believer in the principles advocated by Kossuth. He was hopeful to see Hungary independent, entirely freed from the domination of Austria.

At the end of a rich and successful life, he makes this observation:

"Americans, whose wisdom and kindness lead them to kindle and encourage the newcomers pursuit of his aspiration, find their efforts richly repaid. Neglect and contempt of the immigrants sincere endeavor to merge with the nation have been of infinite harm."

The words of Erasmus on Thomas More can be properly applied to Dr. Gerster too: "He was the Patron-General of all poor devils."

Pliny in one of his Epistles is expressing a worthy aim of life: "Let us leave behind something, that we have lived."

Dr. Gerster has left behind him deep imprints.

We can summarize our estimate of him in these words:

He was little influenced in his judgements by his surrounding. He had the courage of his convictions. He had a deep and openly avowed contempt for sensationalism or popular approval. He was a terror of humbugs. He disdained untroubled by the pre-occupation of prejudice of any kind. His utter freedom of vanity was admirable. He entertained no self deception. He had a strong vein of sympathy. However keen and objective he was in the perception and analysis of facts, in judging motives, his discernment co-incided with wisdom.

Thus the great surgeon, Dr. Arpad Gerster has truly lived a great life. As he watched the sculptor building the Gothic window in his early youth "out of the rebellious stone," so has he — with cautious skill employed — woven "the lace-like tracery" of his own career on the edifice of American Civilization.

