

# MASTER SURGEONS OF AMERICA

## ARPAD GEZA CHARLES GERSTER

ARPAD GEZA CHARLES GERSTER was born December 22, 1848, in Kassa, Hungary, now Czecho-Slovakia, and died at his home in New York City, March 11, 1923. He received his early education in the schools of his native town, chiefly under the teaching order of white Premonstratensians. He graduated in medicine from Vienna in 1872, and arrived in America March 9, 1873.

Gerster was the first man in New York to practice surgery exclusively. In 1878, when he was thirty years of age, he was appointed attending surgeon to the German Hospital, New York, and two year later to a similar position at Mount Sinai Hospital. From 1882 to 1895 he held one of the two chairs of surgery at the New York Polyclinic Medical School. Practitioners came to this institution from all parts of the United States for graduate instruction.

Other positions of note held by Dr. Gerster were: fellow, New York Surgical Society, 1884; member, Century Association, 1890; president, New York Surgical Society, 1891; consulting surgeon, German Hospital, 1896; vice-president, American Surgical Association, 1908; president, Charaka Club, New York, 1909; professor of clinical surgery, Columbia University, New York, 1916; president, American Surgical Association, 1911-1912; consulting surgeon, Mount Sinai Hospital, 1914; and trustee, New York Academy of Medicine, 1916.

In 1902 Dr. Gerster was asked, informally, if, in event it should be offered, he would accept one of the two chairs of surgery at the University of Budapest. This was declined because, as he afterward said, "I had become heart and soul an American. Where my name and reputation were made, there I proposed to serve to the end of my allotted time."

About 1894, the Austro-Hungarian Government decorated Gerster with the Order of Francis Joseph, in recognition of his great charity to poor Hungarian immigrants. A few years later, in 1906, following political action by Austria to Hungary, which he considered unjust, he returned the decoration, maintaining that if he kept it, his independence of thought and speech would be hampered, an action most typical of him.

These brief reminiscences with regard to one of the great surgeons of the world, will seem hackneyed to those who knew and loved the man, and who were intimately acquainted with the originality and richness of his wisdom.

One other man, Christian Fenger, born and educated in another country, came in his youth and strength to make America his home. Christian Fenger in the West, and Arpad Gerster in the East, wrought greatly, and stand out pre-eminently in the history of American surgery. Each contributed mightily to the spread of the new doctrine of asepsis and antisepsis which had been made possible by the work of Louis Pasteur and Joseph Lister. Each, after contributing work of a lifetime to the upbuilding of American surgery, died in the country of his adoption, his name hallowed by a reverent medical profession, and by untold numbers who, directly or indirectly, had benefited by him.

Shortly after I graduated in medicine I went to New York, at the suggestion of my father, to take graduate work in the Postgraduate and the Polyclinic schools, which were at that time in their infancy. Gerster was one of the men with whom I came in contact. He was a forceful, enthusiastic teacher, who opened up to me a new viewpoint in surgery. During succeeding years my brother and I made frequent visits to New York, never failing to spend a share of our time with this remarkable teacher and operator at the Mount Sinai Hospital.

Gerster's medical confrères said of him that he was a physician first, and a surgeon second, for he regarded the patient from the broad standpoint of general medicine rather than from the narrower standpoint of surgery. This gave to his opinions a peculiar value. Diagnoses carefully established led to indications for treatment in which the soundness and originality of his judgment were demonstrated. Few men have equaled him in the wisdom of his surgical indications. He was bold and fearless, and did not hesitate to decline to operate if, in his judgment, the patient would not be greatly benefited thereby. As an operator he was original and courageous. Adequate exposure was a *sine qua non*, since he maintained that careful work could not be done except under guidance of the eye. Under atypical conditions, improvisations were readily devised by him. In postoperative care, his broad medical knowledge and sound judgment were the admiration of colleagues and pupils. His kindness to patients and his conscientious care of them were proverbial. A strict disciplinarian himself, nothing excited his anger more quickly than lack of such qualifications in a subordinate.

Gerster's book, *The Rules of Aseptic and Antiseptic Surgery*, was published in 1888, for those times a veritable edition de luxe, printed on heavy calendered paper with many illustrations by the half-tone process, then almost unknown in its application to scientific books. In order to obtain these illustrations, Gerster mastered the technique of photography and made his own plates, and this when photography by an amateur was quite rare. The book caused a furor, for at that period suppuration was considered a natural sequence of every surgical procedure. It was immensely popular and passed through three large editions in less than two years; that it did not pass through many more editions was due to Gerster's modesty. He said, "My book has done its work." I once heard Dr. Edmund

Andrews, of Chicago, say that this book was the greatest contribution to surgery of the time, and this is well demonstrated by its effect on the American profession. It so thoroughly taught diagnosis, pathology, and technique, as represented in the new school, that students were able to carry out to the extent of their ability the methods discussed, and young men with this new knowledge were able to better the work of older men whose experience proved a handicap. As I look back on that earlier period, I remember three books that helped to form my surgical mind: *Abdominal Surgery*, by Greig Smith, of Bristol, England; *Operations of Surgery*, by W. H. A. Jacobson, of Guy's Hospital, London; and *The Rules of Aseptic and Antiseptic Surgery*, by Gerster.

Gerster's interests outside of medicine were broad. Music, art, literature, and life in the open, his greatest diversion and recreation, were all enjoyed with a keen zest. His sister, Etelka Gerster, notable as an operatic artist, greatly inspired him in his love for music. He wrote well on many topics, and copies of etchings made by him are among the print collection of the New York Public Library. Toward the close of his life he limited his professional work to consultations, and devoted his leisure to writing, and to painting in oils. In 1917 he published an auto-biography, *Recollections of New York Surgeons*, which portrays vividly the development of surgery from the time of his student days to the present.

Gerster was a great man, and unusual. The distinguished honors which came to him were unsought. He loved his work, and lived for it. W. J. MAYO.