In memoriam

Eric D. Wittkower 1899–1983

I dedicate these words to the memory of a man who honored this College as its first President. He established our goals, gave us a shining example to follow and the image of perfection. Asking you to mourn him would not suffice; I, therefore, call on each of you to dedicate your efforts and make this organization worthy of his excellence.

An account of his life and achievements in psychosomatic medicine, psychoanalysis, and transcultural psychiatry must be left to biographers, for anything less would be an injustice. I can only recount a few highlights: born in Berlin, he was educated and lived there for more than one-third of his life. Although unforgettable events in history displaced him to faraway lands, he never denied his German cultural and scientific heritage. In Berlin, he reached the pinnacle of education having earned the degree of Doctor of Medicine and the Privatdozent. In Germany he started research and indeed there, published his first paper at 22. This was followed later by over 200 papers and chapters and 5 edited and co-authored books. He then lived and engaged in research in Switzerland, Great Britain, and finally, Canada. Canada adopted and treated him as Her rightful son.

Eric’s life was that of a physician, psychoanalyst, researcher, creator, and innovator. Neither the environments of his life nor his achievements were ever mediocre. While in Berlin, he was identified with Charité, in Great Britain with Maudsley Hospital, Tavistock Clinic and St. Bartholomew’s, the Royal Army Medical Corps and the War Office, and in Canada with the Department of Psychiatry of McGill University.

His psychosomatic research and publications preceded those of Dunbar, Alexander, Weiss, and English who published between 1941 and 1943. his publication The Influence of Emotions on the Gall Bladder came out in 1929; such studies as on psychogalvanic skin reflex, influence of emotions on cholesterol levels and psycho-neuroregulation of hypertension, and gastric secretion appeared also much earlier. It was in 1935 that the Journal of Mental Science published a series of his research projects on the influence of emotional states affecting various organs. His studies on psychological factors of cardiac pain appeared in 1937, on allergic personality and personality in ulcerative colitis in 1938, the neurosis of war in 1940, the effort syndrome in 1941, emotions and skin disorders in 1953, psychological factors in tuberculosis in 1955, thyrotoxicosis in 1956, rheumatoid arthritis in 1957.

The list of his presentations is truly endless and time does not permit me to name them all. It is, however, necessary to mention his Presidential Address in Amsterdam, at the end of his tenure on the topic of Transcultural Psychiatry (co-authored by Hector Warnes now of Ottawa, Ont, Canada). Eric’s work had been closely identified with trans-cultural psychiatry; he was a founder of the Section on Transcultural Psychiatric Studies at McGill in 1956 and of the Transcultural Research Review whose editor-in-chief he remained until the time of his death. Eric became a psychoanalyst while in London and continued to practice
psychoanalysis seeing patients almost to the very end of his life. Eric was a noted teacher and
when his tenure as Professor of Psychiatry at McGill ended, he was named Professor Emeritus.
Eric was always sought as a lecturer and he travelled the world over. He gave of himself freely
even when travelling was difficult because of his severe physical infirmity.
He was honored by many organizations, some of which he helped to create; he served as
President of the American Psychosomatic Society, Canadian Psychoanalytical Society, American
Academy of Psychoanalysis, and ICPM. His list of appointments, editorial boards, honors, and
positions is unending
and includes significant recognition in Canada, the United States, and indeed around the world.
He was a loving husband, father, and grandfather. He was a kind and gentle man, a real friend to
many, a man with an encyclopedic mind but intolerant of mediocrity. Though he did not criticize
others he gave his honest opinion when asked for critique.
He was demanding of himself even during his 13-year struggle against a crippling illness. When
confronted with the losing battle of his illness he worked diligently to the very end. At last,
overcome by the agony of his final days he talked about his great disappointment: he could no
longer be productive.
Eric did not die, he simply stopped living when he could no longer be of service to his fellow
man. His demise reminds us that we do not control the time we serve, but while Eric served, he
served with excellence and this earned for him true immortality.
A.J. Adam J. Krakowski
Past President, ICPM