

Dr Imrich Sarkany

Born 1923, died 2005

Imrich (Emery) Sarkany was a remarkable man by any standards, who overcame difficulties most of us can barely imagine to build a highly successful career as one of his generation's leading UK dermatologists.

The son of a vet, Imrich Sarkany (or "IS" as we called him at the Royal Free) was born in the small Slovakian town of Svati Jur. His whole life, with its burning ambition to study medicine, was significantly disrupted by the dreadful upheavals of mid-twentieth century Europe created by the unholy twins, Hitler and Stalin. First, he was sent away to safety by his mother before the War, to England, where he in due course enrolled in the Czech brigade of the British Army. Although he did return to Czechoslovakia, it was to a very different country, where he discovered that his whole family had been lost in the Holocaust and that he was very much on his own.

Amazingly, and just a few years before Emery died, he became reacquainted with his home town and the history of its 25 Jewish families, of whom only he and one other had survived. These two created a memorial to the lost Jews of Svati Jur and Emery was able to travel back and see it all for himself. Fortunately he was still well enough to make a speech.

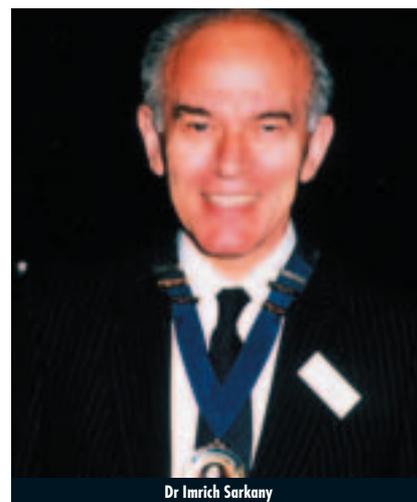
Although Dr Sarkany did begin his medical studies at Charles' University in Prague, with the advent of the repressive Communist regime in Czechoslovakia he slipped out of the country illegally to make a life for himself in the free West.

After an arduous journey he arrived again in England, where an opening at St Thomas's was secured (with the help

of a kind and generous friend) and Emery's career was reignited. His postgraduate training included posts in general medicine and paediatrics, and periods as registrar at St John's, Senior Registrar at Kings and research fellow with Professor Harvey Blank in Miami, with whom – as with many he worked with - he struck up a life-long friendship. In 1959 he was appointed consultant dermatologist at the Royal Free Hospital - where he worked with great distinction for thirty years (with a subsequent additional attachment to the Royal Throat Nose and Ear Hospital) until his retirement.

Emery belonged to the generation of distinguished UK dermatologists who grew up under the influence of Geoffrey Dowling. Accordingly, he had the excellent skills and the enquiring mind that marked out Dr Dowling's disciples. He was a superb diagnostician, always challenging his trainees to come off the fence and commit themselves. His colleague, Professor Charles Calnan was no less outstanding clinically, and no less demanding, and clinical acumen was highly prized among junior dermatologists at the Royal Free during their time in charge! Emery also understood the value of mentorship of the young, and of the influence we all have in encouraging young doctors to come into dermatology. He was very proud of his own disciples and followed their careers with great interest until illness made contacts more or less impossible.

Dowling encouraged continual enquiry too, and Emery was determined to continue to keep his research interest alive. Early on, he was involved in the development of griseofulvin (Lancet



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1958; 11; 1212) and in the correct identification of the organism responsible for erythrasma (JID 1961; 37; 283), as well as playing his part in the development of the clinical science of dermatology in London in the 1950's and beyond. Once established at the Royal Free, therefore, he set up a small laboratory and raised funds for its upkeep until he retired. Here he, selected registrars and Peter Gaylarde, pursued a wide variety of projects, all aimed firmly at attempting to answer real-life clinical questions. Areas that fell under his investigative eye included percutaneous absorption, cutaneous blood flow and oxygen measurement, simulations of psoriasiform change by the application of various compounds, topical corticosteroids, the pathogenesis of lichen planus and serum factors in pretibial myxoedema. He became, without doubt, the world's leading authority on the relationship between the liver and the skin – the subject of his 1987 Prosser-White Oration. He also encouraged his protégés to look out for remarkable clinical cases and phenomena, all of which he insisted on being presented at clinical meetings

and/or published in the journals. In consequence, his publication list runs to nearly 300, with many papers representing unique and important clinical observations. As someone who wrote several papers under his guidance I was always struck by how careful he was both to check that all was as it should be factually, and to ensure that the English was perfect. He loved his adopted language and he made sure that he used it well.

As his career developed he contributed in many areas of dermatology and medicine. He was an examiner for the MRCP. At the RSM, he represented dermatology on the council, was the dermatology section president and served on the scientific and executive committee. He was secretary and president of the Dowling Club, president of the St John's Hospital Dermatology Society, and the first British representative on the European

Union of Medical Specialties, becoming its president in 1986. Above all, I know he was very proud indeed to have been elected president of our association, the BAD, in 1988/9, a year in which I had the honour of acting as his local secretary.

Honours followed too, including honorary membership of dermatological societies in Italy, Norway, New Zealand, South Africa and Germany. He was most tremendously proud of being one of a select band of British members of the American Dermatological Association, being elected in 1977 for his contributions.

In short, Imrich Sarkany served his chosen specialty with enormous distinction but, as you may have gathered, there was more to him than that. He was a tough and challenging boss, with very high standards in personal, ethical and professional matters, but he also had a wry sense of

humour and a ready, beaming smile, and he understood the enormous importance of loyalty.

Finally, he was above all a man of devotion. He truly loved his subject and his profession, gave it his all, and was rightly proud of his achievements and of those of his pupils and colleagues. More importantly, he was completely devoted to Helen throughout a long and wonderfully happy marriage, and to his children: Lizzie (a psychiatrist), Bobby (one of us, of course) and Andy, a lawyer – and their burgeoning families too. As Helen said at his funeral, he ended his life as he began it in: deep in the heart of a loving family.

Although we mourn his passing, we also celebrate a great man and a great career. For me "IS" still IS – in the influence he had on those who met and worked with him.

Dr Robin Graham-Brown – President