



Owsei Temkin

Obituary

OWSEI TEMKIN
1902–2002

The death of Owsei Temkin on 18 July 2002, a few weeks before his hundredth birthday, breaks the last academic link with the founding fathers of medical history. He was born in Minsk on 6 October 1902, but, in 1905, his family, fearing a pogrom, moved to Leipzig, where his father opened a music shop. One of his earliest memories of his new land was of running after his sister, demanding that she should translate into his native Russian everything that was said to her in German. He flourished at school, despite being transferred as an enemy alien during the First World War to the worst school in town. His interests were enormously broad, encompassing philosophy as well as biology and chemistry. When in 1922 he matriculated at Leipzig University, he had difficulty to deciding between faculties, finally choosing medicine, because it would satisfy his enquiries about science while, eventually, permitting him to make a living in a useful manner.

The German university system, however, allowed him to take a variety of courses, in English, philosophy, and zoology as well as medicine. In 1925, he attended the lectures of Henry Sigerist in the history of medicine, and decided to write his thesis, on Hippocratic concepts of disease, under his direction. It was finished in 1927, and, a year later, Temkin qualified to practise medicine. A plan to serve as a resident physician in an old folks' home was blocked by the city authorities. Instead, he was appointed Sigerist's assistant, and began a full-time career in medical history.

When Sigerist was chosen in 1932 to head the first Institute for the History of Medicine in the USA, based at the Johns Hopkins Medical School, he took with him Temkin and his newly married British wife, Lilian. They had met when she was studying in Leipzig for her MA. From then on, Baltimore was to be their home, and their two daughters grew up there.

It was a fortunate choice. Like Leipzig, Baltimore was a smoky town, with a famous university and medical school. More than any other American university, Johns Hopkins was based on strongly German ideals of scholarship, and the newly founded Institute was in part modelled upon what Sigerist, and his predecessor Sudhoff, had achieved in Leipzig. But there were also differences, not least the squelchy summer heat of Baltimore, which compelled Temkin to do some of his reading and writing in the front row of the local cinema, the only air-conditioned building in town.

The Institute was the centre of his academic life for seventy years. Sigerist quickly gathered around him a group of energetic scholars, some, like the classicist Ludwig Edelstein and the anthropologist-historian Erwin Ackerknecht, refugees from the Nazis, others mature physicians, others young Americans of promise. With conferences, meetings, courses, and a journal, the Baltimore Institute quickly became

Obituary

the focus for the academic development of history of medicine in the anglophone world, and Sigerist's own personality, and his ideals of socialized medicine, kept the name of the Institute before the wider public. After the death of Richard Shryock, Sigerist's successor as Director, Temkin directed the Institute from 1958 to 1968, developing its links with other disciplines and with the medical school, and, together with his wife, editing the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* for twenty years.

Retirement brought him leisure to write. Well into his nineties, he came regularly to his office, and even though in his last years confined to a wheelchair, he continued his researches with books brought to his nursing home by his colleagues. His last book was published in 2002, and he submitted his last article to the *Bulletin* less than a month before he died. On my last visit to him, in 2000, he talked not only about the history of medicine, but about his latest reading and the problems of expressing the philosophy of Heidegger in Semitic languages. One of his Baltimore colleagues joked that he was the youngest 99-year-old he had ever met.

Temkin's publications from his Leipzig years already ranged widely, from Antiquity to the eighteenth century. Largely philosophical in tone, they explored the meaning of disease, but beginning with his *Habilitationschrift*, on Hippocratism in Late Antiquity, they also pointed to the major theme of his writings, the understanding of ancient medicine, particularly Galen, and its evolving influence on western medicine over the centuries. His final paper, indeed, offers a solution to a problem he had first identified in 1932.

This was a theme that required all Temkin's linguistic skill, as he examined primary sources in Greek, Latin, Arabic, Hebrew, and many European languages to tease out the history of ideas over the centuries, whether on Hippocrates or, as with his first major book, *The falling sickness* (1945; revised edition 1971), a disease, epilepsy. Above all, it required great clarity of understanding to find a path through often complicated ideas. His *Galenism* (1973), is a little masterpiece, compressing into a few pages of wit and wisdom the research of decades. *Hippocrates in a world of Pagans and Christians* (1991) is a denser study of the transformation of pagan medicine in the increasingly Christian world of Late Antiquity, paying particular interest to changing moral values.

The move to the USA forced Temkin to modify his expectations of his audience. As he once said to me, Des Moines was not interested in the Hippocratic Corpus. The view of European culture when seen from Chesapeake Bay was very different from that from the Mulde. His early attempts to continue his Leipzig teaching were not a success, and, although he and his seminar group produced a fine translation of the *Gynecology* of Soranus (1956), he turned his attention to wider issues. Whether his war service, collating reports on research into diseases, influenced him to turn more to the history of disease is an open question, since *The falling sickness* was certainly envisaged before the war. But there then followed a series of hugely influential papers, looking at the historical development of ideas about sickness, conceptualizing disease, and the meaning of life, many collected in *The double face of Janus* (1977), and "*On second thought*" and *other essays in the history of medicine and science* (2002). His studies of the development of ideas on surgery have formed the starting point for much recent work on that theme.

Obituary

But he considered neither the pursuit of philological accuracy nor the aggregation of fact sufficient by itself. Throughout his life, Temkin insisted that ideas should make a difference to the way in which the medical profession behaves. His *Galenism* is a demand for a doctor to be a thinking doctor; his *Hippocrates* a plea for an ethical component within medicine. In “*On second thought*”, he repeated his credo that reflecting on the past provides an essential perspective for understanding modern medicine. While his insistence on the purity of ideas reflects very much the idealism of Germany in the 1920s, it also informed his total commitment to the history of medicine as part of medical education, even if, as he joked, not having a PhD in the subject would have disqualified him from becoming a modern professor of the history of medicine. His essays reached out to fellow medics, teaching them about the past, and its continual transformations, in order to prompt them to think about their present situation. While he welcomed the wider audience for medical history among historians, he considered that the medical historian’s first role was to bring medical history to the medical professions.

He received many honours—the Welch Medal and the Sarton Prize, election to the American Philosophical Society, the National Academy of Sciences, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences among them—but he remained modest, kind and courteous, even in his criticism. Temkin was always eager to discover what young scholars were doing, in medicine and in history. My first meeting with him, in the early 1970s, was arranged by him to find out why an unknown Cambridge scholar should be interested in Galen. Similarly, during his brief stay at the 1979 Galen conference, he made a particular point of talking to all the participants, especially the young, to find out their interests, whether in Pre-Socratic philosophy, Galen, or topics far more recent. His presence at a Baltimore seminar, ear cocked and with a gentle but quizzical expression on his face, was a challenge, and a compliment, to any speaker. Even in his last years, after the death of his wife in 1992, few went away from his room without being stimulated to new thoughts.

Galen claimed that the best doctor was a philosopher, whether or not he knew it. In his own life Owsei Temkin pursued and put into practice the implications of that claim.

Vivian Nutton