

Max Thorek

(1880-1960)

Max Thorek was a surgeon and teacher who benefited the lives of his many patients, students, and colleagues. He not only taught doctors to be better surgeons, but his inquiries and experiments led to profound developments in many different areas of surgery, especially in internal medicine.

Max Thorek was born March 10, 1880 to a Jewish family in the Tatra Mountains of Hungary. His exposure to medicine began early in life, for his parents, Isaac Thorek and Sarah Mahler, were both physicians. As he states in his autobiography:

Aesculapius had marked me for his own before I was out of the cradle. His staff and twined serpents were the aegis of our home, and his healing art was practiced by both my parents. Into our tiny cottage, along the path that led from the cobbled street, came an endless stream of visitors-Jew, Catholic, Protestant, Turk, Magyar, Tartár, Greek, Bulgarian, Rumanian, Russian - ready to share our food, including those Hungarian cabbage pastries "*kaposztásrétes*"-the thought of which can make my mouth water even today-but even more ready to talk. It seemed to me that there was always discussion going on in our home, before the fire on winter evenings, in the flower-sweet garden in the summer.¹

Thorek received his preliminary education in Budapest. The murder of his brother during a pogrom that occurred in the spring of 1897 persuaded his family to leave Hungary. They immigrated to the United States in 1898, and settled in Chicago.

Thorek earned money as a violinist while he attended the University of Chicago. Although he had no prior knowledge of the snare drum, he talked an administrator at the University of

Chicago into granting him a full scholarship as a drummer for the University band. Max practiced hard all summer to learn that instrument. The University administrator knew Thorek was not good with the instrument, but admired his dedication. Thorek was thus able to enter Rush Medical College in the fall of 1900, which was then affiliated with the University of Chicago.²

Thorek received his M.D. from Rush in 1904 and served an internship at the Marcy Home on Maxwell Street, in the middle of the poverty-stricken ghetto. He married Fannie Ungar in 1905, and then established his own practice. He was an associate in gynecology at the West Side Dispensary from 1906 to 1910. In 1914 he joined the consulting staff at Cook County Hospital.

Thorek's dream for becoming a general surgeon finally became realized when Dr. Sol Greenspahn helped fund the American Hospital in 1911 on the West Side. The hospital soon moved into its own building on the North Side. Thorek became president of the board of trustees and surgeon in Chief in 1912. In 1975, the American Hospital was renamed after Thorek.

Throughout his career Thorek remained dedicated to improving knowledge in the medical field. He served as a professor of clinical surgery at the Cook County Graduate School of Medicine from 1934-1960. Thorek was primarily known for his innovative operation for removing the gallbladder. His refinements to operations on the breast and abdomen improved plastic surgery, and his book *Plastic Surgery of the Breast and Abdominal Walls* helped make plastic surgery a respectable part of medicine.

Through his writings, Thorek was a prolific contributor to American, German, French, and Italian medical journals.³ He also wrote numerous books, including *Surgery of the Brain and Spinal Cord* in 1912, *The Human Testis and Its Diseases* in 1924, *Surgical Errors and Safeguards* in 1933, and *Thorek's Illustrated Surgical Technic* in 1935. His autobiography *A Surgeon's World* is a descriptive and well written account of his life experiences growing up with a family of doctors in Hungary, witnessing anti-Jewish violent pogroms, immigrating to Chicago, and education and development as a doctor.

Thorek often traveled abroad and became a member of many medical organizations. He received an honorary LL.D. degree from Lincoln Memorial University and an Honorary Sc.D. degree from Iowa Wesleyan College. He was a member of the American Medical Association, National Academy of Medicine of Columbia, the American College of Gastroenterology, Internal College of Anesthetists, and many more. He was instrumental in founding the International College of Surgeons in Geneva, Switzerland in 1935. His interests, however, were not limited to the medical profession. He played violin for the Chicago Business Men's Orchestra, and helped fund the American Physician's Art Association.⁴ Thorek also had a valuable collection of rare photographs, and was internationally known as a photographer.⁵ His photographs are part of the permanent collection of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D. C., he and has received many awards for his work in photography. Thorek died in Chicago on January 25, 1960.

¹ Max Thorek, *A Surgeon's World; An Autobiography* (New York: Somerset Books, 1943); 15.

² John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes, eds., *American National Biography* v. 21 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 603.

³ *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* v. 48 (New York: James T. White and Company, 1965), 255.

⁴ Garraty and Carnes, *American National Biography*, 604.

⁵ *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, 256.