R. Wartenberg, Neurologist and Self-Ordained Critic

A law unto himself, Robert Wartenberg was a lively mixture of diverse characteristics. He was warm, kindly, egotistical, vain, a devoted friend, a feared adversary, and as loud in praise as he was vehement in criticism. He had a special aversion to mediocrity.

I can readily recall Wartenberg on a typical visit to our home for dinner. He proceeded at once to the bookshelves, carrying on conversation while nervously, yet earnestly, removing one book on neurology after another, to page through. "That dumb dope," he would say with impish laughter. "Look at the errors on this page! Why didn't he send me his manuscript before it went to press, as the others have been doing? The entire stock of this edition should be reduced to ashes." Or, in glancing through another book, he would charge that the author had not read a reference alluded to: "No, the description of Lasègue's sign wasn't published by Lasègue but by his pupil Forst." Or, again: "How stupid can a man get? I wrote a review of that book recently, and if I had told all the truth, the British would have withdrawn their ambassador from Washington."

At dinner, his wife, Isabelle, Baroness von Sazenhofen (of Freiburg, Germany), as gay and witty as he, would help him embellish recent Wartenberg exploits. He would tell, for instance, of an acrimonious letter he had written to the Surgeon General on the term *neuropsychiatry,* which was still in use in the armed services, then tell of the evasive reply, while she would elaborate on her husband's dislike of this bastard term, saying that neurology is not a form of psychiatry but that each is a separate discipline, able to care for itself.

Wartenberg also enjoyed poking fun at himself, at his foibles, at his totally bald head. He was eternally ebullient and alarmingly candid. "Ach!" he would say in his gutteral voice, "no von could be more vain than I," and he would then proceed to relate his successes with his students, to whom he referred as "my old teachers." It is true that no faculty member at the University of California at San Francisco—where he held forth from 1936 until his death on 16 November 1956, at the age of 69—was more popular with the students than he, and that no other lectures were more enthusiastically attended. He had the faculty of entertaining not only the audience but also the patients who were brought before him. On appropriate occasion he would even allude to the latest antics of his dachshunds or his goldfish. He was an actor and looked the part, with a build, stance, and vigor that recalled Mussolini in his better days. But there the comparison ends, for, as his biographer, Francis Schiller, wrote, "his . . . approach . . . was completely devoid of pomposity and full of jocular, common sense philosophy."

When Wartenberg came to San Francisco he was already in his prime. From the ancient Lithuanian town of Grodno, where he was born in 1887, he advanced through the universities of Kiel, München, Freiburg, and Rostock, to become assistant to such distinguished neurologists as Cassirer (Berlin), Nonne (Hamburg), and Foerster (Breslau). In 1933 he received a professorial post at the University of Freiburg. At the University of California he started once more at the bottom of the ladder and eventually (1952) became clinical professor of neurology; in 1954 he was made professor emeritus.

His perspicacity in all matters neurological won him membership on the editorial boards of eight journals, and the esteem he had earned internationally brought him, in 1952, the recognition most prized by a German professor—a *Festschrift*—which contained no less than 59 articles by 75 authors. An addict to hyperbole, he wrote of this tribute: "This is a super-duper-ultracolossal-mammoth volume. It is immoral, illegal, and ego-fattening to accept this attention. I will soon be committed to a state institution with the diagnosis amentia, with ideas of grandeur."

If Wartenberg's chief scientific contribution could be epitomized, I would say that it consisted of clarifying the principles of diagnosis of neurological diseases by sweeping away smothering complexities and ambiguities. Students and physicians at large could readily grasp the core of neurological examination after Wartenberg had stripped it of its encumbrances and soporific qualities. More life was thus brought into clinical neurology.

Wartenberg was master of the reflex hammer. Of his 158 sallies into the world of literature, perhaps the most outstanding was his book *Examination of Reflexes,* which was translated into seven languages. Here eponyms fell right and left as he supplanted them with anatomical terms that had real meaning. Ruthlessly, he eliminated many reflexes that had no significance. New ones of his own, he added.

An equally successful volume was *Diagnostic Tests in Neurology.* This work, with its clipped phrases and telegraphic style (Wartenberg trademarks), brought clinical neurology into the ken of any inquiring physician. Here one finds fresh observations as well as some which date back many years—for example, on ways of uncovering extrapyramidal disturbances resulting from the epidemic encephalitis which occurred in the wake of World War I. Furthermore, in this book he dwells on a theme which was one of his fortes: that some neurological diseases, such as facial hemiatrophy, are not of lower motor neuron origin, as had been alleged, but are due to alterations in upper motor neurons. He also brings harmony into the relation of "release" to the development of associated movements. Wartenberg's final contribution, on neuritis and neuralgia, which wore away his health and was completed 2 hours before his coronaries and cerebral vessels gave way, is ready for the press. It is as scholarly as the rest, although all may not agree with its emphasis on infection as a causative factor.

No refugee from Nazism who reached these shores adopted more quickly than Wartenberg the American way of life and thought—and the vernacular. No one in his time was a greater champion of the cause of neurology.

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