

Felix T. Rapaport, MD

TO UNDERSTAND Felix Rapaport, a man who worked until the day of his death—April 12, 2001—from coronary artery disease, one must know the child. Felix was a flower blown by the winds of the most terrible and magical century in human history. His nomadic life began idyllically on September 27, 1929. Pursued by the threat of genocide, his family moved from Munich to Paris in 1935. When France fell to the Germans, the Rapaport family found itself literally at sea, unable to find a port of disembarkation until the Dominican Republic opened its doors. Displaying a quality of character that would sustain him throughout life, Felix interpreted the stay in Central America as a fortunate opportunity to learn his third language. The Rapaport journey then turned north to New York City, Stuyvesant High School, and graduation magna cum laude from New York University (NYU) undergraduate school (1951) and medical school (1954).

As a fourth-year medical student, Rapaport nearly died of hepatitis. As he had done before, Rapaport turned potential tragedy into triumph, aided by Bellevue Hospital plastic surgeon John Converse, who ignited Rapaport's interest in the still-embryonic field of transplantation. Over the next decade, their joint activities with the New York Academy of Sciences established the mold from which the Transplantation Society was struck. Fully recovered from the hepatitis, Rapaport served as an officer in the US Navy and began his long odyssey as a peerless educator, scientist, and transplant surgeon. After training in the Department of Sur-

gery at NYU (1958-1962) and serving as a faculty member (1963-1977), he founded the transplantation program at Stony Brook University Hospital (Long Island) and sustained it until his retirement in 1999.

In 1998, Felix Rapaport won the Medawar Prize, the highest distinction of the international Transplantation Society. His receipt of the prize, named for Sir Peter Medawar, the father of modern transplantation immunology, had special meaning because Felix was himself a professional father of sorts. He served the Transplantation Society as Founding Secretary, Past President, and continuous council member for 35 years and as founder and editor for 33 years of the journal *Transplantation Proceedings*.

Rapaport's influence on transplantation stemmed equally from his scientific contributions. Between 1958 and 1962, he reported the first systematic study of skin allograft rejection in humans, which suggested the possible existence of tissue types in man. These studies in New York and subsequent ones in Paris with Jean Dausset culminated in definition of the dog (DLA) and human (HLA) leukocyte antigen system and defined "the laws of transplantation in both species." When George D. Snell, Jean Dausset, and Baruch Benacerraf received the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1980, Dausset remarked that equal credit for his discovery of human tissue antigens should go to Rapaport. Rapaport's other first-time observations included the tolerogenic qualities of organ allografts; the loss of cellular immunity with malignant disease, severe trauma, and burns; the ge-



netic control and sex linkage of host resistance to thermal and radiation injury; and cross-reactivity between bacterial and histocompatibility antigens.

Although full of honors at the end, Felix Rapaport considered that his most successful transplantation procedures consisted of the donation of half of their genes to 5 vital members of the next generation to whom the other half was given by Margaret, his equal partner in an enduring marriage. The children and Margaret survive him.

Thomas E. Starzl, MD, PhD
University of Pittsburgh
School of Medicine
Pittsburgh, Pa

Obituaries Section Editor: Roxanne K. Young, Associate Editor.