

Historia Magistra Vitae – History is the Master – Teacher of our Life Alexander S. Nadas: My Teacher and Friend (1913 – 2000)

Who would not know – in my specialty of Pediatric Cardiology – the names of Robert Gross of Boston, Helen Taussig, Alfred Blalock and Vivien Thomas of Baltimore, the elegant James DuShane of Mayo Clinic, the humane Dan MacNamara of Texas and the serious John Keith of Toronto and last, but not least, Alex S. Nadas of Boston. What a round table association of unique physicians, founders of our specialty. I was lucky to meet and work with most of them except Alfred Blalock and John Keith.

Alexander S. Nadas was the second pivotal teacher in my medical career after Prof. Irene Jakubcova. He was also my mentor and lifelong friend (**Figure 1**).

Born in Budapest, Hungary, he was the only son of a journalist, who founded a leftist weekly in 1909. Printed on its masthead was a “courier or runner”, which emblem was also imprinted as a crest-mark on all the books of Dr. A. S. Nadas. His mother had a milliner’s saloon on the elegant Váci street in the center of Budapest, and later a similar saloon on Madison Avenue in New York City.

The young Nadas studied medicine at the I. Semmelweis University in Budapest, Hungary. At the time of his graduation in 1938, under threat of fascism, a political exodus to the west was started by young physicians and scientists.

In the west Nadas spent his first six months in London under the patronage of the famous Earl H. Wood: a world-renowned cardiologist. It seems the seeds of his interest were planted here. He also spent a year in Geneva studying pathology. His mother advised him to be a cosmetic doctor.

The work with Earl H. Wood had a deciding role in his medical fermentation and Dr. Wood as a scientist and a human being remained his lifelong idol, both as a scientist and human being.

At this time in the US, Robert Gross ligated the first Ductus Arteriosus. Nobody guessed then that these two men would establish the Boston school of Pediatric Cardiology.

The young Nadas left London and sailed across the ocean toward New York. His father was very happy that his wish to see his son become a doctor in the US would be realized.

This memorable voyage was “laced” with a few memorable events which impacted the young doctor’s life. The young Nadas had saved some money in London and during his voyage he entrusted it to a fellow American traveler whom he befriended on board. He asked his friend to hold onto his money until they had passed the emigration and custom authorities. But he got a terrible shock when his friend was nowhere to be seen after they landed in New York.

After a few days in his seedy hotel, he learned that somebody was looking for him! Who the hell is looking for me, when I don’t know anybody here? To his surprise the grinning friend from the boat showed up and passed him his wallet with his money. These Americans are really weird! How the hell could he find me here in this Godforsaken place? mused the young Nadas.

As a foreign medical graduate the young Nadas soon learned that America did not roll out the red carpet for him. When he was later asked what a young emigrant doctor could expect when he or she was aspiring to enter the American medical field, he described a rather gloomy picture of struggle and underlined the absolute necessity of mastering the English language. One had to start with small steps and expectations and slowly but doggedly pursue one’s goal.

He started out as an Intern in Cleveland, and continued as a Resident in Detroit under the leadership of prof. Clement Smith, who turned out to be his longtime mentor and patron.

On a hot night in 1942 (there was no air-conditioning) Dr. C. Smith surprised Alex when he was in charge of the whole Infants’ ward, while other Residents slept. Alex, balding head and brow sweating, stood before his boss, who suddenly asked him: how do you feel Alex? Like a God (!) was the emphatic answer.

Eventually he ended up as a GP at a Catholic Hospital in Greenfield Mass. for three years. Here he met the love of his life, Elisabeth McCleren, a southern belle. He was dismissed from the hospital because he was an advocate of abortion for women.

Eventually, in 1949, he was invited by Prof. Charles Janeway to the Children’s Hospital Medical Center in Boston, where he found his “home”.

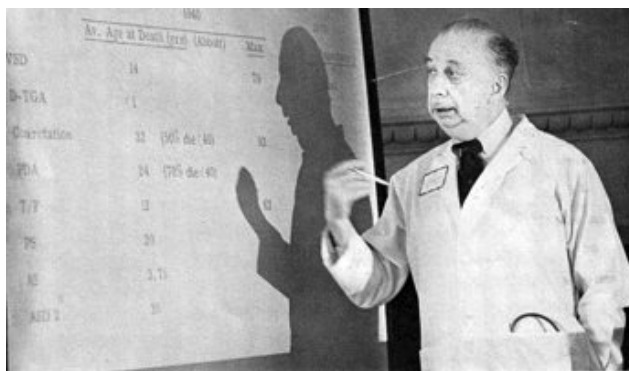


Figure 1 Dr. Alexander S. Nadas



Figure 2 Cardiac Fellows in 1970 at the Children's Hospital Medical Center. The Author is in the second row, the third from the right.

Dr. Nadas accepted this phenomenal offer at 36, to establish the foundation of Pediatric Cardiology, despite a miserable salary, insufficient space and the financial limitation of the Division. Nadas took on this challenge and its potential risk, when nobody could fathom his unprecedented success under such meagre circumstances.

Here, right from the beginning, Nadas showed his personal and professional strength and character, when with an unprecedented effort he charged into the uncharted territory of Pediatric Cardiology. He always chose his young associates wisely, whereby they followed him toward a common goal.

But he distanced himself from everything Hungarian and ran as far as he could from his past. He never uttered a single word in Hungarian, his mother tongue.

In the 50s, the years seemed rather "elementary". It seemed that everything that was important to know now in cardiology was that, for a child with cyanotic heart disease one should go to Baltimore, and with a non-cyanotic one, to go to Boston. The achievements of Gross, Taussig and Blalock were the first harbingers of treatments that would be available for these children with congenital heart disease. At this time the witty Nadas would quip that while Gross was able to close a ductus, Blalock was able to open it: and so the total number of the ductae remained unchanged.

The time of cardiac catheterizations had arrived, with Cournand and Richards receiving the Nobel Prize, and with Janet Baldwin at Columbia University introducing this method into clinical practice. Janet switched to Boston rather soon.

Meantime Helen Taussig in Baltimore, with the help of fluoroscopy only, was miraculously successful in her diagnostic endeavors: in Cuba Castelanous was introducing angiocardiology and in Canada Gibbon experimented with a heart-lung machine.

During this time Nadas spent a year at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital with Samuel A. Levine to boost his skills in auscultation. At the same time Nadas established the norms of ECG in children, related to age, and in the first fifteen years Nadas evaluated all the ECG tracings of the Department alone. Nadas was also a master in auscultations and he examined every child before catheterization. All his findings were noted on special pink slips, which were correlated with the findings after the catheterization.

This was the way cardiology was practiced then!

Together with Maurice Rapaport, he developed a new stethoscope based on physical findings. A copy of this stethoscope is still hanging in my office. Their book "Sounds and Murmurs" had three editions in 1957, 1962, 1972: worthwhile reading even today.

Nadas now introduced weekly diagnostic conferences before every child's surgery, where all the relevant findings were presented to the surgeons present. In these meetings his caustic humor was well known. As you know, he joked at these meetings: "I don't get any stomach ulcers, rather I give them to others!" These were always stimulating exciting events, where nobody was bored or ever slept.

His Grand Rounds were well known and provocative. As he had fellows from every part of the world, he did not forget to joke: Its like the United Nations here, but under my leadership it must be run better! Division No. 35, on the seventh floor, where I regularly was in service, was led by Dr. Nadas for many years and he was frequently our nightly visitor.

Following in the footsteps of his father, D. Nadas was an excellent writer and stylist, yet he never lost his heavy Hungarian accent and his European social grace. An anecdote recounted by a visiting professor was that, as Dr. Nadas warmly welcomed a lady doctor, she declared with a thrill "what a charming man Alex is, and how continental".

Under his "baton" he trained over 150 Fellows from over whole world. Only two were from behind the Iron Curtain and Eastern Europe: Dr. Jerzy Swidersky from Poland and myself from Slovakia (**Figure 2**).

In the following years Nadas published 222 peer-reviewed articles, addressing all the individual lesions of congenital heart diseases, and his ideas led to systematic studies of many of them such as ASD, TGA and HLH, as well as arrhythmias in children. His coauthors were the future leaders in USA, Canada, Europe, Australia and South America. He was the godfather of many of us.

In the 60s, he initiated the "National History Studies" of VSD, PS and As. Together with Abraham Rudolph he established a Cardiac Catheterization Lab, even though he was famous for his lack of dexterity. During his studies, it was not rare to find some dried blood markings on the ceiling of the Lab.

Additionally, his studies on Respiratory Distress Syndrome with Mary Ellen Awery were remarkable.

He established the New England Regional Infant Program with its Registry, integrated for critically ill newborns. As a consequence, the infant mortality fell twenty percent.

In the 70s he developed the conditions for the new discipline of Echocardiography and three of his Fellows, Roberta Williams, Fred Bierman and Steven Sanders, became world-leading authorities.

His years-long association with Robert Gross and Aldo Castaneda brought Pediatric Cardiology to its peak at the time of his retirement in 1984.

Dr. Nadas remained a Consultant of the Center and in his honor the Alexander S. Nadas Professorship was established.

He had a unique sense in choosing the right people for the right problem. He could convince people that under his leadership an optimal solution to a problem would be found.

Dr. Nadas lived very frugally with his wife Elisabeth, who loved sparkling green frocks. At a party if anybody was dressed in green, it was Elisabeth. Dr. Nadas had three children. I met Nancy, his daughter, a talented producer of the renowned "Mr. Rogers Neighborhood for children".

In 1969, I had the privilege to be invited for lunch at his relatively small house with my family. As a typical Eastern European "silly-billy" of the times, it crossed my mind that, well, probably he did not earn too much! And you know what? Actually, I was very close to the truth.

My professional contact with Dr. Nadas was absolutely serendipitous. In 1960 an American pediatrician – out of the blue – dropped into our Institution for Children with Heart Disease, where I was in charge. I did not know that she was from the Beth Israel Hospital in Boston, not far from the Children's Hospital. She toured our Institution (in a country behind the Iron Curtain) and she was surprised by the well-equipped institution and flabbergasted to see the Master Stress Test set up in it. During our conversation, she probed me to find out whether I would be interested to study in Boston under the stewardship of Dr. Nadas, her friend. The answer was an obviously affirmative, although the chances for me were politically zero as I was not a member of the Communist Party.

I did not hear from her for five years, but in 1965 a surprise invitation for a Fellowship came in an envelope marked with the Harvard crest. I had to pass entrance exams for the US and eventually I made it to Boston after I left my country in 1968, following the invasion of the Red Army in Czechoslovakia.

At first glance Dr. Nadas made the seeming impression of a morose man, but actually he was a very human and understanding person.

At the beginning of my Fellowship, for me as an emigre with two small children, Dr. Nadas increased my yearly salary by 1.000 dollars. Altogether my yearly salary was 7.000 dollars, but I was at Harvard!

In the second year of my Fellowship a strange coincidence almost ruined my career. I was having my lunch in the cafeteria when a Senior from the Department of Psychiatry unexpected-

ly joined me. Taking note of his name tag, it occurred to me that he was of Hungarian Jewish origin, who probably escaped his country after the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. He was looking at my name tag askance and went on to ask me about my origins, where upon I gave him a straight forward answer.

A few days later the secretary of the boss, Peggy, called me saying: "Zoltan, Dr. Nadas wants to see you". I interrupted my work and reported to Dr. Nadas. In his office he offered me a seat and behind his large working desk he asked me straight: Tell me Zoltan, how is it that your name is identical to that of a Hungarian Congressman who in the forties was a leading member of the Hungarian Fascist Arrow-Cross party? In my surprise I froze, but kept my composure. We stared at each other and neither of us blinked. I then explained to him, that I had lived all my life in Eastern Slovakia and in the forties I was a young teenager. Our family had nothing to do with what happened in Budapest. Dr. Nadas's glance softened and then he told me: O.K. Zoltan, go and do your job. He really was a "mensch".

During the third year of my training I learned about a Fellow, formerly a captain of the US Army, who was dismissed from further training. Dr. Nadas knew that in some way he owed us an explanation for this action. Eventually, he found a moment to meet with us and he explained to us, the Fellows: you know, "character is our badge," we are defined by our deeds and actions we do when nobody is watching us! The doctor who was dismissed had unfortunately behaved in a way unbecoming for a doctor in my Department. This of course reflected on his personal character as to what kind of human being he really was.

Personal character – he mused – reflects on our personal integrity as a continuum of our professional and personal trajectory in life, which leads to our personal reputation and our professional badge of honor.

Dr. Nadas was an exemplary individual who was a role model and custodian of personal and professional values. Everybody needs his own "Nadas", his idol! Every professor and teacher becomes such a role model whether they like it or not, and their personal or professional conduct and behavior are direct reflections of who they are.

There is a high degree of correlation, indicating that the best scientists and professors who have really achieved something substantial in medicine are mostly highly ethical people with impeccable character, whose work and private life are their lifelong and shining badge. We should end with the hope that in Slovakia and at this Institution of DKC, the ideas of Dr. Alexander S. Nadas will remain a beacon to those following in his footsteps, and that he will remain a role model worthwhile to follow.

Prof. Zoltan G. Mesko, M.D, FAAC, FAPP

These reminiscences were recalled during the ninetieth birthday of the author.