

Academician Professor Zeno Popovici, MD

“Even at setting, the sun is still the sun” (Goethe)

He was born in Reșița on February 14, 1933. It is said that people born in February are looking for an original way that distinguishes them from the rest: “There are men and classes of men that stand above the common herd” (R.L. Stevenson).

His father, doctor John Popovici, was the manager and surgeon of the Central House Hospital in Reșița for 20 years.

He attended the Carol Davila Faculty of Medicine in Bucharest, which he graduated in 1958, taking an examination to be an intern (1959) and then specialist physician (1962) and primary surgeon (1969) at the Floreasca Emergency Hospital in Bucharest for 20 years, being Lecturer (1975), obtaining the title of PhD in Medical Sciences in 1969.

Forced by the communist regime, because he was not a party member, he moved to Sibiu. It was in Sibiu, where he became chief of the Surgery Clinic I - General Surgery and Thoracic Surgery in 1986. Subsequently, in 1995 he became University Professor of the Victor Papilian Faculty of Medicine in Sibiu.

As Zeno Popovici himself wrote in the autobiographical novel “From the Romanian Reșița to Tokyo”, the most important opportunity he benefited from was the \$ 10,000 scholarship of the International Society for Diseases of the Esophagus in Japan in 1988. There, under the guidance of Professor Teruo Kakegawa at Kurume High School of Medicine, he studied esophageal surgery, microsurgery and esophageal lymphodissection.



In the following years, he was invited to hold conferences in England, taking a tour of England from Manchester-Birmingham-Edinburgh-Glasgow to Dundee, which was the final point (November 7-21, 1991).

Two other scholarships followed, in Vienna with microsurgery specialization and, in Lion under the leadership of Professor Lombard-Plated specializing in digestive emergency surgery within the French Association of Surgery.

In 1991, with the involvement of Academician Professor Zeno Popovici, the "Overseas" British Congress was held in Sibiu. On this occasion, he met Professor Alfredo Cuschieri MD, Sir Prof. Miles Irving and John Bancewicz MD. At that time, doctor Alfredo Cuschieri invited Professor Zeno Popovici to co-write the chapter "Pharyngealoesophageal reconstruction with laryngeal preservation after severe caustic injury to the pharynx and esophagus" within the "Surgery of Oesophagus" monograph.

As a result of his recognition of pharyngo-esophageal surgery expert, in 1996 Professor Tom R. DeMeester invited him to the University of Southern California (USC) to hold a conference on this subject. At that time, he was awarded the title of world expert in pharynx surgery and became a member of the New York Academy of Sciences.

It was also in 1996, when he became a member of the Romanian Academy of Medical Sciences.

In 1999, he became a member of the National Academy of Surgery in Paris - Membre associe etranger – and on this occasion, he held a plenary conference on post-caustic pharyngo-esophageal stenosis and total reconstruction of the pharynx by ileo-colon transposition. Two years later, in 2001 he was again invited by Professor J. Moreaux to hold a conference at the National Academy of Surgery in Paris, this time with the topic - Surgical Management of Post-caustic Gastric Stenoses.

In 2013, he wrote a last successful chapter on the reconstruction of the esophagus by the interposition of the colon in Vijay P. Khatri's Atlas of Advanced Operative Surgery, whom

he met when this one arrived in Bucharest, being invited by Professor Irinel Popescu MD, within the Romanian Academy of Medical Sciences.

He left behind an important statistics in esophageal surgery, of which some elements were recognized worldwide:

- 358 esophagoplasties - the largest series in the world performed by a single surgeon - chemical burns in the pharynx, esophagus and stomach;
- original classification of left colon vascularization in view of esophagoplasty (J. Chir. Paris, 1997, 113)
- original procedures of esophagoplasty - Super long colonic graft; Continuous colic loop; Preservation of distal marginal artery; Primary ligation of colic arteries; Rectocoloesophagoplasty; ileocecoesophagoplasty with long ileal loop, ileoesophagoplasty (personal arrangements, "box resection"); Original classification of pharyngoplasty; double pharyngoplasts en Y, "vera and spuria"; transmandibular pharyngoplasty etc.;
- 145 anastomoses with pharynx and 81 pharyngeal reconstructions for benign caustic lesions, with colon, ileum, jejunus, skin and musculo-cutaneous flaps;
- 99 total or partial resections of oro- and hypo-pharynx followed by various reconstructions;
- 28 mediastinal tracheostomes - procedure introduced in our country by Professor Zeno Popovici

He published 236 articles in Romania, 45 articles were published abroad in ISI quoted journals; he wrote 13 books published in the country and abroad and held 18 conferences as visiting professor in Japan, Italy, Israel, Austria, France, Great Britain, USA, Brazil; he made 128 films with surgical techniques, winning even a prize at the Badajoz Film Festival, Spain, 1990.

He was a man with an impressive amount of knowledge, tough but fair, an exceptional surgeon with national recognition but above all, international. Unfortunately, locally, the

pride and wickedness of those around him affected his reputation.

When I met him I was a student in the third year and I was impressed from the first moment by the courses he held, courses that I then repeatedly rehearsed during the period when I was an intern, graduate assistant, assistant professor. He always spoke freely, and every time he brought new, up-to-date information.

I have been impressed by many things at him, first of all, his tenacity, ambition and resilience. He never gave up. At that time, the surgeries lasted between 8 and 12 hours. He made reconstructions of esophagus with left, right, transversal iso and ansio-peristaltic colon, total pharyngolaryngectomy, with mediastinal tracheostomy and neck dissection. All operations were filmed and he used to insist on intraoperative photos. Also, at the end of each surgery, he analyzed all the difficult intraoperative moments and sketched the operation no matter how tired he was.

He used to sleep in the hospital ... and not just for the 8-9 on-call shifts a month he had, but in the rest of the days as well, because in the evening, when he finished the surgeries, he wrote articles or books until late at night. Into this infernal schedule, he used to drag us, the four graduate assistants, later on assis-

tant professors. We were exhausted and hated him for the resistance he had.

He usually found his strength and balance in the Baths of Ocna Sibiului. Whenever he had a free hour, in the evening or in the morning, regardless of time or season, he went to Ocna Sibiului and swam for 30 minutes in salt water. We took him there in turn and froze on the edge of the lake at -15-20 degrees Celsius while he broke the ice with a small ax and swam under our horrified looks.

Retired much too early from the hospital, from all the materials gathered throughout his career, he built his masterpiece, the Atlas of pharynx reconstruction, a 658-page large-format book, colored with 1249 intraoperative pictures and various sketches, reviewed by Paul Orsoni Paris), Alfredo Cuschieri (University of Dundee, UK), Tom R. DeMeester (Los Angeles) and Watts R. Webb (Tulane University Medical Center, New Orleans, Louisiana).

He passed away on 03.02.2018 ...

“You do not have to mourn for me, but to forget me, as everyone else will forget me, for this is the law of life” a fragment from the Book of San Michele - Axel Munthe - his favorite novel.

Associate Professor, Ciprian Tănăsescu MD, PhD
Professor Dan Sabău, MD, PhD

“Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu,
Faculty of Medicine, IIIrd Department