

Dr. Peter Kornfeld, 81, researched rare disease

SPENT LAST 15 YEARS SHARING HIS EXPERTISE AT STANFORD HOSPITAL

By Lisa M. Krieger
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Dr. Peter Kornfeld, who as a boy engineered the escape of his family from Nazi-occupied Vienna and then dedicated the rest of his life to medical research, teaching and patient care, died at Stanford University Hospital on Feb. 2. He was 81.

Dr. Kornfeld, a Portola Valley resident, spent most of his career at New York City's Mount Sinai Hospital as a member of a leading team of doctors studying the rare but serious autoimmune disease called myasthenia gravis.

Upon retiring to California in 1992, he volunteered to be an attending physician at Stanford University Hospital and spent the next 15 years sharing his knowledge and experience, even as he continued learning.

"Medicine was one of the major satisfactions in his life," said Stanford cardiologist Mark Perloth, a friend who met Dr. Kornfeld while directing Stanford's medical training program. "He made major contributions to the understanding and successful treatment of patients" with myasthenia gravis, Perloth said.

After Dr. Kornfeld's retirement, and despite recent ill health, he continued to join staff rounds, offering his insights and perspective on clinical problems, Perloth said.

Dr. Kornfeld was born in Vienna, Austria, to a middle-class family, the child of a sales manager and milliner. But Austria was annexed by Germany, and with the pogrom of Nov. 9 and 10, 1938, known as Kristallnacht or the Night of Broken Glass, German and Austrian Nazis burned and destroyed the family's synagogue. Shortly thereafter, the young Kornfeld and other Jewish children were banned from attending public school.

His father was from Czechoslovakia and his mother was from Poland, but neither nation offered refuge for persecuted Jews. So the 13-year-old boy sought help for his family.

"At the embassies, he saw lines for people trying to get visas -- and realized that the lines were shortest for the U.S., Australia and Great Britain," said his daughter, Jane Bessin.

Once inside the embassies, he hastily borrowed telephone books and looked up other Kornfelds in London, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Sydney. From a list of names -- none of them relations -- he wrote 100 letters, requesting sponsorship for his family. He dropped each letter into a different mailbox, so as not to raise Nazi suspicions.

Finally, on the eve of his departure to Holland on the Kindertransport for Jewish children, two answers arrived in the mail -- one from New York. His family quickly arrived in the United States with only the clothes they were wearing -- which for him included lederhosen and a winter coat -- in the heat of August 1939.

One of his first jobs in the United States, at the age of 15, was creating his own parking lot and parking cars for those attending the U.S. Open tennis tournament at Forest Hills, N.Y. -- even though the property did not belong to him, Bessin said with a laugh.

"He roped off his own area and charged for parking, giving the proceeds to his immigrant parents, who desperately needed the money," she said.

Four years later, he finished high school and enlisted in the U.S. Army. There, he escaped death yet again. The night before his platoon was shipped to the Pacific theater, he contracted scarlet fever and was forced to stay behind. His platoon came under assault and few men returned.

While serving in the Army, Dr. Kornfeld took a test that matched him to a future career in history. Instead, inspired by military medics, he decided to study medicine.

Despite being a newcomer to the country and culture, he graduated first and 10th in his classes at the University of Buffalo and at Columbia University Medical School, respectively.

The next three decades were devoted to the little-

known disease called myasthenia gravis. As a member of a leading research team, he helped identify the underlying pathological mechanics of the disease and established several methods of therapy.

From 1972 to 1987, he was associate chief of the Myasthenia Gravis Clinic at Mount Sinai, contributing to more than 45 articles in scientific journals and pioneering new approaches to treatment.

The condition, while uncommon, can be severe. It is a chronic autoimmune neuromuscular disease, meaning that the body's own immune system, which is supposed to protect against foreign organisms, mistakenly attacks itself.

Myasthenia gravis is caused by a defect in the transmission of nerve impulses to muscles, causing weakness of the voluntary muscles of the body, such as those that control eye and eyelid movement, facial expression, chewing, talking and swallowing. It occurs when antibodies block or destroy the receptors for a neurotransmitter, preventing muscle contraction from occurring.

After retirement he voluntarily took his medical specialty boards, becoming re-certified and gaining familiarity with the latest breakthroughs in his field. After joining Stanford as an adjunct faculty member, he volunteered for 15 years on hospital wards, teaching students and overseeing the care of patients.

In addition to his medical work, Dr. Kornfeld was an avid newspaper reader and a community volunteer who often directed people to the medical care they needed.

He was also an avid soccer fan. In 1964, with three other doctors from Europe and South America, he helped create and coach the East-Coast-based program of the American Youth Soccer Organization.

"My dad may have had two left feet, but he knew how to organize and get things done," Bessin said. The family remembers him as "a take-charge guy with a big heart," Bessin said. Although kindly, with a gentle bedside manner, he could also be "a bull -- strong and stubborn."

"One thing that my dad and mom instilled in us was that we could always attain the goals we set forth," said Bessin, a Cornell graduate who is now

director of development for the Stanford Institute of Economic Policy Research.

"He said: 'They can take away your arm or your leg, but they can't take away your mind,'" she said. "Enrich your mind as much as possible."

Dr. Peter Kornfeld

Born: March 16, 1925, in Vienna, Austria

Died: Feb. 2, 2007, at Stanford.

Survived by: Wife, Carol of Portola Valley; a son, Robert of Bellevue, Wash.; a daughter, Jane Bessin of Los Altos; and four grandchildren.

Services: Already held.

Memorial: Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (www.hias.org), 333 Seventh Ave., 16th Floor, N.Y., N.Y. 10001-5004.