Book Review

*Around the World with Nephrology: An Autobiography* by Zbylut J. Twardowski, MD PhD

Robert Browning once said that you should measure the height of a person’s mind by the length of the shadow it casts. The life and works of Zbylut J. Twardowski, MD PhD are without doubt, a shining example of such a mind. Over the course of several decades, whoever came in contact with him directly or through his work, has flourished under the spell cast by the long shadow of his brilliant mind.

His autobiography, *Around the World with Nephrology: An Autobiography* is a travelogue of sorts. A travelogue of a life well lived, of a life rich in its own remarkable way, and of a life replete with grit, determination, and a burning desire to excel. The book provides a rare glimpse into the life of an individual, who worked his way up from humble beginnings in remote communist Poland, to become one of the finest inventors in the field of dialysis. As many in the field of nephrology would know, Twardowski’s numerous seminal observations and inventions have made a real difference in the field of dialysis as we know it today, in turn benefiting thousands of patients worldwide.

His recently published autobiography provides a starkly honest and detailed account of the author’s life journey across continents. One cannot but marvel at author’s ability to recall events with amazing clarity. It is the text’s clarity of content that makes it this book’s major asset and immediately turns every page into a riveting “must read.”

The text is divided into 13 chapters, beginning with the author’s early life in communist Poland. It describes his early childhood in gripping detail, complete with terrifying experience of Gestapo whisking his father away in the dead of night during World War II (WWII) and his mother’s desperate attempt to save him from execution. A gifted student, excellence came to him as second nature in academia. It was not a surprise therefore that he was admitted to a prestigious medical school in Poland where, during his fourth year, he met his future wife, Halina. The author went on to finish his medical training with distinction.

What follows is a panoramic view of his transcontinental journey beginning from the days of his medical training in Poland to his life in the United States where he gained international recognition and acclaim. The section describing his early experience with dialysis in Poland in 1962 is especially exciting to read. As successful men often do, he turned this opportunity of dabbling with the field of dialysis (still a nascent science) into a tale of excellence and achievement. It is a rare peek into how great scientific ideas are brought to fruition (his PhD thesis was one of the earliest descriptions of the workings of the hollow fiber dialyzer). The description of the period from early 1960s to 1975 offers the reader a glimpse into the development of renal replacement therapy (including kidney transplant) in Poland, spearheaded by a few young nephrologists led by the author. It also highlights his early observations on frequent hemodialysis, the benefits of which are increasingly becoming obvious of late.

The author’s account of his experience as a nephrology “fellow,” (despite being a fully trained nephrologist in Poland) in Columbia MO, is full of interesting anecdotes. It was during this time that he developed an immense interest in peritoneal kinetics that eventually led to the development of the peritoneal equilibration test, now used worldwide. On return to Poland, the author describes his growing frustration with the oppressive life in his home country under communism and his decision to return to Columbia in 1981. Little did he realize that his move to the United States would entail a long period of separation from his family owing to the existing political situation in Poland. This was a tumultuous period for him and his family, separated from each other by time and distance.

In one particular section, the author does a really commendable job of highlighting the importance of what a
physician can learn from patients in the course of one’s career. This section is truly inspirational and reflects the dedication of a man wedded to a lifelong quest for constant improvisation of a treatment that he helped develop decades ago, by learning from his patients. In that sense alone, this book is unique for the many young nephrologists of today, for it underscores the importance of lifelong learning and meticulous attention to detail.

The sections on the author’s persistent desire to continue his research into and through the 1990s, his interaction with colleagues and his trainees, his struggle and tribulations with patenting his inventions, all reflect the human side of his highly analytical and developed mind and make a wonderful read. The icing on the cake is the section on his travels that he undertook after coming to the United States as part of his work- and leisure-related trips throughout the world. Once again, his keen observational skills come to the fore whenever he describes the travels that he undertook with Halina to different corners of the globe. The accompanying photographs are especially clear and detailed, complete with accurate captions. One cannot help but think (in jest) of the serious run for the money this book may provide to the myriad of tourist guidebooks available these days.

I know that Dr Twardowski is a firm believer in Yogi Berra’s famous observation, “it’s tough to make predictions, especially about the future.” He often quotes this during his conversations. Nevertheless, he concludes the book by making his own predictions about what renal replacement therapy might look like in the next several decades. How true he was in proving Yogi Berra wrong, only time would tell.

Having personally known the author for more than 17 years, this book acquired an especially poignant side to it when I realized that his life had, in a strange way, completed a full circle. It was the US-led forces in WWII, which ultimately rescued the author’s father from the claws of the Nazis. Who knew at the time, that many decades later, this Polish physician’s son will achieve worldwide fame from his work done in the United States, in a way repaying the debt he owed to his adopted country that had given so much to him in so many ways.

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