Professor Werner Ulrich JACOBSON, M.D., Ph.D., Sc.D., FRCP, FRCPath
1906 - 2000
(Elected Ordinary Member 1948)

Jacobson combined two traditions in medical research, that of the great nineteenth century German Universities where he was educated and that of the University of Cambridge where he spent his working life. He graduated in Heidelberg in 1930 and moved to England in 1933 shortly after Hitler came to power. He was one of a group of brilliant refugees whom the great cell biologist Honor Fell recruited to work with her at the Strangeways Laboratory in Cambridge. Doctorates in philosophy and of science followed in 1940 and 1960, and in 1980, after two sojourns in the Harvard Medical School as Senior Research Fellow and Visiting Professor respectively, Jacobson was appointed Halley Stewart Professor of Experimental Medicine, a position he held until his death, first in the University Department of Haematology and later in that of Paediatrics in the Clinical School at Addenbrooke's Hospital. Like a kind of academic Nestor, he saw three generations of researchers come and go and worked alongside the fourth, dying in harness at the age of 94 just after completing his most recent paper.

Former medical students remember Jacobson as an outstanding teacher of histology. His research addressed a wide range of medical problems, and each such foray into a new area yielded important results, thanks to the breadth and depth of his learning, the originality of his ideas and the technical skill that enabled him to use whatever methods were needed. Jacobson was widely respected by his peers, but he published little and therefore did not get all the recognition he deserved. Towards the end of his career, the Royal College of Physicians honoured him with its fellowship and he was also a Fellow of the Royal College of Pathologists. One of his important contributions was his insistence over many years of the importance of folic acid deficiency in conditions ranging from spina bifida to atherosclerotic heart disease; for a long time regarded as unproven, it is now prescribed for all pregnant women to prevent spina bifida of their babies.

Once settled here, Jacobson became a staunch English patriot, proud of his service in the home guard during the war and of his College connection. He exemplified the traditional Prussian virtues of probity, industry, intellectual rigour and formal courtesy, but he was unforgiving of the way in which many of his fellow Germans had embraced the evil ideology of the Nazis.

In 1934 he married Gertrude Ebler, a fellow refugee and teacher of mathematics who died in the sixties. He had no children, but generations of medical students found in him an academic father figure to emulate and respect, and in this way his virtues will live on.

M F Perutz & J A Davis
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