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The Memories of Professor Isaak Savel'evich Babchin

On the 120th anniversary of his birthday (1895—1989)



Isaak Savel'evich Babchin is a true patriarch among fellows in the great field — founders of national neurosurgery! He lived a long life of almost 94 year. Getting older physically, he kept his powerful intellect to the last days. How wise and critical was his reply at his 90th anniversary at the Polenov Institute!

Isaak Babchin was not only a highly respected but also very well-liked person. This is why all famous Soviet neurosurgeons gathered for the anniversary celebration in Leningrad in June 1985. I remember that when I along with A.N. Konovalov and E.I Kandel' went to a market for bouquets, salespeople who learned of the person for whom the flowers were designated did their best because they also heard about the wonderful surgeon Isaak Savel'evich Babchin.

The celebration was vivid and memorable. Warm speeches invariably ended with sincere wishes to I.S. Babchin to live to the 100th anniversary. Then, Isaak Babchin hardly stood up: "Why do you hate me so much? I am almost blind, deaf, and barely moving. And you wish me more 10 years of this life". At that moment, everyone felt uncomfortable and sad.

Isaak Babchin was a brilliant orator. The audience always hung upon his lips. How fascinating his lectures were, what a wonderful debater he was, how warmly and gratefully he gave the ultimate send-off to his colleagues! I remember his farewell words at the memorial service for A.I. Arutyunov: "The last brightest star in the Burdenko constellation is set".

Isaak Babchin's oratory was complemented by imaginative gestures; he widely spread his arms, as if he had disembosomed himself to people and embraced them. This Babchin's embrace demonstrated the good nature of a talented person...

...I first saw Isaak Babchin when I was a graduate student. He had came both to the Institute and to conferences. This short man with the bald head and rounded figure immediately prepossessed to himself by his friendliness, exceptional kindness, and gentleness. His judgments were deep and wise; both masters and young neurosurgeons carefully listened to him. When I happened to listen to Isaak Babchin, I was excited both by his thoughts and by their imaginative embodiment.

Accomplishment and achievements

I had learned the biography of Isaak Babchin long before I made friends with him. He was born in Vilno in the family of a merchant of the first guild in 1895. This gave him the right to live beyond the Pale of Settlement. So, Isaak Babchin moved to St. Petersburg (Petrograd) where he became a student of the Psychoneurological Institute in 1914. His study was interrupted by World War 1. He was mobilized and served a common soldier in the Imperial Army from 1915 to 1917 and then an associate doctor in the Red Army. After the war, he completed his medical education at the State Institute of Medical Knowledge where his devotion to surgical neuropathology started. His teacher was A.L. Polenov who prophetically wrote: "...I think that he (I.S. Babchin. – *L.L.*) will undoubtedly be a prominent surgeon-neurologist, a specialist in a new field, which counts just a few scientists in the USSR".

In 1924, I.S. Babchin was a resident at the Institute Traumatology, and then he became the head of the Neurosurgical Department. In 1935, Isaak Babchin defended his doctoral thesis on "Clinical picture and surgery of cervical spine tumors".

Since the establishment of the Leningrad Neurosurgical Institute (1938), Isaak Babchin became the deputy director for science and the head of the Clinical Department. Here, his bright many-sided talent of an organizer, diagnostician, neurosurgeon, scientist, and educator blossomed.

Isaak Babchin was one of the founders of pediatric neurosurgery: he established the Children's Department at the Polenov Institute where he developed and improved a number of surgical techniques in the field of pediatric neurooncology. Stereotactic surgery for parkinsonism and hyperkinesias was developed under his guidance. He splendidly mastered analgesic surgeries on the trigeminal nerve roots and spinal tracts.

The great merit of I.S. Babchin, together with A.L. Polenov, was the creation of the first domestic guide "Fundamentals of practical neurosurgery" (1943).

Chief front neurosurgeon

Wars broke out: first, the Finnish War occurred; then, the Great Patriotic War started. Isaak Babchin was appointed the chief neurosurgeon of the Leningrad Front. In the besieged city, he organized specialized care to warriors with head and spine wounds. Under bombings and artillery bombardments, he tirelessly conducted surgeries for the most complex gunshot injuries to the nervous system.

E.I. Stroganova, an Isaak Babchin's student, writes about his most difficult period of life during the Leningrad Blockade: *"In the first months, the hospital staff (evacuation hospital 1015 – L.L.) consisted of doctors from the Ott Institute and junior doctors who completed the 4th year of the 1st Medical Institute (Leningrad – L.L.) and were drafted into the army.*

I.S. Babchin had to manage the problem of retraining these doctors to neurosurgeons. He believed that it would be easier to teach neurosurgery to undereducated doctors than to retrain experienced professionals.

Despite of being very busy with providing care to the wounded, Isaak Babchin was standing at the operating table for several hours each day. He began training of wartime neurosurgeons.

He selected only young, undereducated doctors as assistants. During surgery, he explained them in detail all the intricacies of dealing with the brain at different stages of operation. Isaak Babchin daily did the rounds of all departments and attended dressings and other procedures.

While working, he made all comments and recommendations in a very friendly and delicate manner, always out of the ward.

When there was no massive influx of the wounded, he gave trainings on both wartime and peacetime neurosurgery. The studies were usually held in the evening, in a dark and cold room (Leningrad Siege period).

The only visual aid was a cigarette in his hand (he did not smoke), by which he illustrated not only curves but also more complex pictures. He never set exams.

Isaak Babchin worked very, very much. He did the rounds of all departments every night, and at 8 am he held grand rounds with an analysis of the work done over the past day.

In one of these grand rounds, a wall clock fell 3 meter down (due to vibrations during the bombing) and, by a lucky chance, touched only his hand, not his head; but Isaak Babchin continued his lecture without interruption.

Isaak Babchin was an example in all things for young doctors. Even in the most difficult times, he was not broken by hunger and cold, lack of water, and so on. He was always smart; a military uniform was always clean and even elegant; the undercollar was clean and snow white, boots shone. He was always shaved.

Isaak Bobchin very cherished his colleagues. Even the head of the hospital could not draw out any of the Bobchin's staff, not only doctors but also nurses, without his consent. He was very thoughtful of employees and subordinates. If there was free evening time, he made (delicately) the staff go outside for physical exercises, which was very important and necessary at that time.

Along with others, he went to unload wood, which was delivered to the besieged city by barges through the Neva River. At the initiative of Isaak Babchin, night conferences were held in 1942—1943 where the experience of treatment at various stages of evacuation was summarized. These conferences were attended even by doctors from health support battalions located in the battle line as well as by employees of the Neurosurgical Institute.

All young doctors were given the theme of scientific generalization of experience in treating head and spine wounds and peripheral nerve injuries. These studies and conference proceedings were generalized and published in collections (currently, they are available at the Museum of Leningrad Defense).

Wounded soldiers and officers respected and loved (very loved) Isaak Babchin. He received a lot of letters from the front with gratitude for restored health. Isaak Babchin was a great diagnostician, which is well known to everyone.

After the war, Isaak Babchin did not leave his students. He employed many of them to the Institute, continued to take care of them, and helped them become professionals.

Throughout his life, Isaak Babchin proved himself as a true patriot of his country as well as a great doctor and scientist respected by all who knew him".

As a major specialist and practitioner of field neurosurgery, I.S. Babchin participated in meetings that were regularly held by the chief surgeon of the Red Army N.N. Burdenko. The facts demonstrate that Isaak Babchin could disagree with N.N. Burdenko.

Despite human softness, Isaak Babchin was firm and principled in scientific matters. In particular, when discussing the instructions, he did not approve too widespread use of intracarotid administration of antibiotics and sulfonamides in battle line conditions. N.N. Burdenko blew up and began to ignore I.S. Babchin. However, despite the anger of the three-star general was unpleasant, it did not lead to any restrictions in the professional activity: N.N. Burdenko was not a mean person.

Post-war drama

The much more dramatic period occurred in Babchin's life when he became one of the first in the Soviet Union who was engaged in psychosurgery. He invented an original leucotome and successfully used it for lobotomy in severe chronic forms of schizophrenia, which were not amenable to conventional treatment. However, harassment of cosmopolitans began at the end of the 1940s. On this wave, the frontal leucotomy opponents achieved the ideological defeat of

psychosurgery and its adherents (A.S. Shmar'yan, I.S. Babchin, M.A. Gol'denberg, R.Ya. Golant, and others) at the Scientific Council of the USSR Ministry of Health. Soon, the Order of the Minister of Health of the USSR (December 1950) was issued, according to which psychosurgery was banned, and scientists developing methods of psychosurgery operations were fired.

Isaak Babchin was removed from the position of deputy director for science of the Polenov Institute. In January 1953, when the odious "Doctors' Case" blew out, he was expelled from the Leningrad State Institute for Advanced Training of Physicians (SIATP) where he headed the Department of Neurosurgery. How the outstanding neurosurgeon Isaak Babchin experienced this, only he knew.

Stalin died, the repressive regime weakened, tension in the society was calmed. However, the published biographies of the scientist as well as his autobiography are silent on this period of persecution and injustice, as if they had never existed. And so it appears in the biographical data: "he headed the Department of Neurosurgery of the Leningrad SIATP from 1947 to 1969" – one might think there was no interruption.

The Thinker

Isaak Babchin was a thinker and, therefore, took up the issues of neurosurgery that required high intelligence. He developed the clinical and pathogenetic classification of closed craniocerebral injury, the main principles of which are not obsolete yet.

He is perhaps the first domestic neurosurgeon who drew attention to the danger of devotion to the technicism, despite all its might. A.I. Arutyunov opposed I.S. Babchin, reproaching him in the methodological backwardness. Note that both masters "fought" in the Journal of Neurosurgery; therefore, their discussion enriched minds of domestic neurosurgeons. Similar discussions have not been held in my favorite journal for a long time.

My friendship with the Master

I developed personal relationships with Isaak Babchin through the book "Traumatic intracranial hematomas" written by me together with L.Kh. Khitrin. I knew Isaak Babchin from his lectures and speeches at conferences, monographs, and articles. Lev Khitrin attended an advanced improvement course in neurosurgery for doctors at the Leningrad SIATP in 1961 and admired lectures and clinical reviews by I.S. Babchin. Once, we received the author's copies, we immediately sent out the book with an inscription to Isaak Babchin. He wrote back a large warm letter urging further research.

This gave me the opportunity to enter into the correspondence and then enter into the house of the dear master. In their apartment on the 8th Sovetskaya Street with lots of books, paintings, sculptures, and antique furniture, Irina Babchin, wife of Isaak Babchin, hospitably offered me tea. I was fascinated by this rare opportunity to talk to the master in the home environment and experienced an unusual rise because of my interest in the history of neurosurgery. Isaak Babchin behaved naturally, talked at length about himself, and answered even very "thorny" questions. I first became aware of the obstacles he had had to overcome.

Since then, I had visited Isaak and Irina Babchin during my work trips to Leningrad for many years. Isaak Babchin was critical of himself and his current capabilities, but I could persuade him into writing memoirs and thoughts on neurosurgery and contemporary neurosurgeons.

"Idle thoughts of a pensioner"

Irina Babchin, after death of Isaak Babchin, handed me to the Museum of the Institute of Neurosurgery some materials on the work of her husband (including a work copy of his leucotome) as well as his last manuscripts. Here are some excerpts from his "idle thoughts of a pensioner".

January 1981:

"The second half of the XXth century in our country is characterized by complete employment and the absence of idles, abundance of pensioners, and high alcoholism in the population".

"A contemporary researcher or scientist is characterized in most cases by a narrow specialization, limited amount of knowledge, and lack of erudition, culture, and sense of humor".

"Modern multiple co-authorship in science, including medicine and neurosurgery, is sometimes necessary (inevitable) and helpful, although it is unnecessary and even harmful to the scientist in most cases. A real invasion of "co-authors" of scientific articles in academic medical journals, who are often people clinging to the tails of other people's ideas and works, demoralizes young scientists and impersonalizes them and even the science itself".

"The situation of a pensioner, especially untimely and protracted, is not only painful but also humiliating".

"Under normal circumstances, people are entitled to a courteous and diligent attitude. Personally, I have from long ago made it a rule to greet the first my friends on meeting, regardless of their age and social status. I congratulate the first (on New Year and other major holidays and events) my relatives, old friends and co-workers, and my former students and colleagues; however, the number of old friends and comrades is getting less, and many of students have become outstanding scientists: professors, honored science workers, Heroes of Socialist Labor, etc. In this way, I strive to maintain kinship, friendship, and companionship feelings that disappear and fade over the years. I am sincerely pleased that in response to my attention and congratulations, I receive dozens of response greeting cards, telegrams, and letters informing me about life, condition, and an increase in welfare of these people and their families. I regularly

exchange by congratulations with the only remaining school friend, N.P. Fulikov, and I learned from him that our Petersburg Petrovsky college turned 100 on the 3rd of January (old style). Friendly memory in the minds, if not in the hearts, of good people should be fully supported".

"A bright, even talented, but unprincipled amoral neurosurgeon, neurologist, or representative of other clinical specialties can not be a professor in the highest sense of the word, teacher, scientist, thinker, undisputed advocate of honor and duty despite the abundance of published works, the so-called scientific works (often in co-authorship), and dissertations; that is the guardian of deontology – the doctrine of the rightness. Ethics, medical ethics, and deontology issues have been discussed by Hippocrates, later by N.N. Pirogov, S.P. Botkin, G.A. Zakhar'ina, then by V.M. Bekhtereva, N.N. Petrova, and now (in the press) by scientists, professors, academicians, and even Ministers of Health (N.A. Semashko, Z.P. Solov'ev). This means that there are problems with morality, even in science".

The Era in Russian neurosurgery

The Lieutenant Colonel of the Medical Service, I.S. Babchin, had good military awards: the Order of the Patriotic War of the 1st Degree, the Order of the Red Star, and a number of medals.

Prof. I.S. Babchin did not have awards in the peacetime. Even when Academician of the USSR Academy of Medical Sciences, the director of the Polenov Institute, V.N. Shamov put Isaak Babchin forward for the honorary title of the "Honored Worker of Science of the Russian Federation" in 1955, this initiative was refused. The second attempt to award Isaak Babchin with the long time and rightfully deserved honorary title was undertook by Academician of the USSR Academy of Medical Sciences, the director of the Moscow Institute of Neurosurgery, A.N. Konovalov in the early 1980s. However, the Health Minister said that this was impossible, since I.S. Babchin had not worked to that moment. Indeed, regalia do not really matter! But, where is justice?!

Isaak Savel'evich Babchin is an epoch in Russian neurosurgery. One of the founders of domestic neurosurgery, he made an enormous contribution to the formation of neurotraumatology, neurooncology, pediatric neurosurgery, field neurosurgery, and development of neurosurgery teaching.

Isaak Babchin was gone, but he left followers and students and made an impact on several generations of neurosurgeons. Therefore, the memory of this outstanding figure of Soviet and Russian medicine lingers on. The St. Petersburg Association of Neurosurgeons, whose founder he was, was named after him.

Largely through the efforts of his student, E.N. Kondakov, a memorial plaque with a bas-relief of I.S. Babchin was placed on the building of the Polenov Neurosurgical Institute, to the development of which I.S. Babchin contributed so much. It is significant that the plenary session of the 1st Congress of Neurosurgeons of Russia in Ekaterinburg was dedicated to the centennial of the memorable teacher, and also a medal was issued in honor of this event.

Finally, on the eve of the 120th anniversary of the scientist, a comprehensive and richly illustrated book "Neurosurgeon Isaak Savel'evich Babchin" written by his younger son, Aleksandr Babchin, who is also a neurosurgeon was published.

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