Lazar Solomonovich Minor (1855–1942)

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Published online: 1 February 2011

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Lazar Solomonovich Minor, born in Vilnius in 1855, was raised in a religious, liberal and politically active Jewish family. His father, Shlomo Zalman Minor (1826–1900), became first rabbi of the Moscow Choral Synagogue. He was a good friend of Leo Tolstoy, to whom he gave Hebrew lessons. Lazar Minor recollected vivid discussions between his father and Tolstoy on the Old Testament, the

highly educated rabbi sometimes having to agree with the judgment of his pupil. It was Tolstoy who later, in 1884, helped young Lazar Minor to get the position of lecturer at Moscow University, something that at that time was almost impossible for someone with Jewish background [1]. After completing his medical degree in Moscow, Minor worked with the Moscow anatomist and physiologist A.I. Babukhin (1835–1891) and in the Moscow University Clinic of Nervous Diseases headed by A.Ya. Kozhevnikov (1836–1902). Minor was interested in German and French neurology and, as was customary in those days for medical graduates, traveled abroad: in Paris under J.-M. Charcot and in Berlin under C. Westphal and E. Mendel. In 1884, after finishing his training, he became a lecturer at the Moscow Clinic of Nervous Diseases, the Mecca of Russian neurology. Minor became one of the closest and most loyal of Kozhevnikov's disciples; he wrote his obituary in 1902 [2].

In the years that followed Minor won international recognition as a neurologist, especially for his research on spinal cord trauma. He was the first to describe the 'sitting sign' to distinguish between lumbago and sciatica: patients with sciatica use only one leg when getting out of bed; lumbago patients 'climb out' with both legs—Minor's sign [3]. His name is associated with the syndrome of sudden onset of back pain with paraparesis or paraplegia from haemorrhage into the spinal cord—Minor's disease [4]. In the 1920s, Minor published a series of papers with regard to familial essential tremor. Two peculiarities impressed Minor in his studies of families affected by tremor: firstly the advanced age that many of the members attained and secondly the large size of the families. These characteristics led Minor to propose the notion of a 'status macrobioticus multiparus', characterized by the triad of tremor, longevity and fecundity [5]. He published 175 scientific

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articles, including the book *Treatment of Nervous Diseases* (1910), which for many decades was widely used and studied by Russian/Soviet neurologists [6].

From 1910 to 1917 Minor was director of the clinic for nervous diseases at the Moscow Advanced Courses for Women. It was not until the October Revolution of 1917 that Minor was officially granted academic status, equal to that of his colleagues. He remarked, however, that even after the revolution ‘anti-semitism was smouldering below the surface’. Minor’s Jewish background and bourgeois-liberal attitudes did not, however, prevent him from being the head of the Department of Neurology at the Second Moscow State University, a post he held until his retirement in 1932. Minor was renowned not only for his clinical and research work, but also for his campaign against alcoholism. From 1897 onwards, he had a scientific interest in its physical and social consequences [7]. He visited foreign rehabilitation centres for alcoholics, established similar centres around Moscow and was one of the founders of the Moscow Society against Alcoholism (1927).

Along with Kozhevnikov, Minor was on the organizing committee of the 12th International Medical Congress, held in Moscow in 1897. The congress welcomed participants from almost all European countries, the USA, Chile, El Salvador, Turkey, Japan etc. Prominent European neurologists and psychiatrists, including R. von Krafft-Ebbing, G. Marinesco, C. Lombroso, V. Magnan, A. van Gehuchten and H. Oppenheim, visited the Clinic of Nervous Diseases headed by Kozhevnikov, and the Clinic of Mental Diseases of S.S. Korsakov, both regarded as among the best in Europe. All 45 foreign colleagues became honorary members of the Moscow Society of Neurology and Psychiatry [2]. Minor developed a lifelong friendship with the Berlin neurologist and neuroanatomist Louis Jacobsohn-Lask (1863–1941) and was a regular contributor to his *Jahresbericht über die Leistungen und Fortschritte auf dem Gebiete der Neurologie und Psychiatrie*, devoted to new developments in neuroscience. Most contributions were from Berlin, but among foreign authors Russia was represented by Minor from Moscow and by V.M. Bekhterev from St. Petersburg. He remained loyal to *Jahresbericht* up to the First World War [8]. In collaboration with E. Flatau and Jacobsohn-Lask, Minor published a textbook on the pathological anatomy of the nervous system [9]. In 1932, he wrote a chapter on hereditary tremors for the second edition of Max Lewandowsky’s *Handbuch der Neurologie*. Minor also edited several Russian translations of German neurologists’ work [8]. At the 13th International Medical Congress in Paris (1900) Minor lobbied for close international cooperation between neurologists and psychiatrists, through revitalization of neurological sections of international congresses. Thirty years later (1931) he was among

the few to represent the Soviet Union at the First Neurological World Conference in Bern.

In 1924 the 70-year-old Minor was a coryphée of Russian neurology and one of the few to be appointed as Kremlin physician. Hence, when after Lenin’s death in 1924 the Commission for Preserving the Memory of V.I. Lenin was established, Minor became a member. In a letter composed in rather old-fashioned but correct German, he notified Oskar Vogt (1870–1959) that he had been selected by the commission to head the investigation of Lenin’s brain. Minor knew Oscar and Cécile Vogt from their previous visit to Moscow, when they introduced their new method of architectonic brain research. This was the start of the Moscow Brain Institute, which became a mysterious pantheon of numerous famous Russian brains for many years to come [10].

Minor in turn created his own school of neurologists, his followers including many prominent Soviet neurologists, including V.V. Kramer, M.B. Krol, L.G. Chlenov and A.M. Grinshtein [6]. At the age of 87, Minor died in Tashkent, to which town he had been evacuated during the Second World War.

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