

## *Obituary*

### **Paul Lorthioir (1898–1982)**



On 25 October 1982, SICOT turned the last page of the first volume of its history. That day witnessed the death, in the midst of his loved ones, of the last survivor of that famous group of 21 founders of SICOT, to whom our Society owes its brilliant beginnings, its meteoric rise, and the extent of its influence today.

Paul Lorthioir was born on 15 May 1898 into an eminent Brussels family, which had produced one of Brussels' first magistrates, the burgomaster Emile de Mot. Paul's father, Jules Lorthioir, of whom we shall be hearing more in due course, played a leading role in the development of, and progress in, 'general' surgery, and also in paediat-

ric and especially in orthopaedic surgery, both in Belgium and internationally.

Paul Lorthioir was just sixteen years old when the 1914–1918 war broke out. He had intended to follow a course of study in which he could exercise his talents as an engineer, mechanic and handyman (which, incidentally, he never ceased to be). In 1915, when he had barely completed his seventeenth year, he threw himself into the fray, evidently with the passion and brilliance which were to characterise the whole of the rest of his life; for he returned as a Lieutenant of Artillery, decorated with the Croix de Feu 1914–1918 and the Croix de Guerre 1914–1918. He was also badly gassed and left for dead; it was only a final and superhuman effort which saved his life. It was doubtless from this episode that he retained his warm and guttural voice, which constantly expressed the joy of living – and perhaps also of surviving.

The example of his father, a surgeon of international repute, and, according to those close to him, the agonising memory of the unspeakable suffering he had witnessed, modified his choice of career; he decided to study medicine. He hung up his Lieutenant's uniform – although only for ten years, as we shall see – and donned the doctor's white coat.

Almost as soon as he returned home, he embarked on his studies, qualifying with flying colours in 1923. He became senior house officer, deputy registrar and in 1953 Ordinary Professor of Paediatric Surgery. He was appointed to this chair solely on the basis of his merit and authority in the field; he had simply not had the time to complete his thesis (we shall soon see why) and he retired as Professor in 1963.

At the outset of his career Paul Lorthioir devoted himself to paediatric medicine because he loved children, both his own and other people's,

and throughout his life was adored by them in return. It was a specialty for which his extreme good sense and cool-headedness suited him ideally. There are two anecdotes which illustrate this admirably. One day he had finished a meal at the house of some friends and was just about to leave, when he heard a muffled and distant cry. He rushed out and discovered, in a neighbouring room, one of his host's children, choking and purple-faced. Without wasting a second, he realised what was happening and made his diagnosis, suffocation caused by obstruction of the respiratory tract, held the child up by his feet, and to the great relief of all concerned, out fell . . . a marble. On another occasion, he was called to the bedside of a child already lying on the operating table, head shaven ready for trepanning. It took only a rapid examination for Paul Lorthioir to rectify the diagnosis and the situation: it was encephalitis, and trepanning was not appropriate. The child recovered, I should add.

By a natural progression, Paul Lorthioir moved on to paediatric surgery and thence, as is often the case in our discipline, to orthopaedics and traumatology. There are few procedures of paediatric surgery to which he did not make some progressive modification, introducing new techniques and innovative ideas. Above all, he retained a life-long respect for clinical diagnosis, based on a thorough examination of the patient, strongly rejecting what he called "Medicine-Machine" – so much so that even when he himself later became ill, he only paid lip service to the many paraclinical investigations.

Paul Lorthioir took on a host of responsibilities at a national level. He founded *Acta Paediatrica Belgica*, was President of the Belgian Society of Orthopaedics, and Honorary President in 1971, when the society celebrated its 50th anniversary. He was also President of the Order of Physicians during a troubled period (1958–1965) when Belgian doctors found themselves in opposition to the country's political authorities over a number of issues. It is quite likely that he paid for his devotion to the cause of the doctors with his first bout of serious illness.

Paul Lorthioir, as we have seen, did not belong to the medical corps of the Belgian army, and he had his reasons, which the military administration, however, neither understood nor accepted. Paul Lorthioir had done so much and so well that in 1929 by Royal Decree he remained in the Corps of Artillery officers. On the strength of this, he fulfilled all the prescribed service require-

ments, so that by 1939 he was a Major of Artillery, and returned to military service in this capacity. Later on – no surprise here – he joined the Resistance, and it is far beyond the present scope to recall his exploits and list his deeds of bravery.

However, it is appropriate to mention one feat of arms in order to do justice to his memory. Like father, like son. his two sons had followed him into the underground combat. One day one of these two, Michel, was on parade. When his name was called, the officer who was reviewing the detachment asked him, "Are you the son of Paul Lorthioir?" On receiving a positive answer, the order rang out: "Three paces forward: you are the son of a hero!"

As in 1918, Paul Lorthioir received two distinctions: the Croix de Feu 1940–1945 and the Croix de Guerre 1940–1945.

At an international level, the extent of Paul Lorthioir's activities was phenomenal. Together with his father, Jules Lorthioir, and a number of other doyens of surgery, he founded the International Society of Surgery, of which he was Treasurer for many years, and subsequently President. In this capacity he came to know the great names in surgery almost all over the world who were pre-eminent during the first half of the twentieth century. As an indication of the distinguished position he held, he took part in the first western delegation to be invited to Moscow in 1948 to re-establish contact. He was also made an Honorary Fellow of the American College of Surgeons.

But it was above all else to SICOT that he gave without counting the cost. His father Jules Lorthioir, himself ill and bedridden, sent him to Paris on that memorable evening of 10 October 1929 to meet with 20 great ones of our specialty in a room of the Hôtel Crillon, in order to found our Society. (I have recounted the details of this event in the Golden Jubilee book). Paul Lorthioir was to be National Delegate for Belgium for forty uninterrupted years, finally giving up the mandate to Pierre Lacroix in 1969. He was present at almost all the congresses, missing only those held in Mexico (1969), Copenhagen (1975) and Rio de Janeiro (1981) as he had more pressing commitments in Brussels.

To be sure, all that precedes is accurate and true; yet it still does not evoke the man who was Paul Lorthioir. He was human through and through, and everything that concerned his fellow human beings was of concern to him. There are countless anecdotes about him, but I will pick out one or two which evoke him most aptly.

In October 1978, on the way to the Kyoto congress, a large Belgian delegation was delayed by a typhoon at Hong Kong airport. After some time, the Belgian Consul was called and requested to find hotel accommodation for Paul Lorthioir (who was 80 years old). Having found suitable accommodation, the Consul returned, but Paul Lorthioir, proudly, and probably secretly rather hurt, retorted, "I am staying with my colleagues." Eventually he arrived at the Kyoto congress, and there he was installed on the platform. Can you guess why? The ceremony drew to a close, and roughly he muttered, "On the platform were the Emperor's son . . . and me!" The congress came to an end, and as Fate would have it, he was right behind me on the steps up to the plane. He turned round with a twinkle in his eye: "Vander Elst, your English is much better than mine," he said, looking meaningfully at a charming hostess, "tell her she's too pretty by half . . . but ask her not to forget to bring me a whisky as soon as it's allowed."

I had planned to bring together, on 10 October 1979, in that same room in the Hôtel Crillon, the Salon des Mérisiers, the most eminent members of our Society, or their representatives, if they were free to come. The evening of 10 October arrived, and there we were in the very place that had witnessed the birth of SICOT. Naturally I had asked Paul Lorthioir to preside over the meeting. I can still picture him now, arriving pale, tired and weakly. "Vander Elst, I've been plagued by epistaxis for days on end, and I thought I wouldn't be able to make it; but you know, when you've promised something, you have to do everything you can to keep your word."

Paul Lorthioir was a devoted family man. One day in 1948, I told him that I was going to Paris; and I might remind you that although by that time transportation had been restored in Europe, the provision of comestibles still left something to be

desired. Without hesitating for a second, Paul Lorthioir asked me, "Would you take a little butter and jam to my lad in Paris?" The lad – his son Michel – was 23 years old . . .

Paul Lorthioir detested lies or pretensions, and on occasion could be quite blunt in castigating foolishness or incompetence, although he never did so in a malicious way. He was an excellent judge of character, and he was a loyal friend in the most testing of circumstances. He had a rather hollow, hoarse, but astonishingly warm voice which had the gift of going straight to heart of whoever he was talking to. He had a perpetual smile on his lips.

To the very end, Paul Lorthioir was devoted to Medicine, and served its cause for sixty years. I saw him for the last time a few weeks before his death. He had taken some time to allow me to visit him; ill as he was, his moral punctiliousness never deserted him. He could not bear to think that anyone should see any sign of deficiency in him; in fact there was none to see. For me, too, it was a final lesson in medical probity: "I was ill in hospital for several days, but by Jove, nobody stuck his ear to my back and made me say 'thirty-three'. Pectiloroquy seems to be a thing of the past . . ." A little later he asked, "And SICOT – is that going on all right? Try to make sure it carries on as it should."

Such was Paul Lorthioir, and such are the memories and the message he leaves us with. Let us live up to them ourselves, and let us be proud to open the second volume of the history of SICOT. May his sons, our colleague and member of SICOT Jean Lorthioir, and Michel Lorthioir, know that we shall remember their father as an exceptional man and a devoted servant of our Discipline.

*Ed. Vander Elst*

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