



In Memoriam: Professor M. Gazi Yaşargil

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I consider it an honor to have been included among those asked to write and honor the memory of Gazi Yaşargil (Figure 1). My first encounter with him occurred when I was a student at Northwestern University Medical School. I worked in the laboratory of Dr. Bucy, who was a giant in academic neurosurgery at that time, and I attended every neurosurgery meeting and lecture. When I asked Dr. Bucy to recommend a place where I could gain some international exposure to a prominent neurosurgical center, he recommended Zurich, Switzerland, where his good friend Hugo Krayenbuel was in charge, and where there was a rising star named Gazi Yaşargil.

Even though, as a fourth-year medical student, I was incapable of appreciating the subtleties of microsurgery, it became very apparent to me that microsurgery was a powerful technique for achieving maximal surgical results. I remember vividly an occasion on which Professor Krayenbuhl, having operated on a pituitary tumor, was very satisfied with what he had removed through a craniotomy but then asked Gazi to bring his microscope to see whether he could remove more tumor. It was most instructive to see how much more tumor Gazi removed. Although Krayenbuhl was very much an autocratic chief, as was common during that time, and frequently treated his staff in a dismissive manner, he recognized Yaşargil's promise and supported his vision interna-



Figure 1: Gazi Yaşargil as visiting professor at Barrow Neurological Institute.



tionally. My visit to Zurich was very formative, and I was convinced that my future endeavor would be to dedicate myself to this new specialty of microneurosurgery.

During my residency at the University of California in San Francisco, I convinced my chief, Dr. Charles Wilson, to allow me to spend six months in Europe visiting three neurosurgical centers. The first was in Munich, where I did some research with Dr. Peter Schmidek at the Max Planck Institute. My wife and I formed a lifelong friendship with Peter. The second neurosurgical center that I visited was in Vienna, where I became a close friend of Professor Wolfgang Kooos, with whom I collaborated on several books and atlases. And the third visit was to Zurich, where Gazi was now chief, and I was in a much better position to appreciate the artistry of his surgery (Figure 2). I made it my goal to copy to the very best of my abilities his surgical technique. It was a great visit, punctuated with watching prominent neurosurgeons be kicked out of Yaşargil's operating room for talking or for getting up from the little bench to which all visitors were assigned. Yaşargil's short fuse was always present and could be ignited with the smallest provocation. It was part of who he was, but he also used this intensity to focus on his surgical challenges and routinely achieved success where others failed. The word "genius" has become overused but is appropriately applied to Gazi Yaşargil (Figure 3).

Dr. Joe Maroon, president of the Congress of Neurological Surgeons (CNS), invited Gazi to be the honored guest for the meeting in New Orleans in 1986. Joe assigned Nancy and me to be the hosts for the Yaşargils. This required being sure there were fresh apples in his presidential suite and being available for any request that the Yaşargils might make. As it turned out, the CNS had a black-tie dinner, and Gazi did not have appropriate attire; thus, Nancy and I took them to get measured to rent a tuxedo and buy a shirt, shoes, tie, and so on, all on CNS's dime (Figure 4).

The shop sent the tuxedo to the hotel the next day by cab. Nancy was waiting in front of the hotel to receive it; however, the cab driver went to the service entry instead, called Yaşargil's room, and asked him to come down to get the tux. Gazi instead told the driver "I don't do that," which made the driver upset, and he left mad (and with the tuxedo). In the meantime, Nancy became concerned since the cab had not arrived where she was waiting; finally, she asked the staff and was told that a cab had indeed come and left. They were able to contact the driver, and he returned and was mollified with a big tip. A stressful episode for my lovely wife!

There was one evening that was free, so we invited the Yaşargils to our travel club dinner (Figure 5). Gazi and Diane greatly enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere with our friends, and for many years thereafter he would comment on how much he had enjoyed this evening and the camaraderie that was present.



Figure 2: The Yaşargils and Spetzlers in Brazil at the spectacular Iguazu falls.



Figure 3: In Morocco on the occasion of Gazi Yaşargil's 80th birthday.



Figure 4: Gazi Yaşargil in his tuxedo in New Orleans at the CNS meeting in 1986.

Gazi was the visiting professor at the Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix several years later, where he stayed with us and was a most gracious guest (Figure 6). For years, he would bring gifts to me for our two children. Our paths crossed many times during the years. He was blessed to have Diane at his side. Not only was she the ultimate scrub nurse, but she was also extremely gracious and frequently smoothed over social upsets instigated by her mercurial husband. For me personally, he was always my neurosurgical idol, whose surgical virtuosity remained my elusive goal. He is and will be missed, but his legacy has affected our field in such a way that countless patients have benefitted from the innovations he brought and the surgical techniques that are imitated worldwide. He remains my neurosurgical idol.

■ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Figure 5: At our travel club dinner in New Orleans.

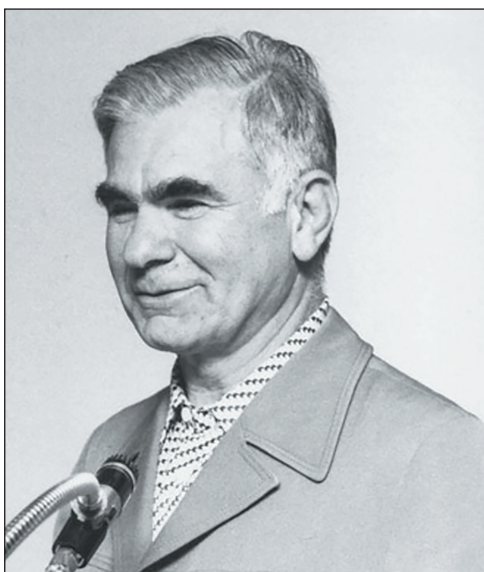


Figure 6: Gazi Yaşargil had a sly, clever sense of humor that can be appreciated in this picture taken during his visit to Phoenix.