

### A. Bernard Ackerman—the “Legend” turns 70

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A legend in his time”—with these words Steven Katz of the National Institutes of Health characterized A. Bernard Ackerman more than 10 years ago at a meeting of the International Society of Dermatopathology. And he was right: Dr Ackerman is legendary. For scores of pupils around the globe, the time they spent with “Bernie” was the most stimulating and important period of their professional lives. This is what they convey to pupils of their own who have never had the chance of meeting Dr Ackerman personally, thus transforming the man into a legend. Currently, Ackerman is probably the best known living dermatologist in the world. There are only few diseases of the skin to whose elucidation he has not contributed. And there is probably no competent dermatologist or pathologist in the world who, when confronted with a section of a biopsy specimen from an inflammatory skin disease, does not follow the method of histopathologic diagnosis advanced by Dr Ackerman.

What is the secret of this success? How can the tremendous impact of Ackerman be explained? How did he come to make such important contributions? There are many explanations, including talent, intelligence, and training by remarkable teachers, such as Carl Nelson, Wallace H. Clark, and Arkadi M. Rywlin. The most important reason, however, was his determination to make a contribution. Ackerman is Jewish, but he has no strong religious inclinations. His view of the world is materialistic which implies that life is not considered to have any inherent meaning. Life can only have meaning if one gives meaning to one’s own life and to the life of others. This is what Ackerman set out to do in a very conscious effort and with a distinct sense of purpose. He wanted to leave his footprints, enhance standards, and help shape the world according to principles that he valued highly, such as recognition of merit without



Albert Bernard Ackerman

consideration of race, religion, or nationality, respect for the individual, directness, and honesty.

Throughout his life, Ackerman adhered to those principles, both at the microscope and in the world beyond it. He furthered internationality by stimulating exchange and collaboration of colleagues from all parts of the world, encouraged individuals to express ideas of their own, addressed controversial issues in the most direct way, even at the risk of alienating colleagues, and exposed dishonesty wherever he encountered it. At the microscope, his respect for the individual found expression in the description of distinctive lesions such as sebaceoma and folliculosebaceous cystic hamartoma, regardless of whether or not specific identification of them had any impact for the patient; his attitude of directness in the avoidance of evasive terms such as atypical melanocytic proliferation for melanoma in situ and solar keratosis for incipient squamous-cell carcinoma; and his insistence on honesty in the forthright admission of misdiagnoses that are an inevitable component of the practice of medicine.

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From the Center for Dermatopathology.

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Albert Bernard Ackerman was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey on November 22, 1936. He was named after his two grandfathers, but because his father dominated family life, he came to be called after his father's father. Ackerman has two siblings, a 14-months younger brother, Jim, who eventually became chairman of the Department of Orthodontics at the University of Pennsylvania and who, in Ackerman's own words, remained his "best friend" throughout life, and a 9-year younger sister, Sue. Ackerman's mother was very playful and imaginative, made up hundreds of little stories, and acquainted him with Jewish culture, including many tales that coupled a fascinating story with a grain of wisdom. His father, an orthodontist, was very strict and demanding. He believed in the American tradition of upward mobility and had high expectations, especially for his oldest son.

Those expectations were fulfilled. Ackerman excelled at high school, attended Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, and then entered Princeton University, where he graduated cum laude in religion and literature in 1958. Ackerman's love for literature influenced his style of writing. Precision in, and elaborate use of, language eventually became prominent features of Ackerman in his professional life. Ackerman's love for religion and philosophy found expression in his tendency to transcend a particular issue and to put it into broader perspective, be it patterns of inflammatory skin diseases that he compared to patterns in the plumage of birds, or the "dysplastic nevus" that he viewed in the broader context of similar concepts that had gone before, such as that of the "activated junctional nevus." Ackerman wrote his junior theses at Princeton about "Dietary Laws of Judaism" and the "Hebrew Conception of Nature and Dignity of Man," and his senior thesis about the famous Yiddish humorist, Sholom Aleichem. His decision to write about Jewish subjects reflected his origin and particular knowledge in those fields, but was also a conscious effort against the lingering antisemitism in the United States. Ackerman was never religious in a narrow sense, but when he made it into Princeton's Freshmen Basketball Team, he demonstrated his Jewishness by putting on a mezuzah.

At that time, there was still a quota for Jews at American colleges, universities, and, especially, medical schools. Nevertheless, Ackerman made it into Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, where he graduated in 1962. Following internship at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City, he became a first-year resident at the Department of Dermatology of Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital, whose chairman, Carl Nelson, had a profound

influence on him. Ackerman acknowledged that the very first lesson he learned from Nelson when applying for his residency, "Gentlemen don't need contracts," became his "guide in both professional and personal life."<sup>1</sup> Nelson's premise, "the patient comes first,"<sup>2</sup> became another credo of Ackerman who, despite many obligations, always took time to speak to worried patients at the telephone or to see them in his office. It was the example of Nelson that made Ackerman sternly critical of the attitude of appointing chairmen of clinical departments on the basis of merits in research, rather than their clinical competence.

Ackerman wanted to have the most diverse and eclectic training that he possibly could. Following 2 years of military service in the Allergy and Dermatology Clinics at Andrews Air Force Base, Washington, DC, he spent the second year of his residency in dermatology at the University of Pennsylvania and the third year at Harvard University. By then, he had decided to specialize in dermatopathology, one of the reasons being that, in the discussion of diagnoses in clinical rounds, the dermatopathologist usually had the last word.<sup>3</sup> In 1968, Ackerman became a fellow in dermatopathology at Harvard University under Wallace H. Clark, Jr. In a tribute to Clark published in 1998, Ackerman emphasized that "he taught us about pride in competence and in professionalism. He taught us to make work play and that playfulness enhances pedagogy. He taught us the value of iconoclasm and unconventionality. He taught us about irreverence. He taught us not to be impressed by labels or titles. . . . He taught us the joy of intellectual curiosity and love of learning. He taught us what it means to be a human being and to be thoroughly human with flaws and foibles exhibited undisguised."<sup>4</sup> Those lessons were not lost on Bernard Ackerman.

In 1969, Ackerman became assistant professor at the Department of Dermatology of the University of Miami School of Medicine, the first dermatologist ever to be made a full-time dermatopathologist in the United States. Ackerman was lucky to find a close friend and mentor in the chairman of the Department of Pathology, Arkadi M. Rywlin, who had escaped the Nazis and had lived in many different countries, including Switzerland, France, Palestine, Spain, and Mexico. When walking, riding bicycles, and watching football games of the Miami Dolphins, Rywlin shared with Ackerman not only a fascinating view of the world that was based on tremendous experiences, but also his wealth of knowledge about rudiments of pathology in the classic Virchowian tradition.

At that time, diagnostic dermatopathology was developed poorly. Although histopathologic features of the most important skin diseases had been described comprehensively, no method for diagnosis

had been formulated. As a consequence, students of the subject were lost in a flood of morphologic detail, and the diagnosis rendered most commonly in the realm of inflammatory skin diseases was "chronic non-specific dermatitis." Those deficiencies came to be recognized. In his *Guide to Dermatohistopathology* in 1969, Hermann Pinkus decried the "game of quick diagnosis and counterdiagnosis" and called for "systematic analysis" of sections of tissue on the basis of distinctive types of tissue reactions, such as an "eczematous," a "psoriasiform," and a "lichenoid" one. A similar method was proposed by Wallace H. Clark, Jr. It was Ackerman, however, who brought those tentative ideas to fruition by defining various patterns of inflammatory skin disease and by integrating them into a coherent classification that was based wholly on morphology and served but a single purpose, namely, enabling dermatopathologists to come to a specific diagnosis couched in the language of clinical dermatology.<sup>5</sup> Ackerman published his "method by patterns analysis" in 1978 in a book that became a classic, *Histologic Diagnosis of Inflammatory Skin Diseases*. With that book, systematic analysis of sections of tissue on the basis of clearly defined criteria became possible; a new era in dermatopathology had begun.<sup>6</sup>

In 1973, Ackerman left the University of Miami and joined the faculty of New York University School of Medicine, where he built the largest training center for dermatopathology worldwide. For nearly 20 years, dermatologists and pathologists from all parts of the world kept flocking to "7J," Dr Ackerman's suite in the Skin and Cancer Unit. Sitting at an 18-headed microscope, they received instruction from 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM, starting with consultations in the morning that included the most difficult problems of differential diagnosis in dermatopathology, continuing with the "regular reading" of sometimes more than 1000 cases per day, and concluding with the discussion of studies and the preparation of lectures and books. In the evening hours, Ackerman usually invited fellows and other colleagues for dinner in one of his favorite Lebanese or Italian restaurants, and he rarely retired before midnight. However, when those students and colleagues came to "7J" early in the morning, they were startled to receive piles of manuscripts that Ackerman had edited between 4 and 7 AM. That tremendous workload required great self-discipline, and it only could be carried because work was turned into fun; on good days, little jokes were more numerous than seborrheic keratoses coming across the microscope, and laughter was resounding.

Ackerman's good humor was one of the factors that made him a great teacher. Another was his ability

to simplify matters and his confidence in the validity of his own judgment. Inevitably, simplification sometimes meant oversimplification, not all judgments were on target, and Ackerman's confidence in the validity of them made it difficult to argue with him. This was probably his greatest flaw. A teacher who is not sure of himself and of what he wants to say, however, cannot provide guidance. Ackerman guided his students, and it is remarkable in how many controversial issues he finally proved to be right, be it the recognition of parapsoriasis en plaques as a variant of mycosis fungoides or the concept of melanoma in situ.

Yet another quality of Ackerman as a teacher was his ability to ask simple questions, to spot inconsistencies in concepts about diseases and management of them, and to elucidate them by critical analysis of everything that had been written about them from their inception to the present.

Ackerman's greatest quality, however, was probably his generosity. A teacher is expected to be generous, but Ackerman was it in the extreme. For one, he was generous with his time. His working day had 20 hours, but whenever there was a serious personal problem, Ackerman took time to resolve it. For example, when one day a technician had to be taken to hospital, Ackerman interrupted all his duties and took nearly an hour to speak to doctors to assure that his technician got the best care. There is probably no letter that Ackerman did not respond to, and he must have written thousands of letters of recommendation on behalf of his students. Ackerman never had a family, but he considered his students to be an "expanded family" and was ready to invest his entire energy in them. Second, Ackerman was generous with money. He contributed mightily to educational programs of several universities and other philanthropic causes. Nearly every evening, whether in New York or abroad, whether together with medical students or with professors of universities, he took others out for dinner and always asked for the bill. If one wanted to pay in his presence, one had to sneak out and do it secretly. Last, and most importantly, Ackerman was generous intellectually. When he came up with a new idea, he did not hesitate to share it; he never thought of research as a field of competition. When somebody asked for a slide, a picture, or even a whole collection of pictures, he was given it, and no small number of books has been published in different languages that are based chiefly on material provided by Ackerman. At "7J," every fellow who stayed for more than a few weeks was given a project. Ackerman worked on those projects assiduously, but when they were brought to completion and published, the fellow nearly always was made senior author.

The combined efforts of Ackerman and his many students had a profound effect on dermatopathology. Year after year, numerous studies emanated from Ackerman's laboratory, and results of them were integrated in many books, such as the series about "Differential Diagnosis in Dermatopathology," "Clues to Diagnosis in Dermatopathology," and neoplasms with follicular, eccrine, apocrine, and sebaceous differentiation. A common feature of all those publications was Ackerman's emphasis on precise definitions and repeatable criteria for diagnosis. Instead of describing various microscopic aspects of skin lesions, including those without diagnostic value, as had been done in preceding decades, Ackerman focused on findings germane to a specific diagnosis. Thanks to those efforts, diagnostic decisions that had formerly been considered to be extremely difficult became relatively easy (eg, distinction of melanoma from most recurrent nevi, irritated nevi, and Spitz's nevi). Another constant theme of Ackerman was his advice, "Never get too close." Ackerman advocated pattern analysis as a method of diagnosis not only for inflammatory skin diseases but also for neoplasms, arguing that the architecture of a neoplasm, including features like symmetry and circumscription, is a direct consequence of its pattern of growth and, therefore, reflects its biological behavior more closely than cytologic changes, such as atypical nuclei and mitotic figures. Ackerman's emphasis on pattern analysis had a strong influence not only on dermatopathology, but on pathology in general.

Ackerman was like a catalyzing ferment in dermatopathology. The number of his original articles and books is astounding, and there are probably only few pathologists who do not possess at least one of his books. Hundreds of Ackerman's pupils continue to practice dermatology, pathology, and dermatopathology according to principles learned from Ackerman, and because many of them became directors of dermatopathology or chairmen of departments of dermatology at universities across the world, Ackerman's ideas and methods of diagnosis were passed on even further. Ackerman was founder and first president of the International Society of Dermatopathology and founder and first editor of the *American Journal of Dermatopathology*. In 1992, he left New York University School of Medicine to become director of dermatopathology at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, where his activities continued unabated and where he founded yet another journal devoted to dermatopathology, *Dermatopathology: Practical and Conceptual*. As an editor, Ackerman saw to it that every single issue of a journal was colorful, dealing with subjects as

diverse as clues to diagnosis in dermatopathology, concepts of diseases, and historical, cultural and ethical aspects of medicine, that every single article included original ideas, and that reading the journal was both pleasant and stimulating. Moreover, Ackerman started his own publishing company, Ardor Scribendi ("love of writing"), the purpose being to publish medical books, including those without great economic promise, at the highest possible standard.

In 1999, Ackerman founded the Ackerman Academy of Dermatopathology in New York City, a private institute with even more space and better equipment. In addition to all other activities, he embarked on a new endeavor, [derm101.com](http://derm101.com), a Web site devoted to education in dermatology and dermatopathology and that includes *Dermatopathology: Practical and Conceptual*, a clinical atlas, and hundreds of interactive quizzes with clinical pictures of skin lesions and photomicrographs of sections of biopsy specimens taken from them.

Ackerman retired on June 30, 2004, passing on his responsibilities at the Ackerman Academy of Dermatopathology to his student, Geoffrey Gottlieb. Henceforth, he was no longer involved in the regular "reading" of slides but continued to study sections of biopsy specimens sent in consultation. He did no longer attend scientific meetings but continued to work on various projects, including the interactive quizzes and various books, such as the 3rd edition of his textbook *Histologic Diagnosis of Inflammatory Skin Diseases*, which was published in 2005. Moreover, Ackerman has underwritten a variety of programs, including a professorship at Harvard University dedicated to the subject of "Culture and Medicine." At Phillips Academy in Andover, a similar program was begun with his support. At Massachusetts General Hospital, he funded a "reading room" for dermatopathology equipped with an 18-headed microscope, a large collection of antique microscopes, and various memorabilia collected during the course of his professional life. At the Dental School of the University of Pennsylvania, he funded a Seminar Room dedicated to the memory of his father and to his brother and nephew, all of whom were orthodontists and graduates of that School.

The record of Ackerman's professional life is impressive. When histories of dermatology and dermatopathology are written in the future, he will doubtlessly be featured as one of the most prominent figures of all time. Many honors have been bestowed on Ackerman, including honorary membership in numerous dermatological societies, honorary doctorates of the universities of Giessen, Germany,

Patras, Greece, and Pavia, Italy, and, last but not least, the 2004 Master Dermatologist Award of the American Academy of Dermatology. The greatest honor, however, is the honor that a man awards himself by being able to say to himself, in the autumn of life, "well done."

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