

1975

CHAPTER 73

MY HEART ATTACK.

We come now to the year 1975, in which major events happened in our lives. On the 29th of March, I had a heart attack. It happened while I was walking with Hedy on a Saturday evening towards the Metropolitan Opera building. I felt suddenly an extremely severe pain in my chest, also in both arms, pulling them towards the sides of my body. I knew immediately that it was the heart, but it went away within a few seconds, and so I did not tell Hedy anything and we continued walking towards the opera building and went up to our seats. I had not felt well before that for about a week. I had stomach pains as never before, always after meals, like ulcer pains, and I had put myself on a strict diet of cooked cereal and milk, and I improved gradually. But on that Saturday, when we were to go to the opera, there was no cereal prepared, as Hedy had thought that I was already well, and I ate something else, I don't remember exactly what; I think it was applesauce, and the pains came back very soon. I felt miserable and I forced myself to vomit. I told Hedy that I will probably ^{not} be able to drive to Manhattan and that we will therefore have to stay at home. But after an hour or so I felt better and we went.

And then, after parking the car, when we walked toward the opera building, that enormously severe pain came. I was sitting during the entire opera quietly on my seat and did not leave it during the intermissions.

We had planned, as we had often done before, to stay over

night in Francis' apartment and we drove there, parked the car on West 58th Street and went up. During the night, I had again stomach pains and had to get up once or twice. It was raining the next day and I stayed in bed till noon. I then felt better and we decided to go to a movie theatre on West 34th Street. After the show, we drove home to Brooklyn.

I ate very little, and we sat down to watch television. I felt warm and took my temperature. I had 99.5, and I could not understand what it meant. I had no throat pain, no symptoms of a cold. I decided to go to bed. After a while, I took the temperature again and now I had 101. I had completely forgotten the chest pain, which I had on the way to the opera, 24 hours before.

I slept very well and woke up the next morning, refreshed. I was sure that I had no fever anymore. But when I took my temperature, I was astonished that I had 102. I felt my pulse and found that I had many extrasystoles. That alarmed me. I went down to my office and took my blood pressure. There it was: 100 over 70, or something like that. Now I knew that I had a coronary thrombosis.

I called Marvin and asked him to get me a bed in the intensive care department of the Flower Hospital. He was astonished, but after I explained everything to him, he knew that I was right. He got me a bed, and I went with Hedy by limousine to the hospital. The diagnosis was, of course, confirmed. There were 3 or 4 doctors, who took care of me and they all treated me very well. It was routine care and the main medication was Xylocaine by intravenous drip. They gave me in the beginning too much Valium, 5 mg three times a day, and I slept too much.

I asked them and they changed it to one a day. Lying there was not unpleasant, rather interesting, as I saw many interesting cases that were brought in. We were 8 in the room. The nurses were excellent. Hedy came twice a day, others also came, Francis, Johanna. Hedy stayed in Manhattan in Francis' apartment, went to Brooklyn only when she had to bring something or pick up the mail, etc. They usually kept patients 5 days in intensive care, but they kept me for 7 days, as the fever did not go down. I had no pains whatsoever. Then they transferred me to a single-bed room on the 7th floor, where I had a beautiful room with the view of the Central Park. On the 10th day I was allowed out of bed, and I started to walk in the corridor. I was still very weak then. I had then often visitors, and almost everybody in the family came. Altogether, I stayed a little over three weeks in the hospital.

While there, I had enough time to contemplate and think about my future and I had come to the conclusion that it was high time for me to retire. And one day, Francis came to tell me that the family had come to that same conclusion. We then discussed details like selling the house and moving away from Brooklyn.

At this point it may be appropriate to ask what had caused or initiated the heart attack. I had not mentioned till now anything about my physical condition and therefore have to do it now at this juncture. I have to go far back to the First World War, when I was suffering from rheumatic fever, which I had mentioned already. It did not affect my heart, apparently. Since then, I was always in good health. I suffered from migraine headaches and I also had all kinds of food allergies. I had psoriasis in a mild form, only on some fingers of the hands. That I had in-

herited from my mother. Francis had it too and also Walter.

I had a slightly elevated blood pressure for the last few years. It sometimes went as high as 180/80, and I was taking quite regularly anti-hypertensive medication, Aldactazide, half a tablet or one tablet daily, and very frequently, at times daily, I checked my blood pressure. I also developed a very slight edema of my lower legs and therefore abstained completely from salt and reduced my fluid intake. Aldactazide controlled also very well the edema. I knew that it was very necessary to bring my weight down, which was for a long time as high as 175 lbs. and I had brought it down to 165.

The overweight was, of course, an important factor and dated back many years. It became alarming, when I first noticed a rise of my blood pressure, which I may have had also for a few years. When I observed it, it was already too late, as, in conjunction with the edema, it meant congestive heart disease. The medication helped to some degree, but the symptoms were then only suppressed. I was well aware of it, but was not strict enough with my diet and therefore not successful enough in reducing my weight.

One of my problems was sleep, not enough sleep. I never went to bed before midnight, most of the time later, as paperwork in my office demanded it. I knew that that was very damaging to my health, that 6 or 7 hours of sleep were not enough, but I could not do anything about it. I was always sleepy and had to strain myself to fight against sleepiness. Vacations did not help me to recuperate, as they were always also strenuous. That strain was a contributing factor to my heart condition was certain. Also contributing were aggravations, excitement, and the strain

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caused by our general situation.

I had not mentioned it yet that general conditions in Brooklyn had deteriorated very much. When we moved into our house in 1951, we had moved into a fine neighborhood with a better class of people. But gradually, over the years, it became one of the worst sections of New York. Statistically, our area had one of the worst crime records. Attacks in the street, robberies, burglaries, became daily occurrences. I had to have installed all kinds of alarm systems in our house, since we had a few minor burglaries. These alarm systems seemed to work, since real burglaries had stopped for the last few years.

But I was exposed to serious attacks, once in the office, and 4 or 5 times in the street, in the course of the last 6 or 7 years. In 1968, I was badly injured, when a man threw a big block of ice into the side of my face, causing a fracture of the mandible, a brain concussion, so that I fell unconscious to the ground, which resulted in a fracture of the left 5th finger and other injuries. But the worst attack, which almost cost my and Hedy's lives, occurred on the 19th of January, 1975. It affected me very much emotionally.

I did not want Hedy nor the rest of the family to know about it, as long as I lived, and so I did not tell them anything that happened. Would I have done that, I would have had to close up my office for ever. But I recorded a description of what happened on my tape-recorder. Later, after I had retired from practice, I changed my mind and let them listen to my recording.

I am bringing here verbally what I had recorded, a few weeks after it had happened: