

**A Biography of and Interview with  
Isidor I. Sprecker<sup>1</sup>, DVM**

**Class of 1939, College of Veterinary Medicine, Cornell University**

Author and Interviewer: Dr. Donald F. Smith, *Austin O. Hooey Dean Emeritus*

**He took the Road Less Traveled**

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other ...<sup>2</sup>*

Robert Frost's poem was a template for Isidor Sprecker's life. He was a scholar and avid reader, a musician, sage, philanthropist—and a good veterinarian. His classmates remember him as studious, analytical and cerebral. A quiet man who might not always have been one *of* them in a social sense, he was always one *with* them in advancing the profession.



New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph

*Isidor I. Sprecher 1939*

Born August 8, 1913 to Russian Jews who had fled to the United States to avoid persecution, Isidor was raised to be an independent thinker. The knowledge of farm animals that he acquired growing up while working cattle and horses, made him popular with his student colleagues when he arrived at Cornell.

Dr. Sprecker practiced in Derby, Connecticut after graduation, and continued there until he joined the US Air Corps and Veterinary Corps during World War II. His assignments were in the British West Indies where he inspected food and tended to the medical needs of the dogs and cats owned by the officers on the base, as well as service dogs.

In July 1945, he married Sylvia: a teacher, reading specialist and consultant from Connecticut who had sought employment in the Caribbean to be close to Isidor. When they returned to Connecticut the following year, Sylvia suggested that he consider going to medical school to become a surgeon. Though he would have realized greater income as a physician, he loved his animals and remained committed to ministering to their health.

Unable to return to Derby because a new highway had bisected his former animal hospital, Dr. Sprecker established a practice in Waterbury in central Connecticut. When faced with challenging cases, he would seek assistance from Yale University's medical school, just an hour's drive from his home. He was an inquisitive man and fashioned a mini-laboratory in

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<sup>1</sup> Isidor used the family name, Sprecher, during his Cornell days, but changed it to Sprecker when he was in practice. At his request, the library and cancer institute that bear his name revert to the initial spelling.

<sup>2</sup> The "Road Not Taken", from "You Come Too" by Robert Frost (1916)

his garage to create new designs of diagnostic instruments and orthopedic or dental appliances that met special needs for his patients. A voracious reader, he loved to adapt innovative approaches to medical and surgical challenges.

When the veterinary college at Cornell was facing serious fiscal constraints in the 1970s, Dr. Sprecker developed a close relationship with Dean Edward Melby and offered to help the college financially. In honor of his former professor, Dr. Peter Olafson, he established a fund to support pathology. The Spreckers later established scholarships to benefit both veterinary and undergraduate students at Cornell. Over the next two decades and spanning several veterinary deans and university presidents, the bond between the Spreckers and Cornell solidified and deepened. A special friendship was forged between Dr. Sprecker and Cornell President Frank H. T. Rhodes.

During Dr. Sprecker's 55<sup>th</sup> class reunion in June 1994, the veterinary college's library was renamed as the Roswell P. Flower-Isidor I. and Sylvia M. Sprecher Veterinary Library and Learning Resource Center in recognition of the couple's extraordinary generosity. They were also cited as Foremost Benefactors of Cornell University.<sup>3</sup> Both Isidor and Sylvia shared a deep love and appreciation for books, and it was inspiring to observe them when they visited the college, sitting among the rare books and manuscripts of the veterinary collection, pondering the wisdom and learning that had impregnated the profession by generations of veterinary scholars.

Nine years after the dedication of the library, the Sprecker's generosity was again honored at with the establishment of the Institute for Comparative Cancer Research, led by Professor Rodney Page. By forging linkages between cancer biology and clinical research in multiple species, the Institute advances knowledge of both animal and human cancer. President Emeritus Frank H.T. Rhodes thanked the Spreckers for their continued generosity. "*The Sprecher Institute will be a jewel in the Cornell crown*" he proclaimed. Isidor's response captured his longstanding pride, and his commitment to Cornell. "*I hope others will benefit from the Institute and emulate what we have done to help make Cornell great.*"

The Spreckers moved to their retirement in Boynton Beach, Florida, in 1977 and continued to participate in local Cornell events, occasionally making the return trek to Ithaca. Following Isidor's death in January 2004, Sylvia moved to Delray Beach where she currently resides.

Continuing the words of Robert Frost,

*"I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -  
I took the one less traveled by  
And that has made all the difference."*

Isidor Sprecker's contributions to veterinary medicine and to Cornell made a difference.

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<sup>3</sup> Classmate Dr. John D. Murray is also Foremost Benefactor. See his interview elsewhere in this collection.

## Interview

[Listen to the Interview](#)

**Subject:** Isidor I. Sprecker, DVM  
**Accompanied by:** Mrs. Sylvia Sprecker, wife  
**Interviewer:** Dr. Donald F. Smith  
**Interview Date:** January 22, 2008  
**Location:** Delray Beach, FL

Photograph taken at the  
Dedication for the  
Sprecher Comparative Cancer Program



*Dr. Isidor I. Sprecker and Mrs. Sylvia Sprecker, 9/11/03*

### **Interviewer's Note:**

*I first became acquainted with the Spreckers in 1994 when the name of the veterinary library was changed to reflect their generosity to the college. After becoming dean in 1997, I (often with my wife, Doris) got to know Isidor and Sylvia much better during our annual alumni visits in their area. During these and other meetings, Isidor expressed the desire to make a second major gift to the college to reflect their deep commitment to cancer research. This culminated in the establishment of the Sprecher Institute for Comparative Cancer Research in 2003. Shortly after presenting a speech in January 2004 in Rochester, New York, honoring the birthday of the university founder, Ezra Cornell, I received a telephone call informing me that Isidor Sprecker had just died. The lives of these two great men, each devoted to the advancement of learning, was now juxtaposed temporally. (Dr. Donald F. Smith)*

*Dr. Smith:*

This is Donald Smith from Cornell University. The date is January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2008. We are in Delray Beach, Florida, with Mrs. Sylvia Sprecker. Sylvia is the wife of Dr. Isidor Sprecker, Class of 1939. We are here to talk about some of the events of their life together—him as a veterinarian and you, Sylvia, as his partner for many years.

Sylvia, thank you for agreeing to do this. Please start by talking about how your husband's family came from Russia and also how your family came from Russia.

*Mrs. Sprecker:*

I can tell you that Iz's family came [from Russia], but I don't know under what circumstances. They did have a grain business which probably didn't do very well and that spurred them into coming to this country.

As far as my parents were concerned, my father and mother met each other through relatives in Odessa, Russia,<sup>1</sup> where my father was stationed with some of the Czar's people. They were trained to fix anything that was broken, but he wasn't happy and he decided that it would be better to come to this country where he worked as an engineer in one of the factories. He gave that up to buy and sell old houses.

*Dr. Smith:*

How did you meet your husband?

*Mrs. Sprecker:*

I met my husband at an adult camp nearby his home. I was a secretary during one summer. A cousin of his evidently took a good liking to me and she introduced me to him. [We were] married in British West Indies during the war. We made up our minds that if he was stationed somewhere where there wasn't any danger of war, that I would come.

I took the civil service exam to be able to come overseas. At that time, Uncle Sam gave me a very nice ride from my hometown to Puerto Rico. From Puerto Rico, we went to British West Indies. There we were married on July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1945, had a honeymoon in Barbados, courtesy of Uncle Sam. Then we came back and I worked for one of the officers at the base until he was discharged.

*Dr. Smith:*

You said earlier that your marriage certificate contained a long list of people who had to sign off before you could get married.

*Mrs. Sprecker:*

In those days, the colonel had to come to see if you were white. They didn't care to have any of the officers or any of the soldiers marry natives. So, when he came, they sent the permission slip all the way up to Washington, D.C., and came back down with thirteen endorsements.

*Dr. Smith:*

What were Dr. Sprecker's responsibilities during the war?

*Mrs. Sprecker:*

He had to inspect food, which was the major responsibility. But there were officers who had cats, and officers who had dogs, and there were a few dogs on the post. He was busy. He had a very nice assistant and they managed to do everything that they could do.

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<sup>1</sup> City in southern Ukraine, on the shore of the Black Sea.

*Dr. Smith:*

He graduated in 1939, two years before the U.S. entered the war. He was in practice in Connecticut during those years?

*Mrs. Sprecker:*

Yes, he was in practice in Derby, Connecticut,<sup>2</sup> but by the time we came back from the British West Indies, that area had changed when the State put through a very large highway.

We went back to his folk's home, then decided to go back to my home. At that time, there were vacancies [in veterinary practice] and he decided to practice in Waterbury, Connecticut.<sup>3</sup>

*Dr. Smith:*

Were there other veterinarians practicing there at the time?

*Mrs. Sprecker:*

There were two other veterinarians practicing at the same time. There was one veterinarian doing large animal, exclusively, and the other veterinarian was [doing] exclusive small animal. My husband decided that he would take the small animal route.

*Dr. Smith:*

During his educational experience, he distinguished himself in many ways. He was a very good student, graduating near the top of his class. He had some good friends at Cornell. Do you recall who some of those were?

*Mrs. Sprecker:*

There were two brothers [Morris, from the Class of 1938],<sup>4</sup> Bob Ferber,<sup>5</sup> John Murray,<sup>6</sup> Harry Schiller.<sup>7</sup> Most of the boys came from New York, so they were very happy to be with a country boy who knew horses and cows very well.<sup>8</sup>

*Dr. Smith:*

During his years in practice, he often told me how interested he was in developing new techniques. He was very good with his hands, good as a surgeon. He also talked about the way in which he read up on new techniques and learned things from the journals.

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<sup>2</sup> Small city northwest of New Haven.

<sup>3</sup> Fifth largest city in Connecticut, midway between Hartford and Bridgeport.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander and Robert Morris '38, twin brothers, originally from Jamaica, NY; both deceased.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Ferber '39, originally from Flushing, NY; currently resides in Syosset, NY; his interview is elsewhere in this collection.

<sup>6</sup> John D. Murray '39, originally from Elkland, PA; currently resides in Keuka Park, NY; his interview is elsewhere in this collection.

<sup>7</sup> Harry Schiller, originally from New York City; deceased.

<sup>8</sup> Isidor shared a house with several other Jewish veterinary students (personal communication, 2007, Dr. John Murray '39).

*Mrs. Sprecker:*

He had a lot of scientific journals and he always had a place in the garage for all the things that he would study. In later life, he used to do some experiments, especially for cancer research—on his own; he didn't have anybody sponsoring him. He would take some of the animals that would have cancer, and bring them down to Yale University.

*Dr. Smith:*

Somewhere along the line, he became very interested in supporting Cornell. In the mid 1990s, you and he opened the rededication of the library.<sup>9</sup> Could you talk about that?

*Mrs. Sprecker:*

When he came to Cornell, there was a very small library. It was a one room thing, very little room to study. He vowed then, that if at any time he could afford it, he would change that, which he did. I think that is very commendable.

*Dr. Smith:*

Then, later, during the time that we worked together, you funded the cancer program.<sup>10</sup>

*Mrs. Sprecker:*

Yes, that's another thing. He had two people in his family who died of cancer. I had one person in my family who died of cancer. When you see that, especially on younger people—today, it seems to happen more often in older people—you can never forget it. As long as we could afford to do it, we supported the cancer program.

*Dr. Smith:*

That's a very wonderful thing that you both have done. As you look back on your husband's career, are there things that you remember with special happiness?

*Mrs. Sprecker:*

Well, there were always little stories about people who would come in with their dogs. We had one gentleman who was a minister, who loved cats. He had a soft heart for every cat that came his way. He had about 23 cats in his place, and they were all well-fed and well-cared for. But at the time when he passed away, his wife didn't know what to do with them all. She called my husband and they had to euthanize them and that was a terrible, terrible time in his life. He never wanted to put anything to sleep.

*Dr. Smith:*

Was he happy as a veterinarian; is that what he wanted to be?

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<sup>9</sup> Dr. and Mrs. Sprecker were named Foremost Benefactors of Cornell University in a ceremony officiated by President H.T. Rhodes on June 23, 1992. On June 11, 1994, in a ceremony officiated by Dean Robert D. Phemister, the veterinary college library was renamed as the Isidor I. and Sylvia M. Sprecher Veterinary Library and Learning Resources Center, in recognition of their gift.

<sup>10</sup> In recognition of a second major gift to veterinary medicine, Dean Donald F. Smith officiated at the ceremony honoring the establishment of the Isidor I. and Sylvia M. Sprecher Comparative Cancer Program on September 11, 2003.

*Mrs. Sprecker:*

Oh yes, when we first came back from the war, I said to him, “All you have to do now is go to medical school and be a surgeon”. He said, “I don’t want that; I want my animals”, and that is where he stayed.

*Dr. Smith:*

Why did you suggest medical school?

*Mrs. Sprecker:*

Well, I thought it would be a more lucrative life and also not as hard a life as a vet. The days that he started to practice, you were a [24]-hour man without any other outside help, until you were established. Even when you got outside help, you still were there 24 hours. If everybody went, there was somebody who had to stay there. He usually had someone who lived in the hospital, but when it came to puppies at night, or kittens at night, he had to have help.

*Dr. Smith:*

When you came back for reunion, which you did often, you always saw Dr. John Murray. What was the relationship that Iz had with Dr. Murray?

*Mrs. Sprecker:*

I don’t know, but they were very friendly and they liked each other.

*Dr. Smith:*

Do you think that was the case when they were classmates in school as well?

*Mrs. Sprecker:*

Oh yes, yes—he often talked about him.

*Dr. Smith:*

You also recalled a Chinese person who was in his class—Dr. Francis Kwong—and you tried to meet him in China once.<sup>11</sup>

*Mrs. Sprecker:*

Francis Kwong had graduated as a veterinarian from Cornell and went back to China. At the time of the revolution, he was relegated to the northern part of China. When that phase of life was over, he came back to China and was at the head of an agricultural school. That is where we tried to see him [when we visited China], but we couldn’t make contact with him. When we returned from our trip, Iz and he corresponded for a while.

*Dr. Smith:*

In closing do you have any way in which you would like your husband, Dr. Sprecker, to be remembered at Cornell?

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<sup>11</sup> Frances Kwong Jung-lu '39, originally from Taisun, Kwangtung, China; deceased.

*Mrs. Sprecker:*

Well, I think they've honored him very nicely and I think that the name will be left there for quite some time. That is a very nice recognition.

*Dr. Smith:*

Could you explain the different spellings of your name? When he was in college, he went by Sprecher, but later it was changed to Sprecker.

*Mrs. Sprecker:*

He changed it because people would come into the office and say: "Spree-cher; Spre-cher" so if you put the "k" in it you get the sound of "Spre-ker". It is more of an English sound. The German influence sound is "Sprecher", which means *speaker*. In order to Anglicize it, it became easier to change the spelling.

*Dr. Smith:*

When his and your name appeared both in the library and learning center, and also in the cancer center, he chose the original student spelling of the name: Sprecher.

Thank you, Sylvia.

*Mrs. Sprecker:*

Thank you. It's been a pleasure.