

Ephraim Shorr

June 1, 1897 — January 6, 1956

We have come together to honor the memory of our friend Ephraim Shorr. To us who knew and loved him, his sudden and untimely loss is inexplicable and almost unbearable. But in our grief and bereavement it is appropriate that we think for a few moments of the meaning of his life and the influence it has had and will have on us and on others.

Ephraim Shorr's remarkable intellectual qualities were recognized from his earliest school days. His retentiveness was prodigious; his synthesis of ideas, intuitive; his critical capacity, precocious. Edward Tolstoi, a classmate in high school at New Haven, his roommate and close associate in college and medical school, tells us of his photographic memory, his effortless leadership in all classes, his skill as a pianist, his artistic appreciation and rendition of Chopin, Mozart, and Bach, his facility as a draftsman, his enthusiastic participation in sports and other extracurricular school activities. He tells also of his generosity and helpfulness to those who were less gifted—a trait that characterized him throughout his life.

During his education at New Haven, Ephraim Shorr received many honors. Great expectations were entertained for him not only by his family but also by enthusiastic friends and teachers. These good opinions he took seriously as obligations for fulfillment; and with all the industry, pertinacity, and faith that were in him he strove throughout his later life to match in achievement his own great talents and the confident anticipations of his friends. To everyone who is both ambitious and conscientious, the laudable but vain desire for fulfillment is a compelling motive. To Ephraim Shorr it was a passion which was responsible in no small part for his later erudition and accomplishment.

Upon his graduation from Yale Medical School he sought internship at Mount Sinai Hospital, where his examination entitled him to first choice of places and where he spent the next two and one-half years in clinical service and study.

Then in 1924 came the time for decision concerning his future course. He chose, perhaps because of the influence of his great teacher Lafayette B. Mendel, to focus his efforts on the field of metabolism and nutrition at Cornell, where Graham Lusk had established a school of metabolic research and where Eugene DuBois was pioneering in the application of calorimetry to study of disease.

Eugene DuBois tells of Ephraim Shore's arrival at Cornell and the Russell Sage Institute of Pathology. He came armed with a fine letter of recommendation from Lafayette Mendel and with preparation and qualifications meriting an important post in any medical school. His demands were modest. He did not care for high-sounding titles, big budget, or elaborate equipment. All he wanted was a place to work and opportunity to test some ideas in research. When he was told that the only available post was that of a laboratory technician, he accepted it eagerly and gratefully. Although the position was unimpressive, it offered the inestimable advantage of freedom to engage in basic fundamental investigation without consideration of immediate practical application.

This was the modest beginning of a distinguished career in research and teaching that was conducted over a period of thirty-five years entirely at Cornell University Medical College, the New York Hospital, and the Russell Sage Institute of Pathology

To his lifework Ephraim Shorr brought remarkable qualifications. The scope of his detailed information was phenomenal. To the study of problems of metabolism and endocrinology he could apply assimilated knowledge of biochemistry, physical chemistry, and general physiology that aided in the creation of new and challenging hypotheses and afforded direction and continuity to his explorations and research. He reacted adversely to the idea of the amateur in research. He knew, as few men have, the background, preparation, and concentration that are necessary in the evolution of valid hypotheses and secure establishment of the simplest facts. Because of his own extraordinary capacity and fertile imagination, many of his investigations became immediately productive. It was a pleasure to watch him develop a problem and then devise method and decisive experiment for its solution; lines of approach were so precisely anticipated and planned that without false starts or perceptible delay they were translated into trial and action. Ephraim Shorr was an excellent technician, meticulous in detail; his experiments were painstakingly executed and they were repeated until he could convince himself of their accuracy and significance. This in itself was a difficult task, for he was an exacting critic of his own work. He once spoke of Mr. Fabian Soderstrom, the remarkable mechanic who built and operated the Sage Calorimeter, as a man who made every piece of apparatus a little better than was necessary. It could be said of Ephraim Shorr that he always took care to have his own technique and experiments a little better than was necessary. Once he had convinced himself of the accuracy of his own work he never feared to defend it.

The extent and variety of his investigations were impressive. It was his principle that in his laboratories there should be at least three projects going at all times; one so involved that completion could not be expected in a lifetime; another with a likelihood of solution in several years; and a third that might be completed in several months.

This is neither the place nor the time to recount all of the problems that engaged Ephraim Shorr's attention. It is possible only to indicate the weight of his contribution to science. His interests ranged over the field of endocrinology and metabolism. They included studies of parathyroid diseases, examination of creatin metabolism in maladies of the thyroid, influence of the pituitary on the pathogenesis of diabetes, calcium and phosphorus disturbances in diseases of bone, urinary stone formation, the action of sex hormones on citric acid excretion, the effect of menstruation and varying clinical states on epithelium of the vaginal tract, action of adrenal hormones in shock and hypertension, infrared spectra of steroids. During the past decade the major focus of his interest was a study of substances formed in liver and kidney during anaerobiosis and their action upon circulation in various normal and pathologic conditions. This exploration, one of the most productive of our time, led among other things to definition of the functions and actions of ferritin and its identification with a harmful substance elaborated by the liver during the development of shock. Some of this important work was presented in 1954 in Ephraim Shorr's Harvey Lecture.

This phase of his researches was never more productive than during the last year. Recent conversations with him disclosed his joy over the success of some of the newer experiments in which he saw the possibility of ultimate success in his long campaign to elucidate the mechanisms of shock. It appeared that his whole concept could soon be launched and projected on a bolder scale and with revolutionary implications.

In spite of the magnitude of his accomplishment, Ephraim Shorr was never satisfied. Never once did he feel that he had attained his goal of fulfillment. Above his desk was a quotation from Whitman which said

"It is provided in the essence of things that from any fruition of success shall come forth something to make a greater struggle necessary."

This truth, always with him, spurred him constantly to new exploration and experiment.

Above his desk there was another quotation, attributed to Stravinsky, and this was

"We have too much to do to be in a hurry."

This somewhat enigmatic reminder had partial explanation in a statement of Samuel Johnson that also attracted Ephraim Shorr. Johnson said

"A large work is difficult because it is large, even though all its parts might be performed with facility. Where there are many things to be done, each must be allowed its share of time and labor in the proportion only which it bears to the whole."

Ephraim Shorr saw in their entirety large concepts as few men have seen them. If, however, we are seeking today the meaning of Ephraim Shorr's life, we cannot rest with estimate of his scientific achievements. He was, above all, a humanitarian.

There was goodness in him, and its expression which arose neither from ambition nor from expediency was the natural spontaneous outflowing of a warm and generous nature.

He understood and was helpful to adolescents, who so frequently are uncomfortable in the presence of adults. He understood medical students and the house officers and Fellows who surrounded him. The doors to his offices and laboratories were always open; and the exacting detail of his investigations and other activities never limited the time that he spent sympathetically with his younger associates. His advice was sought by an amazing variety of people; he liked to help, and he had so much to give.

He had an engaging habit of offering imaginative, appropriate, and unexpected gifts to his friends, a new edition of his favorite "Tristram Shandy," or a record of South African folk songs, or a simple book-holder for a man who habitually wrote in bed.

Ephraim Shorr was an accomplished and warmhearted physician, capable of offering keen diagnosis, effective therapy, and also sympathetic understanding. Although his research and much of his clinical work was in a restricted field, he resisted the thought of rigid specialization and maintained for himself and his colleagues the ideal of comprehension of the whole of medicine. The Endocrine Clinic, which he formed at the New York Hospital, illustrated the breadth of his vision of medical service. Long before group practice or psychosomatic medicine was generally emphasized, indeed over twenty years ago, he fostered an enterprise where internists, endocrinologists, psychiatrists, surgeons, dermatologists, and social workers could serve a common purpose.

All of his life Ephraim Shorr was a teacher who never tired of teaching. His instruction was seldom formal; it was more a sharing of some of his vast erudition and penetrating philosophy with those about him. In the aggregate, its influence on the able young men who surrounded him was incalculable. In the guidance of associates, he encouraged and led but never dictated.

Ephraim Shorr was a dedicated man, and he was interested in anything that might better his fellow men. In Public Health he was active on various committees and in fostering its increased support. During the last Presidential Election he campaigned for the candidate of his choice and was already renewing his preparations for participation in the coming election.

In spite of his many activities, he lived quietly. His life apart from the laboratory, lecture room, and clinic was spent in his home. There, surrounded by some of his favorite etchings and his music, he shared similar tastes and enthusiasms with the gentle and understanding woman who was his wife and companion almost thirty years. In the summer their cottage at Martha's Vineyard was a haven where they could see their friends and indulge their love of flowers and the outdoors. Their affection for each other was beautiful to see. Ephraim Shorr never tired of telling of the happiness of his home life.

Although he was never satisfied with his work, and it was not in the nature of things that he should be, he was happy in the accomplishment of each day; and never more than during the last few months, when progress of his experiments was so gratifying. Also, he occasionally found comfort in a statement of Samuel Johnson made at the time he published his dictionary. "In this work," Johnson said, "when it shall be found that much is omitted, let it not be forgotten that much likewise is performed."

To us who do not have Ephraim Shorr's inner drive for fulfillment and who can view his life more dispassionately, his achievement and accomplishment seem to place him among the greatest scientists. He lived and worked in the tradition of Lavoisier, Liebig, Voit, Lusk, and DuBois—immortal contributors to the science of nutrition. His teaching, his philosophy, and his spirit will endure in the thoughts and acts of the scores of brilliant young men who have looked to him for guidance. The thoughts that his genius has brought to medicine will never die.

We are still appalled that Ephraim Shorr is no longer with us. Carl Binger, who loved him, sent, yesterday, lines that express much that we feel

*Quiet friend, with critical but smiling mind
Why have you gone so soon
Before your work was done
And all the beauty that you cherished turned to truth
And long before the love you gave could be repaid.*

We all are still desolate with our loss, but each of us can glory in the privilege and satisfaction of having known Ephraim Shorr and seen him at work. We can find comfort in the assurance that in spirit and influence he will remain with us.

D. P. Barr