

Theodore Kretzmar

Specialist Surgeon



I matriculated at the Kimberley Boys High school. I was the only matriculant to go to Wits University for anything. I stayed at the Men's residence. The first few weeks were devoted to residence rules including the guarding of the residence mascot, Phineas, a life size statue of a Scotsman in full regalia. The story goes that he was 'borrowed' from the pavement of a barbershop in Edinburgh. I wonder if he still resides somewhere in the back of a dark and dusty cupboard in Dalrymple Hall.

The next function was Rag Day – with floats and a Rag Queen. We dressed in ridiculous costumes and solicited money for good causes from the crowds who came to watch.

In this Rag photo, on the left is Charlie Metcalf who had a dilapidated truck and went on into insurance. Next to him Zallie Rubinstein. He was my mentor in physics and chemistry. He became a radiologist in Israel Then there is me and on the right Solly Rosenberg who became a dentist and emigrated to America.





The years of study passed. I too have memories of the continuous bridge game with **Arthur Vinik** as the tutor with amongst others, **Avroy Fanaroff** and **Mike Plit**, who later was my best man at my wedding.

After qualifying, I went onto the Senior Houseman / Registrar surgical circuit under **Professor du Plessis**. I was the surgical houseman to the respected **Jos Lannon** at the children's hospital **TMH**, at the same time as Avroy and Mike were there in the medical wards.

From there I went to **Baragwanath** as a registrar. After completing the time required, I went to Edinburgh to attend the course and write the Fellowship. During this time, I married Gwenda nee Cohen from Bloemfontein, and fifty-four years later we have three married boys,

three daughters-in-law and six grandchildren aged from four to fourteen – all living in Johannesburg.



Some anecdotal links from Bara to Edinburgh and London

Walking up the long outdoor corridor to tea, my co registrar **Abe Mizrachi** was stopped for a chat with a young nurse, who happened to have a sinus under her jaw. Abe told me this was a median dental sinus from caries of a lower incisor tooth and treatment is removal of the tooth. It just so happened that my first short case in the Edinburgh Fellowship exam was just such a problem, which I correctly diagnosed. (They had him as TB). The examiner said yes of course, that is what it is, and promptly removed the case from the exam pending an x-ray which concurred. I would never have known this, but for the chance passage encounter at Baragwanath Hospital.

One of the professors lecturing on the course in Edinburgh, on thoracic surgery, was discussing treatment of the daily intake. He quizzed us about treatment of a seaman who had been brought in stabbed in the heart. I put up a hand --- 'Sir was the stab into the right or left ventricle?' Answer was, 'Who are you? and where do come from???' 'Baragwanath Hospital, Sir, and we operate on these frequently, if right sided stabs. (Stabs into the left ventricle do not get to hospital.) I wondered what would happen if I met him in the exam. I did, and he was charming. We had a wonderful general discussion around stab heart surgery at Baragwanath Hospital in the 1960s.

I passed the exam and the sherry in the college library, coming in from the snow, welcoming those who passed, was the best cherry on the top one could have.

We then moved to London where I worked for two years before returning to South Africa. Gwenda cajoled me into writing the London FRCS during our time in London, which I did and passed. We lived quite close to my sister Geraldine and husband from our class **Ronnie Auerbach**.

At my interview at Farnborough hospital in South London they warned me that intake nights could be very busy. When I enquired how busy? They said there may be at least 4 or 5 cases coming in overnight! One trauma emergency still remains in my memory. Three young men wrapped their car around a lamppost. One was a head injury and I sent him to a neurosurgical unit. The other two were a ruptured spleen and a ruptured liver and spleen, on both of whom I successfully operated. Next day when the elderly consultant heard about this he was concerned and asked me why I had not called him. I gently asked him when he last handled such cases. His answer was he had never done so, and I could see that he was relieved that he had not been called.

Setting up in Springs

After returning to South Africa and registration, I opened my private surgical practice in Springs. I was also surgeon to the Far East Rand group of hospitals, as well to the gold mine hospitals then still in existence, now long gone. My first consulting room was provided to me by a GP practice, of which one partner was **Max Shaff**, also in our class of '60. I chaired a group of directors and doctors who built and ran a Medical Consultants building Medpark, which thrived, and then was sold when no longer needed.

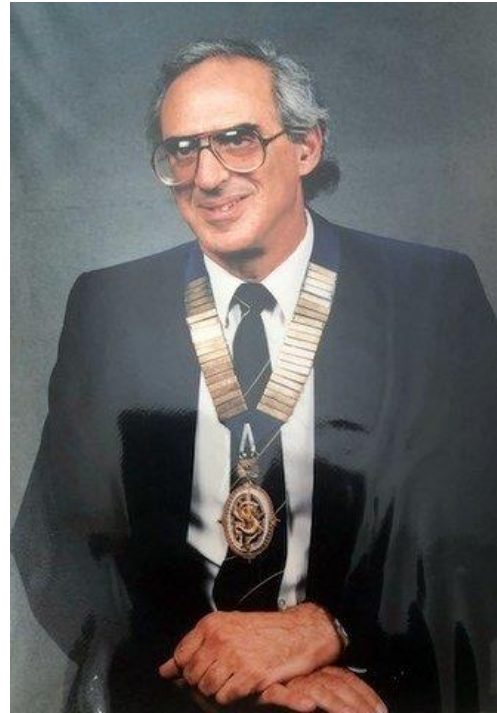
The 'gold' chain

The years in Springs passed quickly and relatively uneventfully until 1995 when I was no longer, for health reasons able to continue as a surgeon and closed my practice. I practiced general surgery in Springs when general surgery was still very general. During this time I was elected president of the then Federal Council of the East Rand for a year.

I remember that the chain with names of past presidents was very heavy, I am sure not gold, but someone must have thought otherwise, as it was stolen some years later

We relocated to Johannesburg and when physically no longer able to work as surgeon, I was introduced by a friend who was an insurance broker, to the two very young actuaries, Adrian Gore and Barry Swartzberg (the age of my sons) who had just started a revolutionary medical aid scheme, originally called Momentum, now the colossus of Discovery Health (as a part of Discovery Holdings). And after three searing interviews I was inducted into a new career, in medical aid / insurance.

I became a member of the teams that developed systems and protocols which have now morphed into



the highly sophisticated systems of today, but the original skeletons are still there. I was given an award for my contributions. Here I am with my colleagues and staff at Discovery with my 'Lifetime Achievement Award'. I am still

with Discovery, working at home now due to the virus, but enjoying every minute of my work in my home office (below).



Sharing a life with Multiple Sclerosis

At 50 I was diagnosed with MS. It was not a shock, rather, an epiphany – ‘a sudden, intuitive insight into the reality or essential meaning of something’. It all made sense. Five years earlier I had had an acute episode of what they called Guillain-Barre Syndrome, when my legs buckled and for a while I was paralysed up to the waist. I recovered but was unsteady and bumping into things – hence my re-visit to the neurologist.

It dawned on me that this probably went way further back affecting me from my student days. I recalled I had had an optical neuritis which is often a sign of MS when I had a sudden loss of vision and pain in my eyes. After a while, it went away. I realized that the tiredness in my legs in running or swimming or playing squash, all along, was probably the same problem.

Nobody could diagnose it in those days. In the late 50s they did not have the Computed Tomography (CT) scans or Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) technology. It was fortunate that I did not have such a stark diagnosis in my early twenties. I might have thought I could not do this or that – could I marry? have children? could I have specialized in Surgery? Knowing this diagnosis then, would certainly have drastically changed the course of my life. So, thankfully not knowing, I went ahead and did all of those things.

Not fighting – but embracing

Once I knew – what to do? I realized there was no sense in ‘fighting’ the disease, I had to learn how best to live with it. All I had lost was the use of my legs. Others were far worse off. I had to work out how to overcome this disadvantage and function as normally as possible for as long as possible.

With a tremendously supportive wife and family – I continued to do surgery for several years, sitting on a high stool. To move around the house, I first used a three wheeled walker.

To move further afield, I got a horse – actually, an electric scooter. And by further afield I am not just talking about going to Sandton City – but to Venice and a cruise in the Adriatic, to Barcelona and on a boat trip along the Nile visiting tombs in the Valley of the Kings.

The opportunity to change my working life from physical surgery to mental agility on the computer where my experience counted, was a blessing. Today I am still putting in a day’s work for Discovery Health and loving it. I feel that the disease has probably burned itself out by now, as I am nearly 84!

Biographical sketch contributed by Theodore Kretzmar, Johannesburg

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