

## **Dr. Štefan Šimko**

**(12 June 1916 – 27 September 2002)**

Štefan Šimko, MD and a retired General, deceased on Friday, September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2002 - he was 86 years old. Dr. Štefan Šimko is well known to the Slovak public, and in the international medical community as the founder of the medicine of burns, and the reconstructive surgery in Slovakia. Not all they know, that this was just one of his big deeds, one of the many others pioneering achievements in his lifetime.

His life was full of dramatic changes, and of unusual dynamics. Despite of the many changes, and of the unexpected challenges, Dr. Šimko stood firmly by his humanistic principles. He stood by the people in their most difficult situations, helping people on the edge, between the death and the life. His medical activities contributed to the science of medicine.

He was citizen of his native Kosice, where he spent his forming years, and where he always returned. There he was practicing surgeon, and it was in Kosice where he also died.

He was born June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1916, in the family of Dr. Ľudovít Šimko, the founder and chief of the ORL department of the State Hospital in Kosice. He acquired his high school education at the Real Gymnasium on Kovac Street in Kosice. In the years 1934-1938 he was studying on the Medical School at the Charles University in Prague. At the beginning of the WW2, after forced closure of the Prague university, he continued his medical studies at the University of Zurich, where he defended his thesis "*Ueber die paranasalen Hypophysenoperationen und ihre Erfolge*" and graduated *Summa cum laude*. After graduation he returned to the at that time already occupied Kosice, where his parents still lived. He started his medical career as surgeon assistant at the Pázmány University in Budapest. At the beginning of the 1941 he finished his residency with the certification in the general surgery, techniques and theory of the operations. Same time he had to defend his Swiss diploma once more at the University in Debrecen. After that, he was drafted into the labor unit of the Hungarian army in Kosice.

In the overall wartime situation, after the tragic disappearance of his parents - Dr. Ľudovít (Lajos) Šimko and his wife Irena, born Moškovič, were deported to Auschwitz; the threatening prospective of the Nazi occupation had convinced him to run away from the labor camp and to join the antifascist forces. With a help of the young Serbian Kovinka Ćurić, his future wife, he escaped into Yugoslavia. In the mountains of Yugoslavia they both joined NOVPO, Yugoslavian partisan units. As a military surgeon would Dr. Štefan Šimko, together with his wife as a medical nurse, work in partisan hospitals in Slavonia, Srem, and Bosnia. At the front, he organized medical activities in the form of a mobile surgical team. In the first phase of resistance in mountains he had to operate with primitive tools, without any anesthesia. At the end of 1944, after the defeat of the German military in Yugoslavia, he was working as a surgeon in the Hospital Center #1, in Novi Sad. Here he was able to perform the complex surgeries.

In April 1945 after returning home, where he found out about the tragic death of his parents and many other family members, he received his first post war job in the Medical Center in Košice (Poliklinika Stred). After couple months he started working at the department of Surgery in the State Hospital Košice. In the 1946, yet again, he had to defend his MD diploma at the Charles University in Prague. After that he started to work as the deputy chief with Dr. Steiner in Košice and in Martin.

After a year work in the hospital in Martin, he returned to Košice to work as a civilian doctor in the Military hospital #24, in the department of Surgery, under leadership of Dr. P. Knot. In

1948 he was drafted into the military service. After the officers school he became the chief of the surgical department in the Military Hospital #25 in Prešov. During his active stay in Prešov, Dr. Štefan Šimko was leading a complex operation of the surgical care for about 1,700 patients, members of the Greek partisan army. At that time he accomplished his professional residency under professor Dr. Burian. These extensive surgical activities, again with war victims, were yet another great school for him to acquire surgical skills, especially in the field of plastic surgery. At that time he also published his first scientific article “about sympathetics and blood circulation in limbs”.

In the fall 1950, Dr. Štefan Šimko was transferred to the regional Military Hospital #5 in Ružomberok. Here he was active as the head of the surgical department. After his transfer the rest of patients of the “medical help for the Greeks and Macedonian” action were then treated in Ružomberok.

During his seven and half years long stay in the Military Hospital in Ružomberok, he established the first independent anesthesia department, he initiated the construction of the new modern surgery building, introduced the experimental surgery into the praxis, established kennels and operational rooms for experiments, begun to develop the chest surgery, established fundamentals of the reconstructive surgery, in cooperation with army film group he made educational movies, he educated and promoted professional careers for many of his colleagues. Together with Dr. Rozhold they built a pump for the extra-corporal circulation. This instrument was patented and used in the field circumstances. With his expert and highly professional activities Dr. Šimko contributed to the great name of the Military Hospital in Ružomberok.

In the year 1962 Dr. Štefan Šimko returned to Košice as a chief of the surgical department of the Military Hospital. He was active in this function for next ten years. In the new environment in Košice he continued in his experimental surgery initiatives in cooperation with the University of Veterinarian Medicine. With the help of the extra-corporal circulation equipment he performed the open-heart surgery, performed transplantations, and gradually focused on the myocardium infarct. In this field he defended his PhD in the year 1958.

In Košice Dr. Šimko became interested in the work of Professor Boerem in the field of hyperbaric treatment. Two hyperbaric chambers were built in cooperation with VSZ and Airforce Academy (Dr. Rampacek), one for single person, and one large walk-in chamber. With these hyperbaric chambers the Dr. Šimko’s team achieved excellent results, even though the initially expected effects on the post-traumatic shock were not confirmed. The domain of the hyperbaric treatment was the gas caused phlegmn, the CO poisoning, and some other cases of unconsciousness. In the Military Hospital Košice he introduced the chest surgery, furthered the chest surgery of the sympathetics and the thyroid gland surgery. In cooperation with professor Kunstat they used the extra-corporal circulation equipment at the cytostatic regional therapy of the limbs’ malign diseases by excluding the limb from the circulation, and introduced a vein catheter using Seldinger’s method. Thanks to him, the Military Hospital Košice, as the first medical establishment in Slovakia received haemo-dialysis equipment for clinical use.

In the year 1969, after the Soviet occupation, and after his older son Dusan’s emigration to Switzerland, he decided to leave the Army. He applied for, and he was appointed to the position of the chief of the newly created Burns Center in ZÚNZ -VSŽ Šaca. Even if this was a major change to leave a leading position in a military medical establishment, Dr. Šimko, with stamina characteristic for him, started to build a new, until then in Slovakia non-existent,

department for the treatment of patients with severe burn. This required very specialized skills for a general surgeon, and in incredibly short time he was able to change his focus and orientation to the challenges of the treatment of the thermal traumas. His new activities started in the “old hospital”, what’s now FRO in Šaca. From 1970, in the then newly built hospital in Šaca, he begun to build the new department, including the technical equipment, and personnel.

There was no other place, where the newly appointed personnel would gain the experience. It was necessary to educate and train all the medical staff. He coped successfully with that task. And so started the history of the Burn Center, which together with final part of the surgical activities of Dr. Šimko, most of us, and also he himself, regard as his pinnacle of success. Even, as he would say, this was “one of the saddest areas of medicine”, in the short time he built up a department, which gained the status of the Burn Center providing advanced care and treatment for severely burned from the whole country. Since that time the Center treated 16,000 inpatients, and more than 35,000 outpatients. Death rate for the thermal traumas decreased from 24% before 1969, to the current 2.4%.

Besides the development of the Burn Center, Dr. Šimko continued in his medical research for military. In the year 1970 he published his pioneering work about hyperbaric treatment of the burns with CO poisoning. This was a research in co called group A/u, e.g. of the European importance. His Burn Center participated also in the research and development of the artificial covers.

The Burn Center is internationally well known, many of it’s staff are members of the international professional organizations ISBI and EBA, it works in the area of the international exchange of the skin banks, and regularly organizes professionally acclaimed conventions with international participation. The knowledge and experience from the Dr. Šimko’s Center were often used at the building of the Burn Center in Bratislava, where are also working some of the Dr. Šimko’s pupils.

After retirement he again proved his restless energy, and initiated the work about the medical aspects of disasters. Result was a scientific publication “Disaster Medicine”. Dr. Šimko was member of the several national and international professional societies. He was awarded dozens of awards and honors – medical, social, and military. After the revolution, in the 1990 Dr. Šimko, Ph.D. became a General Major, i. r. He achieved the military rank, which was long overdue.

What can one add at the end? Even today, patients are coming to the Center and asking for Dr. Šimko to take care of them. His name is still reverberating in the NsP Hospital in Šaca. This is the most beautiful and the best proof of his long activities in this hospital, in his native town, as a physician, friend, and before all, a man who his whole life dedicated to the Medicine.

In the name of all thankful colleagues, close co-workers, and patients, today we are saying – thank you, we shall not forget!

Rest in Peace

By: Dr. Ján Babík  
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(For the magazine SLS “Medicinsky monitor”)