Dr. Alan Klass - a short biography

ALAN ABRAHAM KLASS

On January 18, 2000, Alan Abraham Klass, our beloved father, grandfather, uncle and brother died peacefully at Deer Lodge Center, where he had been staying since October 1999. He is especially mourned by his sole remaining sister, Beatrice Krivel of Toronto; his daughter Baillie Jean Tolkien and son-in-law Christopher of Aups, France; his son Daniel Jacob Klass and daughter-in-law Georgia of Berwyn Pennsylvania; his brother-in-law Ted Jacob; his nephew Morley Chess; and his grandchildren, Adam and Rachel Tolkien and Benjamin, Jeremy, Samuel and Rebecca Klass; along with a host of nieces and nephews, all of whom remember his wonderful stories. He was predeceased, in 1991, by Helen Jacob Klass, his beloved wife of 52 years.

He was born in Ekaterinoslav, Russia, in 1907, the sixth child of what was to be an octet. In 1914, shortly before the onset of the Great War, his father William Klass fled Imperial Russia, bringing his family directly to Winnipeg where he established a dry cleaning and tailoring business on Osborne Street. Alan attended Gladstone, Earl Grey and Kelvin High Schools. He was a bright and precocious student who got far ahead for his age in school and thereafter regaled his family with tales of his embarrassment at attending high school in knickers when all his classmates had long since graduated to long pants. He denied ever playing sports.

He graduated in Arts at the University of Manitoba, then, assisted by loans from his family and from the Winnipeg Jewish Community, entered the Faculty of Medicine. He graduated in 1932, then completed a surgical residency at the Winnipeg General Hospital. He undertook additional anatomical training as a student of the great anatomist J. C. B. Grant. He travelled to England, where he learned the art and science of surgery, obtaining the Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh by examination. While in training in England he earned his keep as a General Practitioner with Dr. Cyril Aubrey in Ramsgate, England, and as Ships Surgeon on the SS Mombassa and SS Madura, of the British India Line, sailing from London to Calcutta and Bombay. He acquired a lifelong taste for adventure, and for things British, especially kippered herring, Stilton cheese and British cars. He also, forever after, answered the phone with a very British Hellew.

On his return to Winnipeg in 1937, he began a career in Surgery, only to be interrupted by the onset of the Second World War. Despite his recent marriage to Helen Jacob, he enlisted in the Canadian Army Medical Corps on the day war was declared against Germany. He eventually served three years overseas, in England and France. He disembarked at Juno Beach on D-Day plus one, establishing a surgical triage station, then serving as field surgeon in St. Omer, France as the Normandy campaign continued. He was demobilized in 1946, and returned to Winnipeg.
After studying the chaotic health systems of that era, he, along with a small group of local physicians and surgeons, established the Mall Medical Group, one of the first models of a Health Maintenance Organization in North America. This clinic depended upon a unique contract forged among local garment manufacturers (led by his father-in-law Ben Jacob of Jacob and Crowley), the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, and the doctors of the Mall Medical Group.

During his long surgical career, Dr. Klass established a reputation as a careful craftsman and innovative surgical pioneer. He published regularly in the scientific literature, especially on the topic of vascular surgery and arterial embolectomy. He was a popular professor of surgery and clinical anatomy, teaching several generations of University of Manitoba medical students about the rotation of the gut and the life of a doctor.

He was an active supporter of the University of Manitoba, and was appointed to the faculty in the Departments of Surgery and Anatomy, elected President of the Alumni Association and elected a member of the Board of Governors. He was awarded the honorary degree, LLD, for his many services to his alma mater. His community service was extensive as well. He was President of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Manitoba, President of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs, Chairman of the Medical Advisory Board of the Manitoba Cancer Foundation, and a member of the Rotary Club, for which organization he was involved for many years as President of the Model United Nations Association. In later years he was especially proud of the subsequent career of one particular Student Secretary General, by the name of Lloyd Axworthy.

He was a man of many hobbies, some of which he took far too seriously. His greatest career disaster was an ill-starred venture into the business of manufacturing Kosher Salami, which he embarked upon with typical enthusiasm and optimism. Despite his careful study of microeconomics and the regulatory requirements of the Federal Government and the Kashruth, the only remnants of this venture were a bruised ego, a diminished bank book, a set of very sharp butcher knives, and perhaps the only membership by a practising surgeon in the Union of Amalgamated Meat Cutters of America.

His greatest formal contribution to the Province of Manitoba derived from his Chairmanship of a Provincial Commission in the early 1970s to investigate the cost of pharmaceuticals in Manitoba. The Commission recommended the establishment of the first Pharmacare program in Canada, the precursor of the current drug insurance plan now in operation. His studies for this Commission were summarized in a monograph entitled Theres Gold in Them Thar Pills; An Inquiry into the Medical-industrial Complex", published in 1975 by Penguin.
During all of this activity, Alan Klass practiced medicine and surgery. He earned the respect of his colleagues and was loved by his patients. Beyond the fact of his skills was a rare human being, a man of good judgement and humanity, with a twinkle in his eye, and a listening heart. He gathered whole families under his spell, and it was a rare Sunday that a surprise package of fresh clotted cream, or Kulbasa or Panini did not arrive at his door as testament to his patients’ appreciation. Long after his retirement from practice, in 1985, cards and calls from his beloved patients continued to arrive.

In 1990 he had a cerebral stroke that began a progressive loss of recent memory, and in 1991 he lost his great partner in life. The remainder of his days were mainly spent quietly with his family in Berwyn, Pennsylvania, where, in the deepening fog of memory loss, he magically maintained his special personage, ever kind, ever compassionate, ever the gentleman. His sense of humour survived till the end. He never complained. His story was in many ways a typical one for an Immigrant to Canada, though it is hard to picture him in that stereotype since he adopted the ways of Canada with such warmth and grace. His days nearly spanned the century, and throughout that time he embraced his world of patients, friends, and family with a rare combination of love and curiosity. And just like the kind and caring staff at the Grace Hospital and the Deer Lodge Center, they all loved him back. The family thanks Drs. Birt, Tanner, Altere and Stevens for their special attention in his dying days. Funeral services were at the Shaarey Zedek Synagogue in Winnipeg. Active pallbearers were Dr. Murray Kopelow, Mr. Stephen Kroft, Mr. James Chess, and Dr. Klass's grandsons, Benjamin, Jeremy and Samuel Klass. Honorary pallbearers were Mr. Morley Chess, Mr. Robert Cohn, Dr. Robert Cooke, Dr. Alan Downs, Mrs. Brownie (Samuel) Freedman, Mr. Ted Jacob, Mr. Sol Kanee, Senator Richard Kroft and Mr. Gordon Pullan. For friends who so desire, contributions to the Alan and Helen Klass Fund at the University of Manitoba, in care of Private Funding, will be welcomed.