HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THORACIC SURGERY

RUDOLPH MATAS (1860-1957)

Rudolph Matas, third president of The American Association for Thoracic Surgery, was born near New Orleans in 1860. Shortly thereafter his aristocratic Catalan family returned to the stimulating atmosphere of Paris and Barcelona. When Rodolpho was 7 years old, his father, a colorful and well-connected but certainly erratic surgeon, moved the family back to New Orleans and thence to the Brownsville/Matamoros area of Texas. Young Matas received an excellent early education in Matamoros schools. In 1877 he entered the medical school of the University of Louisiana, now Tulane. Having survived a near fatal attack of yellow fever, repeatedly epidemic in New Orleans, he had the important advantage of being an "immune." As an undergraduate he won a coveted 2-year residency at the Charity Hospital and also, as an "immune" fluent in Spanish, spent 4 months as secretary of the United States Yellow Fever Commission in Havana. On receiving his medical degree at the age of 19 years, he entered and rapidly developed a busy general practice in New Orleans, which made possible his clinical research as demonstrator of surgical anatomy at Tulane and editor of the *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal*.

Blessed with an encyclopedic memory, a scholarly imagination, and a capacity for hard work, Matas was a prominent contributor to the surgical scene from the start. In 1894, at the age of 34 years, he was appointed professor of surgery at Tulane, a chair he held for 33 years, then emeritus professor until his death. He soon became known internationally for his bold advances in the treatment of aneurysms, notably obliterative and restorative endoaneurysmorrhaphy. In summing up his career in 1940, a prelude you might say to the era of reporting large series of aneurysm repairs and aortic replacements, he reported to the American Surgical Association some 600 major vascular operations and 108 papers, usually monumental, on vascular surgery.

A great admirer and friend of Halsted, in 1889 Matas experimented briefly with cocaine for local and spinal anesthesia. At about the same time he suggested intravenous saline solution drips for patients with major blood loss, as were being done to treat patients who were severely dehydrated as a result of cholera. In 1902 he reported his

modification of the Fell/O'Dwyer method of intratracheal intubation in the management of open pneumothorax.

Elected to the American Surgical Association in 1888, he became its president in 1909. Ravitch's centennial history of that association chronicles the number of topics Matas felt called on to discuss—usually at immoderate length but always with authority: for example, surgical problems of the Negro (later recorded in 123 pages, 5 pages of bibliography), cancer of the breast, surgical education, arteriorrhaphy for aneurysm, Cutler's mitral valvulotomy, tests for collateral circulation, colon resection, sympathetic blocks, thrombophlebitis, and, elsewhere, resection of thyroid tumors and Kondolean operations for elephantiasis.

Among his formidable list of honors and degrees was the Bigelow Medal of the Boston Surgical Society, which Matas received in 1926. He was the third recipient (after W. J. Mayo and W. W. Keen) of this award. After an hour-long introduction by Harvey Cushing, Matas spoke for two plus hours on the "Spirit and Art of Surgery." He expressed little pleasure in the impressionist painters because of their lack of detail, comparing their technique with the slapdash surgical operations he decried. It was a cold November evening and the heat was turned off early. What might have been a chilling occasion was more than matched by a warmly gracious letter to the Society afterward.

Given the universal acceptance of Matas' verbosity, it is fitting that he is the subject of a lengthy biography by his devoted disciple, Isidore Cohn, of Tulane. It is a superb portrait of a master surgeon. It is also a story of his intense involvement in the life of New Orleans and his turbulent relationship with both his parents. We are given a poignant vignette of Matas. He married late to a New Orleans beauty. His only child, a boy, was stillborn. Forty-one at the time and overcome by a sense of once and future loss, Matas arranged for a formal photograph, which he withheld from his wife, to be taken of the infant in the arms of the delivery nurse.

Rudolph Matas died at the age of 97 years. His life span included watching the death of a patient from renal failure after laparotomy performed with Listerian carbolic acid spray to use of cardiopulmonary bypass in resection of thoracic aortic aneurysms. His living memorial is the Rudolph Matas Library at Tulane.

J. Gordon Scannell, MD