

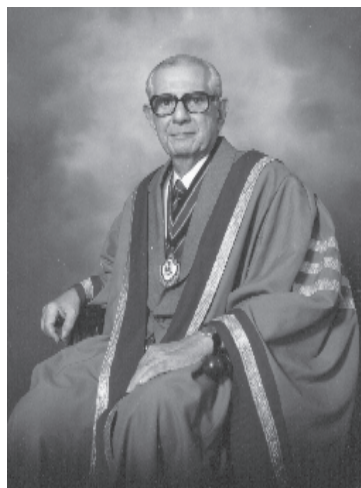
Yahya Cohen (1920-2003), FAMS

“I have had my invitation to this world’s festival,
and thus my life has been blessed. My eyes have seen
and my ears have heard.

It was my part at this feast to play upon my instrument,
and I have done all I could.

Now, I ask, has the time come at last when I may go in
and see thy face and offer thee my silent salutation?”

*Rabindranath Tagore
(Gitanjali)*



Yahya Cohen (1920-2003).

Much can be written of a great and noble surgeon, and to try to summarise the lifetime achievements of a dear friend, mentor, guide and humanist into a few paragraphs leaves one anguished for the incompleteness of the tributes due to one who sacrificed much in the pursuit of the Art and Science of Surgery. Singapore would have been a poorer place if there had not been a Yahya Cohen.

My first “introduction” to Mr Cohen, as we have fondly called him over the years in spite of other titles such as Professor, was when I sat with the freshmen/women of the 1948 medical class at the Convocation of medical graduands of the proceeding year. There was a thunderous applause when the name of Yahya Cohen was called and it was announced that he has scored distinctions in Surgery, Obstetrics and Gynaecology and Medical Jurisprudence, for which achievements he was awarded a Silver Medal and a Book Prize. I thought that this young handsome man was truly a hero and prayed that I could in a small way be like him.

Mr Cohen was tutor in Surgery from 1948 to 1952 and, by the time I got into my Surgical posting, he had left for the United Kingdom as a Queen’s Scholar to obtain his English Fellowship and to receive further training in surgery. He was exposed to research when he worked under Professor W C Wilson in Aberdeen and he learned the fine art of plastic surgery from a leader in the field—Mr A B Wilson of the University of Edinburgh. These two postings were crucial to his development as a scientific surgeon and a master craftsman in the art of surgery.

Fortunately for me, when I returned to Singapore after working in Malaya from 1954 to 1956, Mr Cohen was Senior Lecturer in Surgery. Though I wanted to be a surgeon, I could not obtain a posting in Surgery and chose to be a trainee Anaesthetist so that I could be near where the “action” was. I had the privilege to administer anaesthesia for many of Mr Cohen’s patients and thus could learn the art, though indirectly, from a master. I could see at that time that he was a strict disciplinarian who did not spare himself or his staff. After I passed the primary examination, I was fortunate to be his registrar for some time and I can say, with honesty, that it was that exposure that gave me the insight into surgery that enabled me to pass the English Fellowship at the first try.

Mr Cohen was Senior Surgeon, Singapore, from 1960 to 1972, during which time he was also Visiting Professor at Tel-Aviv University from June 1965 to January 1966. This was when he met Nina and it was rumoured that he proposed to her by asking her “Would you like to come to Singapore to see if you would like to live there?” What was fated then happened—Mr Cohen found the loving lovely partner who would share the rest of his life.

Mr Cohen later became Clinical Professor in the University of Singapore. Though Mr Cohen worked in many medical bodies in various capacities, his greatest contribution was to the development of the Academy of Medicine, Singapore, of which he was the Founder Scribe in 1957. He was later elected Master of the Academy from 1968 to 1970. He was a key figure in the formation of the Academy’s Chapter of Surgeons and was its Founder Chairman. He was also responsible for the formation of the Singapore Surgical Society and was its first President.

It will take me too long to go through his contributions to the Alumni Association, the Singapore Medical Council, of

which he was Chairman for a number of years, and the numerous positions he held, such as examiner in surgery for nurses, medical and dental students and postgraduates. He was honoured by the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh and the American College of Surgeons and elected as Fellow of these Colleges. Mr Cohen contributed to postgraduate teaching and education in Singapore. He published many scientific papers in his lifetime and helped others do the same.

To honour him, the Chapter of Surgeons established the prestigious Yahya Cohen Lecture and the first Lecturer, Professor K H Yeoh, paid a fitting tribute to Mr Cohen who, though frail by that time, attended this eponymous lecture to show his respect for a young surgeon.

I was fortunate to have been Mr Cohen's neighbour in College Road and his friend. When his knee bothered him I arranged for an osteostomy to be done by a distinguished Japanese surgeon. Unfortunately, the procedure did not help him much. I saw him frequently when his clinic was next to mine. My family and I have enjoyed and treasured the friendship of both Mr Cohen and his charming wife Nina, who truly complemented his life and brought much joy to him. She nursed him with concern and made sure that he was as comfortable as possible till the end. We owe a special thanks to his nurse, Sonya, who kept his mind ticking till his last days. When I went to see him a year or so ago, Sonya told him that Prof Pillay had come and what he said — "Kandasamy Pillay – good man – good surgeon" — brought tears to my eyes. I am fortunate to have made that impression on a man I loved and respected and one who was a true leader of Surgery in Singapore. He did not seek the limelight of politics and did not wait on anyone to receive small favours. He gave of himself freely to all and left a great tradition to be emulated by those who come after him. He left footprints in the sands of time and built many stepping-stones to guide others.

The Academy of Medicine salutes a Past Master and a great Academician of Singapore.

[Mr Cohen was born in Singapore on 1 April 1920. He studied at the King Edward VII College of Medicine from 1938 to 1949. (He was in Raffles College for a year from 1937 to 1938. His studies were interrupted by the Japanese Occupation from 1941 to 1945.) He passed away on 12 February 2003].

V K Pillay, *FAMS*
