More than 20 years ago, Stephen and I were attending a meeting of the International Society of Nephrology. After an evening event, we went to our hotel; as we entered the elevator, we were joined by two Japanese nephrologists and their spouses. As we were ascending, one of them looked discreetly at my badge without any reaction, but then he looked at Stephen’s badge. It was like a “moment of discovery” when he said to his colleague, “Vas – peritonitis.”

This elevator story reflects the impact that Stephen had on nephrologists around the globe with respect to the diagnosis and treatment of peritonitis. I wonder how many young nephrologists, when they read in a paper on peritonitis that its “diagnosis is based on two of the following three findings: (1) cloudy fluid – WBC – 75% leukocytes, (2) abdominal pain, (3) identified organisms,” will know that Stephen Vas set these diagnostic criteria. Furthermore, Stephen Vas was behind the first four International Society for Peritoneal Dialysis (ISPD) guidelines for the treatment of peritonitis, the most frequently quoted papers of Peritoneal Dialysis International. Finally, it was Stephen who gave the Peritoneal Dialysis Bulletin its current name, Peritoneal Dialysis International, after the “Bulletin” became the official journal of the ISPD, and he was one of its Associate Editors for 20 years.

I came to know Stephen Vas when he moved from Montreal to Toronto to become our Microbiologist-in-Chief. During his first month, he gave Medical Grand Rounds and I went to listen to him. He was really impressive: tall, with white hair, talking in a loud and firm voice, totally convincing that he was an expert in his subject. I was surprised when, at the end of the rounds, he asked if “Oreopoulos was there” because he wanted to speak to me. He said that he came to Toronto in part because he had heard of our work with peritoneal dialysis (PD) and that, since his work was concentrated on the study of white cells, he thought that peritoneal effluent would be a great source for these cells. The rest is history. We became close friends and his microbiology laboratory became “our lab.” He helped us immensely in the diagnosis and treatment of peritonitis and he applied his vast knowledge of microbiology and infectious diseases to the care of our patients. He would see all of our patients, not only those with peritonitis but also those with other infectious diseases. He was one of the first to study the inflammatory response of the peritoneal cavity and he went around the world lecturing on the principles of treatment of the infectious complications of PD. Until the end of his life, he was available and gave his opinion freely about these difficult problems to people who called from around the world. His “Nephrology Forum” on peritonitis, which was published in Kidney International in 1983, is a classic and is valuable to people around the world. Similarly, the first four ISPD guidelines for the treatment of peritonitis had a great impact.

He cared deeply for his patients, who adored him, especially the women, who felt so comfortable with his compassionate care.
Stephen was born in Budapest on 4 June 1926, the second child, after his sister Veronika. His father was the owner of a hardware store in central Budapest. After receiving his high school diploma from the Fasor Gymnasium in the spring of 1944, he was taken right away into a Hungarian Nazi labor camp in Transylvania, Romania. Stephen escaped the camp and, crossing the closing-in Russian lines, he fled to Bucharest. He originally planned to study physics but when the Hungarian-language University in Cluj (Kolozsvár) opened, he started studying medicine as this was the only discipline offered. After the war ended in Hungary, Stephen returned to Budapest in 1945 and continued his studies there. He received his MD in 1950. As a young doctor, Stephen worked in various hospitals and public health research institutes. He also spent 3 years in the military as an immunologist, focusing on epidemic control and microbiology. Stephen married Dr. Magdalena Raditz in 1954. In 1956, he received his “Candidacy” (PhD). The same year, Stephen and Magdalena fled Hungary to Vienna, where Stephen received a Rockefeller Scholarship to go to Montreal. Three years later, he began teaching medicine and microbiology at McGill University. Five years before leaving Montreal, Stephen became the Chairman of the Department of Microbiology and Immunology at McGill.

In 1977, Magdalena and Stephen moved to Toronto, where he became Chief of Microbiology and Magdalena joined the Hematology Department of the Toronto Western Hospital. Following the merger of the Toronto Western and Toronto General Hospitals, Stephen was appointed Chief of Microbiology of “The Toronto Hospital,” where he continued until his retirement.

After his retirement, Stephen joined our Division of Nephrology as a staff person in the PD program. He was happy looking after PD patients and they were totally attached to him. He was always available to our nurses, day or night, whenever they needed his advice.

Unfortunately, 5 years ago, Magdalena died and Stephen became depressed, although he never let his feelings show during our daily interactions. However, toward the end of his life, his loneliness became stronger and the attraction of his family and his roots became so strong that he decided to return to Budapest. He was excited by the fact that, not only the physicians and nurses there, even the Government officials held him in great respect. He consulted Baxter on education programs and supported with all his strength the Nephrology Department of St. Margit Hospital in Budapest. He was deeply involved in teaching, something that he always enjoyed.

Stephen died 14 October 2006. I believe that the PD community has lost one of its great pioneers. Personally, I have lost a great friend, adviser, and confidante whom I will miss a great deal. May the ground that covers him be light and his memory eternal.

Dimitrios Oreopoulos
Founding Editor

Following are some spontaneous comments from some of Stephen’s friends on learning of his death:

I remember him so well as an innovative, exceptionally bright, outspoken character who was larger than life! When he entered a room, he had a remarkable presence, not only from his height and mane of white hair, but from his personal charisma. He drew our attention to the hazards and treatments for infections in the peritoneum, and this gave him (and us) international stature in this important area. We will miss him.

Michael Baker, Canada

It is sad to hear of the death of Stephen Vas. I have forwarded a proposal for a lectureship bearing his name to the ISPD Council, and we will discuss the issue in the coming council meeting.

Wai Kei Lo, Hong Kong

Stephen was a good scientist and a good friend to me.
Claudio Ronco, Italy

We will miss him at the Annual Dialysis Conference, which he always supported.
Zbylut Twardowski, USA
I am so sorry to hear of this. He contributed so much.
Steven Korbet, USA

It is always sad when eras come to an end.
Adeera Levin, Canada

Stephen was an “old” friend and a great supporter of my efforts while I was at TWH.
Tirone David, Canada

It is hard to believe that he is no longer with us. It is a great loss for our PD community. May his soul rest in peace.
Mrinal Dasgupta, Canada

We will miss him.
Lois Reynolds, Canada

I will keep Dr. Vas in my memories as well as the time we shared at the “Western.”
Nada Dimkovic, Serbia

I am very saddened to hear this news. Dr. Vas was truly one of the giants in the field, but more than anything else, a truly nice human being. I consider it my privilege that I knew him.
Panduranga Rao, USA

I am so sorry. I know he was a close, respected, and beloved colleague. He contributed just tremendously to the PD world of knowledge.
Beth Piraino, USA

This is very sad. He was a great man, wise and kind, an inspiration for all. He will be sorely missed.
Andreas Pierratos, Canada

Bad news about Vas’ death. But he leaves a strong and fundamental footprint in the history, of the lives (past, present, and future) of people who are CAPD/CCPD dependent. I remember, many years ago in Rio de Janeiro, he alerted us with his statement that, “Bacteria can never be defeated.” Helping people is a direct way to survive, and an excellent way to defeat the end of our biological life.
Jose Grunberg, Uruguay

Stephen was a close friend of ours for over 20 years and we will miss him. Not only was he a great scientist, but also a great human being. I enjoyed working with him closely for about 5 years in the early 80s.
Ramesh Khanna, USA

Both Rose and I have great affection as well as respect for Stephen.
Peter Blake, Canada

Georgia and I have very fond memories of our conversations with Stephen at many meetings throughout the world. He was a major contributor to the field of infectious disease. We could always count on him to lecture on any subject in this field as we organized the ADC programs. We will miss him greatly.
Karl Nolph, USA

I was really saddened to hear about Stephen passing away. He was such a wonderful man. I have many fond memories of times we were together at meetings.
Nancy Abbey, Canada

Some of us knew him from McGill — not long after he came from Hungary after the revolution. He made a lot of contributions to science and medicine.
Irving E. Salit, Canada

I was extremely sad to hear about Professor Vas. I have very fond memories of him. He was an astute clinician and extremely caring for patients and always helpful to the fellows. He was a devoted teacher and with a great command of the subject. He had visited us in Lucknow with his wife and had given us very useful tips to improve our culture techniques, for which we remain ever grateful to him. He had also a fun-loving personality and got along very well with people of all ages. We will all miss him deeply. I pray to The Almighty to let his soul rest in peace.
Amit Gupta, India

I and my colleagues loved him very much, and I am sure all of us will miss his kindness, wisdom, and sense of humor. I hope we have made his life nice and happy since he has returned home to Hungary.
Agnes Haris, Hungary

Annual Stephen Vas Memorial Lectureship: The Organizing Committee of the Annual Dialysis Conference has decided to establish this lectureship in honor of Dr. Stephen Vas, beginning in 2008.