PRESERVING HISTORY

Ira J. Kodner, MD: ASCRS President and Creator of the Washington University Colorectal Surgery Residency

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FAMILY ORIGINS

The parents of Dr. Ira J. Kodner were both of Ukrainian ancestry. The paternal side, from the town of Bar, escaped postrevolution Ukraine amid civil war and pogroms. Dr. Kodner's father, Charles Kodner (1901–1979), the only family member fluent in both Russian and Yiddish, was a border guard in the military (Fig. 1). In 1920, at age 19, during some of the worst pogroms in Ukraine, he provided the escape route for the family. After a year, they gained safe passage to the United States via France to join relatives in St. Louis.

Charles Kodner was a scholar. Fluent in 7 languages, he graduated from the St. Louis College of Pharmacy (Fig. 2) and met his wife-to-be in St. Louis. Dr. Kodner's mother, Sofia Lookofsky, was born in Paducah, Kentucky, and was raised in 1 of the 2 Jewish families in Mayfield, Kentucky. Also an immigrant from Ukraine, Sofia's father, Papa Joe Lookofsky (Fig. 3A), combined shoe repair with his retail clothing stores in Mayfield (Fig. 3B).

Charles and Sofia Kodner welcomed their third son into the world, Ira Joe Kodner, on May 18, 1941 (Fig. 4). The Kodner Family left Mayfield when Ira was 4 years old. They initially lived above Charles Kodner's drugstore in Clayton, Missouri, a western suburb of St. Louis. Sofia cooked an interesting mix of Eastern European and Southern soul food. Once a month, Sofia hired domestic help to assist with maintaining the household. Young Ira was introduced to pig's feet for lunch, renamed "French chicken," to avoid objections from Charles, who was raised in the Orthodox Jewish tradition. Charles insisted on Ira's bar mitzvah in an Orthodox synagogue, although he was later confirmed in a Reform Temple.

The family moved to University City, another western suburb 2 miles north of Clayton, Missouri, 1 of 2 St. Louis communities with a significant Jewish population. Ira was the youngest of 3 sons, with 7- and 12-year gaps in age to his older brothers (Fig. 5). Charles Kodner, described as a tough Ukrainian, was worn out by his older boys by the time Ira came of age. Sofia was a nice, kind country girl. For instance, she wouldn't let Ira go outside with a Popsicle unless he had 1 for all of the neighborhood children. Ira was close to his Mother, learning gardening and embroidery, which provoked taunts from his

FIGURE 1. Charles Kodner in military uniform.

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FIGURE 2. Charles Kodner (kneeling in the middle) with the other Jewish students of the 1927 graduating class of the St. Louis College of Pharmacy.

brothers. Sofia was a major influence. It was her kindness that Ira tried to emulate in both his personal life and career.

EDUCATION

The boys attended St. Louis Public Schools: Ira at Jackson Park Elementary School and then University City High School. Ira wrestled and played football in early high school.

By the time Ira entered high school, Charles was in poor health and informed Ira that he could not subsidize his college education. The teachers at University City High School were outstanding. This period of the Cold War included the launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik, thus initiating the "space race." The science and math teachers were determined that American education would keep up with the Soviets. Ira had the same English and math teachers for 3 years. He spent over 3 hours on math homework every night. He considers his public high school education a treasure. A hard-working student, Ira earned a scholarship to attend Washington University (WU) in St. Louis, majoring in chemistry and biology, and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa in his junior year.

Ira worked as a clerk in the university library ($0.90/hour) and also behind the soda fountain of the Glaser drugstore near St. Mary's Hospital in Richmond Heights (3 miles south of University City). Hospital staff frequented the drugstore for lunch; however, in that pre-Civil Rights era, a prominent black surgeon, Dr. J.J. Thomas, was not allowed to eat at the lunch counter (Fig. 6). Dr. Thomas was the first surgeon Ira met. Ira and Dr. Thomas would eat lunch together and have conversations in the stock room. Dr. Thomas advised Ira NOT to declare premedicine as a major but instead to take a more liberal array of classes and apply to medical school (MS) during his senior year.

In his last 2 undergraduate years, Ira landed a job as a lab technician at Monsanto Chemical Company. A

physical chemist at Monsanto, Dr. Edward J. Griffith, was a mentor and advisor. Ira witnessed a situation where a disgruntled employee demanded a raise in pay from his boss and threatened to quit. This act led to the employee's prompt firing. The lesson he learned: don't back your boss into a corner. On graduation, Ira was awarded a Jackson-Johnson scholarship to attend WU MS.

Ira met Barbara Bottchen during their first year as undergraduates at WU. They dated and later married before the start of MS. This was a "mixed marriage." Ira was Jewish and Barbara was raised Protestant but converted to Judaism. Barb worked in advertising to pay the bills, and the couple contemplated raising a family. All physicians were being drafted during the Vietnam War, some after residency training. Ira chose to enlist in the Army during the last year of MS to obtain a salary with a 3-year payback after internship. The recruiter advised that rushing his application that same day would provide an opportunity for deployment to Germany rather than Vietnam. After the birth of their son Charles during MS year 4, graduation (Alpha Omega Alpha) from WU MS and internship at the WU-affiliated Jewish Hospital, the young family moved to Germany for a 3-year deployment.

FIGURE 3. A, Dr. Kodner's maternal grandfather, Joseph Lookofsky, at Reelfoot Lake, Tennessee. His grandfather died a year before Dr. Kodner's birth.

GENERAL SURGERY RESIDENCY

For the first 2 years in Germany, Dr. Kodner was assigned as battalion surgeon (general practice) to artillery in the garrison town of Baumholder, providing service to the troops during maneuvers with no opportunity to perform surgery. On a bus ride back to the hotel during a medical meeting in Bavaria, 2 colonels sat behind Dr. Kodner and Barb. The colonels bemoaned their surgical staff and one commented, "You know, what I need is a young surgeon who wants to work his ass off. Nobody in my hospital wants

FIGURE 3 (*CONTINUED*). B, One of Lookofsky's stores "on the square" in Mayfield, Kentucky.

FIGURE 4. Young Ira, age 2, in Mayfield, Kentucky.

to work." Dr. Kodner turned around and asked where the colonel was stationed.

"Berlin" was the reply.

"I'm your guy," said Dr. Kodner.

The Kodner family moved to Berlin. Dr. Kodner performed many operations that last year, heavy in orthopedics, as the sons of military personnel were active in American tackle football. He later received credit for the year as general surgery training, which proved crucial to landing a colorectal surgery (CRS) residency position.

Following his military commitment, Dr. Kodner returned to St. Louis to complete general surgery residency at Jewish Hospital. Two blocks south, Barnes Hospital had a separate general surgery residency. In the 1960s, Barnes Hospital was still segregated, with Black wards in the basement of the building, whereas Jewish Hospital was integrated.

Early in Ira's general surgery training, Dr. Sam Schneider, a senior surgeon at Jewish Hospital, introduced him to the St. Louis Chapter of the United Ostomy Association at a time when surgeons were under no compunction to assist with the postoperative needs of their ostomate patients. At that time, some ostomates used old tuna fish cans stuffed with toilet paper as stoma appliances. Furthermore, pediatric patients born with bladder extrophy were now surviving into adulthood thanks to the innovation of the urinary conduit (Bricker loop),[1] and their urostomies required lifelong attention. Dr. Kodner asked Jewish Hospital Chief of Surgery, Dr. Arthur Baue, to fund an ostomy care clinic, which quickly expanded to include psychologists and other affiliated clinicians. One of the local ostomates, Elnore Sturm, trained as a licensed practical nurse, would enroll at the Cleveland Clinic (CC) for enterostomal therapy training. She would return to Jewish Hospital as a licensed practical nurse and certified enterostomal therapist to care for these neglected patients. Given that

FIGURE 5. Ira with his older brothers, Martin and Mike, and parents, Sofia and Charles.

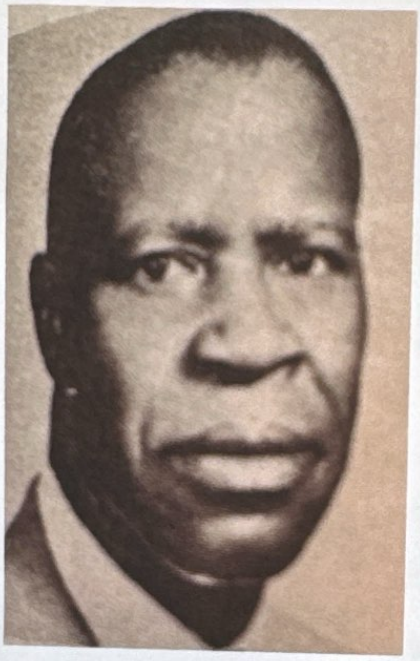

FIGURE 6. Dr. J. J. Thomas, a community surgeon who provided sage advice during lunchtime conversations with Dr. Kodner regarding the path to medicine and surgery.

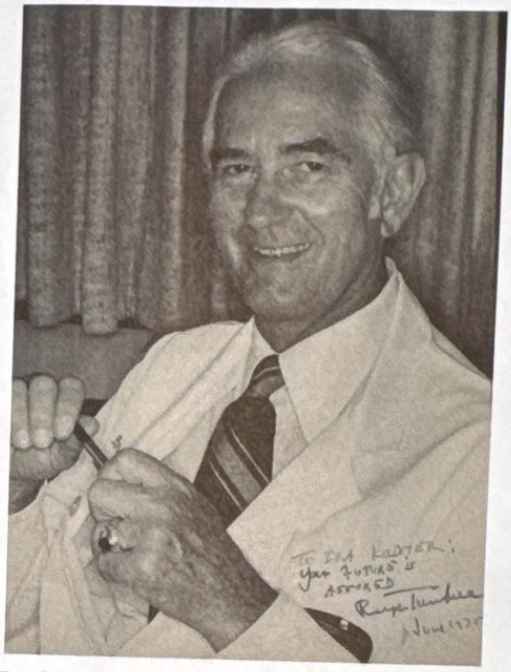

FIGURE 7. Dr. Rupert B. Turnbull, Jr., Chair of the Department of Colon and Rectal Surgery at the Cleveland Clinic. The note reads, "To Ira Kodner: Your future is assured Rupe Turnbull, June 1975."

the field of intestinal stomas fell within CRS, Dr. Baue, who had a national reputation, called Dr. Rupert B. Turnbull, Jr., Chair of the Department of CRS at the CC, to arrange an interview for Dr. Kodner regarding a CRS residency position.

CRS RESIDENCY

Dr. Rupert B. Turnbull, Jr., American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons (ASCRS) President (1974–1975), was a very meticulous, competent surgeon with an international reputation (Fig. 7). Dr. Turnbull agreed to take on Dr. Kodner for the CC CRS Residency on completion of general surgery training. However, after the in-person interview with Dr. Turnbull in Cleveland, Dr. Kodner discovered that the available position was for 1974 and NOT AVAILABLE at the expected conclusion of his general surgery training in 1975. Dr. Kodner would not be eligible to accept the 1974 CRS position under these circumstances. Dr. Kodner and Barb did what they usually do in times of crisis: they found a restaurant in Cleveland serving lobster and contemplated their future. Dr. Baue worked his magic with the American Board of Surgery to count the busy clinical year in Berlin as a year of general surgery training, allowing Dr. Kodner to advance to Chief Resident (1973–1974) and thus commence CRS Residency in July 1974, immediately after the CRS training of Australians Victor Fazio, Ian Cunningham, and Malcolm Goldsmith. David Jagelman (England) and Peter Wilk were Dr. Kodner's co-residents, and they were joined midyear by Ian Lavery from Australia.

The Turnbull practice was massive and could include 100 hospitalized patients. Ian Cunningham stayed on an extra year to assist with the service, making daily rounds and scheduling operations, before returning to Australia.

EARLY CAREER/CREATION OF CRS RESIDENCY

Dr. Kodner enjoyed the full support of the Jewish Hospital community during his career, including helping to fund his move to Cleveland for CRS residency. However, it was never in doubt that on completion of training, they

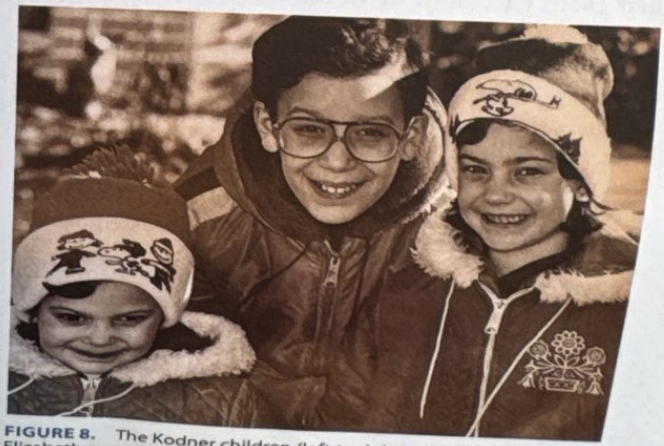

FIGURE 8. The Kodner children (left to right): Molly, Charles, and Elizabeth.

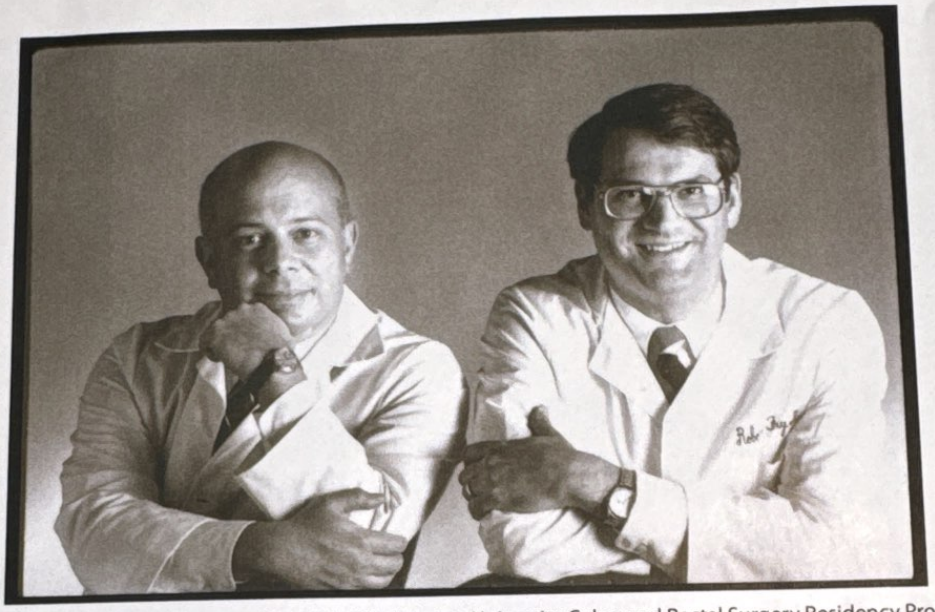

FIGURE 9. Drs. Ira Kodner and Robert Fry, founders of the Washington University Colon and Rectal Surgery Residency Program.

would return to St. Louis to raise their family (Fig. 8). During his internship, Dr. Kodner was supported by Dr. Stanley London, who became a good friend and mentor. Dr. London was a member of Parkcrest Surgical, a private practice general surgery group. He offered a position in the group to Dr. Kodner during his internship, before he began general surgery residency. On returning to St. Louis, Dr. Kodner joined Parkcrest Surgical, but he found the group to be more financially motivated with principles that were counter to his own. Furthermore, by confining his practice to CRS within the group, he was warned that he would starve. However, Dr. Turnbull had advised otherwise, warning that when Dr. Kodner performed his first cholecystectomy, he would no longer be a surgical specialist.

Dr. Kodner was also mentored by Dr. Stanley Goldberg of the University of Minnesota, who was passionate about increasing the number of CRS residencies, especially within academic institutions, a position also articulated by Dr. Norman Nigro, long-standing executive director (1972–1986) of the American Board of Colon and Rectal Surgery (ABCRS).[2] Dr. Kodner's ultimate goal was to establish a CRS residency in St. Louis.

Groundwork was laid for the CRS residency. Dr. Goldberg invited Dr. Kodner to meetings of the newly formed Association of Program Directors of CRS. Dr. Kodner approached the chair of surgery at WU, Dr. Walter Ballinger, regarding these plans. Dr. Ballinger threw him out of the office, saying, "Just leave, I don't believe in colon and rectal surgery. It is never going to happen here. I don't want to see you again."

However, after years of bailing Dr. Ballinger and his academic surgical faculty out of difficult clinical situations, the 2 would become friends, and the CRS residency was finally approved. The CRS private practice grew steadily and allowed for expansion. Dr. Robert Fry, one of Dr. Kodner's

FIGURE 10. Dr. Ira Kodner, American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons President (1997–1998), and his wife, Barbara.

WU medical students/residents, who also spent time in the military (Air Force), also completed the CC CRS Residency and returned to join Dr. Kodner as founders of the WU CRS Residency in 1980 (Fig. 9). The first CRS resident to complete the WU CRS Residency (1980–1981) was Dr. John P. Roe (see Supplemental Table 1 at https://links.lww.com/DCR/C522). After 5 years, they left Parkcrest Surgical to become full-time academic surgeons at WU, recruited by Dr. Sam Wells, the new Chair of the WU Department of Surgery (1981–1997). The number of CRS residents trained per year increased to 2 in 1997 and 3 in 2008.

CAREER ASCENT, SERVICE TO SOCIETY

Dr. Kodner was the founder and chief of the CRS section of the WU Department of Surgery from 1985 to 1998. Major contributions to the surgical literature include publications on IBD, intestinal stomas, and rectal cancer, including integration of radiation therapy.[3–5]

Dr. Kodner was involved in many organizations within the specialty. After years of service, he was named ABCRS president from 1991 to 1992. He was also the ABCRS representative to the American Board of Surgery (1986–1992). Dr. Kodner participated in the American College of Surgeons' Commission on Cancer, Board of Governors (1996–2002), and the Advisory Council for CRS (1997–2002).

His involvement with the ASCRS began as chair of the Stoma Liaison Committee in 1978 and continued with the Executive Council (1991), ASCRS officer (secretary in 1992), and ultimately ASCRS president (1997–1998; Fig. 10).[6] Four former WU medical students/general surgery residents/CRS residents, inspired by Dr. Kodner, also rose to become ASCRS president: Robert Fry (2001–2002), James Fleshman (2009–2010), Matthew Mutch (2023–2024), and Sonia Ramamoorthy (2024–2025), with a fifth former WU CRS associate, Thomas Read (2021–2022) ascending to ASCRS president (Fig. 11).

Dr. Kodner would become the inaugural holder of the Solon and Bettie Gershman chair of CRS at WU, the second endowed chair in CRS.

END OF CAREER, RETIREMENT?

Toward the end of his surgical career, Dr. Kodner completed a 1-year fellowship in Clinical Medical Ethics at the

FIGURE 11. Dr. Kodner with former medical students/residents/associates who became American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons President (left to right): James W. Fleshman (2009–2010), Thomas E. Read (2021–2022), and Matthew G. Mutch (2023–2024). Not in picture: Robert D. Fry (2001–2002) and Sonia L. Ramamoorthy (2024–2025).

University of Chicago Medical Center (2002–2003). This led to his presenting the first annual Parviz Kamangar Humanities in Surgery Lecture on ethics at the ASCRS convention on June 25, 2003.[7,8] He delivered the Joseph M. Mathews Oration, "If an operation can't cure you, what can I do?" at the 2009 ASCRS annual meeting.[9] Dr. Kodner retired from clinical practice in 2014, but he continues to be active in palliative and end-of-life care, surgical ethics, Oasis (national organization for the education of Seniors), and the Barnes-Jewish Hospital Foundation Board of Directors. He claims to be "flunking retirement" as he is busier now than during active practice.

CONCLUSIONS

With the full support of the local St. Louis community that helped launch his career, Dr. Kodner has had a significant and lasting influence in CRS at the international, national, regional, and local levels—from early efforts to provide professional assistance to ostomates of the St. Louis Chapter of the United Ostomy Association, to service with multiple national societies and organizations, including presidency of the ASCRS and ABCRS. The crowning achievement was the establishment of the WU CRS Residency, against early and steady opposition, which ensured the ever-expanding ripples and reverberations from former trainees, associates, and mentees (see Supplemental Table 1 at https://links.lww.com/DCR/C522). This profile stands as a testament and lasting tribute to Dr. Kodner's long, productive career, which continues to have an impact well into "retirement."

KEY WORDS: Association of Program Directors of Colon and Rectal Surgery; American Board of Colon and Rectal Surgery; American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

View ASCRS video about Dr. Ira Kodner at this YouTube link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cV7bKYLO67k

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