

ARNOLD GOUREVITCH (1914-2004)

We report with sadness the death of Arnold Gourevitch at the age of 89, and extend sympathy to his wife Corinne - whom he married in 1951 - and their sons and two daughters. Arnold regularly attended both home and overseas meetings contributing to both the friendship and scientific aspects of "The Club". His whimsical sense of humour which made him an entertaining after dinner speaker. Arnold was elected to the Travelling Surgical Club in 1964 when it was obligatory to have served in the Armed Forces: this he did with distinction, gaining an MC in 1942 and being mentioned twice in dispatches.

The son of Russian Jewish émigrés, Arnold was born in Paris on February 24 1914. The family moved to England, where his father qualified as a doctor. Arnold himself was educated at King Edward's School, Birmingham and at Birmingham University Medical School whence he qualified, gaining the FRCS (Eng.) in 1939. A natural linguist, he was proficient in French, Russian, Hebrew and Greek, a talent only matched by his athletic ability at small ball games, swimming, hill-walking and shooting – he represented his school and university at Bisley. He also became an accomplished painter (in oils, acrylic and watercolours).

Arnold was reticent about his achievements. He distinguished himself first during World War Two. Joining the Territorial Army, in 1938 he was commissioned into the Royal Army Medical Corps and served with the Field Ambulance part of 145 Brigade, 48th South Midland Division. He went to France with the British Expeditionary Force and was evacuated from La Baule in Brittany, where with one orderly he manned the hospital. A brief posting as RMO of the 10th West Yorkshire Regiment led to the most dangerous period of his wartime experience as he joined the surgical division of No 7 General Hospital, disembarking at Suda Bay in Crete in April 1941. By then the Balkan War had ended and most of the Commonwealth and Greek garrison had escaped from Greece. A German assault was inevitable but Arnold established a hospital near Galatas, west of Canea. This was soon full of casualties and three fellow surgeons were killed during bombing attacks: Arnold Gourevitch and a comrade escaped as they were taking an early morning swim, though they admitted having to duck in order to avoid the bombs as enemy troops invaded the island. Returning from this early morning "relaxation", they avoided capture by hiding in a ditch.

General Freyberg ordered the hospital to be evacuated by the Navy, via the south coast. Some 200 badly wounded men needed to be left behind and as senior medical officer, Arnold Gourevitch volunteered to stay behind and look after them, taking refuge in caves. Himself captured after a few days he set up a 200-bedded hospital in the Prisoner of War camp (with 8000 prisoners) and was soon looking after 600 patients. The Germans planned to move all POW's to the mainland, and Gourevitch and a fellow Australian doctor decided to escape. This they did in darkness over a triple barbed wire fence, and managed to reach the house of a sympathetic dentist in Canea. The two escapees lived in caves and

shepherds' huts, looking after wounded Allied soldiers and Cretans, though the penalties if caught would have been severe. Life on the run became second nature to them.

In April 1942. the two men were contacted by an SOE operative on the island who suggested that they were needed in North Africa. A legendary naval officer, Lieutenant-Commander Cumberlege, took them to Libya where Arnold soon made his mark and was awarded the MC. He was attached to the 8th Field Surgical Unit, part of the New Zealand Division, and served at the battle of El Alamein and the rest of the North African campaign. Taking part in the invasion of Sicily and serving during the rest of the Italian Campaign he was mentioned in dispatches at Monte Cassino and ended his war in Trieste. Indeed, on our visit to Italy many of the TSS membership heard Peter Craig's talk on the Battle of Monte Cassino, during which he paid tribute to Arnold, and it was also the subject of a television programme and BBC book soon after. In 1946 the unassuming war hero returned to England where he was appointed to the Queen Elizabeth and Birmingham Children's Hospitals, and became an enthusiastic lecturer in surgery and anatomy at Birmingham University Medical School. He was elected to the Court of Examiners of the Royal College of Surgeons of England in 1969 and gave a Hunterian Professorship Lecture on Biliary Atresia. Retiring in 1979, he continued to teach medical students, particularly in anatomy.

Arnold Gourevitch never talked about his exploits as anything out of the ordinary, but it was typical that he should respect his Jewish ancestry by volunteering to serve in the Yom Kippur War. He made many friends in the Israeli Army. Indeed, he organised an excellent trip to Israel which had to be cancelled because of limited support, and such was his disappointment that he and Corinne let their attendance at TSS meetings lapse for a while. This unassuming, amusing and talented man will be greatly missed, not only by his wife and family to whom he was devoted but also by all those who knew him in the TSS: indeed, by all who value wit, learning and friendship. His heroism was acknowledged by an extensive obituary in the Daily Telegraph.