

“Future Pirogov”: about the student years of the scholar M.I. Perelman in Yaroslavl

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This article is dedicated to the student years of the scholar M.I. Perelman. Based on the archival materials we analyze the biographical facts of the future renowned scientist and also observe the specificities of the educational process in medical universities during the years of the Great Patriotic War.

Keywords: *M.I. Perelman, the Great Patriotic War, Yaroslavl State Medical Academy, students, medical universities, surgery*

Scientific and public recognition in the sphere of medicine is the result of many years of intense research and practical work – work that usually begins during one's student years. One striking and instructive case is the career of the academic and doctor of medical sciences Professor Mikhail Izrailevich Perelman (1924–2013) – an outstanding scientist and a talented surgeon¹.

His emergence as a doctor began during World War II. It was the war that determined his choice of future profession and radically changed his original plans. He received a diploma with honors at 16 years of age on June 21, 1941, the day before the war came to Russia. Such a diploma opened the doors to many prestigious schools. After submitting his documents to the Leningrad Institute of Aviation, Perelman immediately returned to his native Vitebsk, from which he was evacuated to Ordzhonikidze (now Vladikavkaz) due to the rapid advance of German troops. A year later, given the looming threat of Ordzhonikidze's occupation, he went to Novosibirsk.

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this. Decades later in his autobiography, Perelman wrote in detail of his early student years, and of his favorite teachers, whom he could not forget. [1]

His enrollment in North Ossetia Medical Institute and subsequent transfer to the Novosibirsk Medical Institute was not only for military-strategic reasons, but also for family reasons. He followed his father in moving around the country. From the first days of the war, Professor Izrail Moiseyevich Perelman, a doctor of medicine and surgeon, combined teaching with hard work in the surgical field hospital. Prior to the war, he headed the Department of Hospital Surgery at the Vitebsk Medical Institute.

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and of his favorite teachers, whom he could not forget. [1]

In his autobiographical book, Perelman titled the chapter about his student years "Galloping Across Europe." The need for the rapid training of doctors required the All Union Committee for Higher Education at the USSR Council of People's Commissars (VKVSH) to rethink the duration of training while maintaining the pre-war number of hours and approved programs. The training period at medical schools was reduced to three-and-a-half years. The plan was achieved by reducing the summer holidays from two months to one and the winter break from two weeks to one. The educational process was also greatly intensified. The study workload was increased from 36 hours per week to 42.

In the early days of the war, VKVSH instructed medical school departments to quickly redesign their academic programs to reflect national defense goals in accordance with wartime objectives. The curricula and teaching methodologies were urgently revised. Separation into different faculties was temporarily stopped. Pediatric and sanitary-hygiene departments were temporarily closed. The training of physicians was conducted according to a unified profile in the medical faculty, focused primarily on training doctors for the army and in-depth study of the issues of military surgery, military hygiene, infectious diseases and epidemiology. At the same time, the students' lack of theoretical knowledge was completely compensated for by more practical training. Given the shortage of medical personnel, students actively worked not only as nurses and medical assistants, but often performed doctors' roles. It came as no surprise that in Perelman's third year at the Novosibirsk Medical Institute he began to assist in operations, working at a first aid station.

In the summer of 1944, after the entire territory of Belorussia was liberated from the Nazi invaders, it was decided to return the Belorussian Medical Institute to its republic. In Yaroslavl, on the basis of the Council of People's Commissars' order of August 15, 1944, a new higher education institute opened – the Yaroslavl Medical Institute. It became one of five medical schools

created during the war years to meet the growing demand for physicians.

During the first year of the war, the number of medical universities in the USSR decreased from 72 to 56. The number of medical students in comparison with the prewar period fell by half. Many institutions were forced to quickly evacuate. Eight Russian medical schools – Voronezh, Kuban, Kursk, Crimea, Rostov, Smolensk, Stavropol and Stalingrad – were in zones of major combat operations or in occupied territories at the beginning of the war, so they suffered considerable damage. Before the war, they accounted for 37 percent of the Russian Soviet Republic's students.

The increased demand for physicians combined with a decline in the number of students and medical schools necessitated the decision to open new institutes. In 1942, the Krasnoyarsk Medical Institute was founded and in 1943 the Pharmaceutical Institute was created in Pyatigorsk. In 1944, medical schools opened in Chelyabinsk, Chkalov (present-day Orenburg) and Yaroslavl. The medical institutes that were evacuated in the first weeks of the war from the neighboring Soviet republics formed the basis of these new institutes, working in temporary premises located in these towns.

Of course, the small amount of furniture and books inherited from the Belorussian university could hardly be called a base. But its work had a significant impact on Yaroslavl. Many teachers who worked at the Belorussian Medical Institute remained at the Yaroslavl Medical Institute. They included Professor Izrail Perelman, who simultaneously headed the department of hospital surgery and the department of topographic anatomy and operative surgery (until 1946). The tradition of human kindness, decency and responsibility that manifested itself during the difficult war years remained, as did the students who started their studies at the Belorussian Medical Institute in 1943. Among these students was Mikhail Perelman.

Enrollment at the Yaroslavl Medical Institute was held for all the courses of one faculty – the medical faculty – attracting 997 students. The students were mostly young people from the Yaroslavl (75.9 percent), Kostroma (10 percent)

and Vologda (about 5 percent) regions. Other areas, including Western Ukraine, Belorussia and Siberia, accounted for about 10 percent of the first student intake. Previously they had studied in 29 universities around the country. The main contingent was girls and women, with male students being the exception, which was typical in those years at almost all universities.

Mikhail Perelman was one of the brightest students. This is no exaggeration and was genuinely the case. A report from the department of human anatomy on its first months of operation was preserved in the Yaroslavl Region State Archives. By October 1, 1944, the department staff consisted of two people – Associate Professor I.M. Turetsky and senior laboratory technician I.Y. Ponomarenko. Doctor I. I. Shcheglov, fourth year student Z. Davydov and fifth year student Perelman were invited to be honorary teaching fellows. [4]

The department was located in the old building of the former Antipova secondary school (7 Revolyutsionnaya Street). The first thing the staff occupied themselves with was equipping the department. They worked late at night, preparing specimens and student visual aids. By the beginning of February 1945 they had successfully opened a small but fully functional anatomical museum. The only thing the department did not lack, despite difficulties in its delivery, was cadaver material (a sad fact of wartime).

The temperature in the classroom did not rise above 6-10 degrees Celsius. The staff stoked the wood stove themselves. They cobbled together furniture, which was lacking. In practical classes students were seated on boards attached to improvised mountings. Large groups had to double up together due to the lack of teachers. Sixty or more people simultaneously attended classes together. And in spite of this, not one lecture was disrupted and there was no disruption of practical classes. Having a deep knowledge of human anatomy and topographic anatomy, Perelman successfully coped with the responsibilities of an assistant, helping with student classes. He was always one of the first people to show up at the university department.

Along with his employment at the department of general anatomy and his first scientific works,

in his spare time (as much as that existed given the wartime conditions), he worked as the “on duty staff member” in the N. V. Solovyev City Hospital and at the city’s surgical hospital. [5] Perelman was granted permission to participate in operations and operate independently not only due to the acute shortage of surgeons, but also due to his three years of surgical experience, which he acquired during his studies in Novosibirsk and internship in the Kemerovo region. Perelman, a fifth course student, worked for free in hospital No. 5365, took part in operations, and independently operated and conducted classes with nurses. [5] The volume of surgical work during the war in the Yaroslavl region’s surgical field hospital was unusually high. Hospital № 5365 was set up in Yaroslavl in March 1943, specializing in surgical procedures for treating wounds of the lower extremities. It was one of the major hospitals that produced exemplary results for Yaroslavl medicine. The region took 5th place in the country in terms of the number of operations performed and 2nd place in terms of the number of blood transfusions. It was No. 1 in the Russian Soviet Republic in terms of discharges. [6]

The novice surgeon Perelman, a student from the first set of graduates from Yaroslavl Medical Academy, played his part in this. The students did not have enough time to carefully prepare for final exams. For practical training, in January 1944 the USSR People's Commissariat dispatched them as final-year student doctors to the 1st Belorussian Front – to the cities of Khotimsk and Krichev in the Mogilev region. They had to fight the outbreak of typhus that ravaged the liberated areas of Belarus.

The epidemiological situation in liberated Belorussia, which had been destroyed by the Nazis, was difficult. They lacked medicines and had little experience, but the Yaroslavl doctors worked hard and conscientiously in the vicinity of the front lines. The students were vaccinated against typhoid before they were dispatched, but that did not prevent some of them, including Perelman, from contracting the disease. Fortunately, he quickly recovered. This episode ensured a lifelong respect and trust towards immunology.

Returning to Yaroslavl, the students immediately immersed themselves in preparation for the last examination session, although there was practically no time left to prepare. The final year students of the 1944/45 academic year sat six state exams: therapeutic medicine, surgery, children's diseases, obstetrics and gynecology, infectious diseases, hygiene and organizational health care. Professor S.A. Gilyarevsky headed the state examination commission. He had been seconded from Moscow to the Yaroslavl Committee on Higher Education of the USSR.

The practice of holding state exams in those years was different. The therapeutic medicine exam was conducted first. Every student was allocated a patient prior to the exam. After the student examined the patient, they reported to the committee with a detailed diagnosis of the patient. They tested their knowledge of observation methods with the same patient. The next step was to answer assigned questions. Further on they were asked to give an opinion on a laboratory analysis and were asked a few questions on laboratory techniques. At the end of the questioning they were requested to prescribe appropriate medications. The surgical exams were conducted in a similar fashion, only in this case students were offered X-ray images to aid analysis.

The results of state exams, which concluded in June 1945, pleased the commission and all the teachers. The results indicate the level of professional knowledge: high distinctions were awarded to 47.6 percent, distinctions to 37 percent, satisfactory to 15 percent and unsatisfactory to 0.4 percent. Medical degrees were awarded to 53 graduates. The committee concluded that they were impressed by these cultured and literate people, who possessed good professional knowledge.

According to the state examination committee's unanimous conclusion, Perelman distinguished himself with his brilliant answers in all six exams. Examination committee member Professor S. I. Ratner's assessment of Perelman's knowledge and skills proved to be largely prophetic, describing him as a "future Pirogov". [7]

Eight graduates, including Perelman, received diplomas with honors. The first set of graduates hailed from an unusually wide geographical

range – from Yaroslavl and Kostroma regions to Khabarovsk, Chita and the Kuril Islands.

Perelman, having already proven himself as an excellent teacher, remained as a teacher at the Yaroslavl Medical Institute.

The director of the Yaroslavl Medical Institute Professor V.G. Yermolayev named Perelman as one of his best students. In his report to the Commissariat of the Russian Soviet Republic on the activities of the university from October 1, 1944 to March 1, 1946, he noted: "Among the first set of graduating students, M.I. Perelman distinguished himself with his special knowledge." [8]

It was no coincidence that in January 1945 the Academic Council unanimously nominated him for a Stalin scholarship (a scholarship category that was established in 1939). Student scholarships were small in those years and differed depending on the course. Successful first-year students received a stipend of 140 rubles, second-year students – 160, third and fourth – 185 and fifth-year students – 210 rubles. Honors students received an increased stipend (the scholarship was increased by 46 rubles 25 kopecks). The number of places on the Stalin scholarship was determined by the industry branch's Commissariats and applicants were nominated by the Academic Council.

Not all candidates nominated by the institute for the Stalin scholarship were approved by the Commissariat. This was the case with Perelman. The Commissariat refused to award him the Stalin scholarship. [9] The reason given was a GUMUZ decree forbidding Stalin scholarships to be awarded to graduate students. The Stalin scholarship was impressive – 531 rubles².

The overall situation in the country and the government's attitude to medicine, which had proven its significance during World War II, led to a surge of interest in medical science and medical practice. Retaining a high social status, the doctor's profession was prestigious and was particu-

² The prices in the Yaroslavl Medical Institute student cafeteria shed some light on how large a sum this was. In 1946, a glass of milk cost 45 kopecks at the reduced price for graduate students and participants in the war. In 1947, the cost of a first course ranged from 80 kopecks to 2 rubles 35 kopecks and main courses cost from 1 to 4 rubles.

larly popular. According to the Ministry of Higher Education, in the second half of the 1940s competition for places in medical institutes was at its very highest. [10]

The wages of those who worked in higher medical schools were also high. In the Yaroslavl Medical Institute the salary of the institute director and his deputy for scientific and educational work amounted to 3,700 rubles in 1944. The bonus for therapeutic work, which was paid to those teachers in the clinical departments who had a service record of more than 10 years, was 950 rubles. The faculty dean was paid an extra 1,000 rubles in addition to the main teaching salary and the assistant dean received an additional 600 rubles. A professor who was a department chairman earned 2,200 rubles in 1944. A department head holding the rank of associate professor received 1,500 rubles, an associate professor and senior lecturer – 1,100, an assistant teacher – 900, a se-

nior laboratory assistant – 500, a laboratory assistant – 325 and a diener – 150 rubles. A secretary to the director received a salary of 300 rubles, the secretary to the dean – 250, chief of staff – 600, office head – 400, head librarian – 800, librarian – 500 and a cleaner – 115 rubles.

The average salary in the USSR in 1946 was 480 rubles. Consequently, the salaries at the higher institute were considerable and markedly exceeded the salaries in industry and especially in agriculture. Working at the university was prestigious. Education and knowledge were valued and respected.

Although the above may be true, it was primarily Perelman's professionalism, sensitivity and kindness to others that determined his future course in life and his chosen profession. The teacher, scientist and surgeon lived a beautiful and dignified life and received well-deserved recognition in both Russia and abroad.

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