

George Mandl reminisces

From the Department of Physiology web page with additions:

Born in Czechoslovakia (now Czech Republic) in 1929, George Mandl spent his first six years in Prague and thereafter lived in Brno. When WWII ended in 1945 he was 16. After the Soviet takeover in 1948 he was somewhat protected by his maternal uncle who was in the Czechoslovakian army, and (due no doubt to his musical talents) was in the local chorus of the Soviet army. After one failed attempt to escape to Austria, he succeeded on the second try by carrying a suitcase filled with Soviet propaganda (the border guards probably thinking he was a provocateur going to the West) and spent two years in an Austrian displaced persons camp. He arrived in Canada in 1951. According to his family, George's experience of wartime and the aftermath influenced his entire outlook. Anger and bitterness were never his response in his personal life and all benefited from it, but he certainly could get riled up if he saw evidence of history repeating itself. The same was true professionally in the Department of Physiology.

While working as a technician in the Department of Physiology, having been hired by Duncan Cameron, he earned his undergraduate degree from Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) in Montreal in 1961, and his Ph.D. in Physiology from McGill University in 1966. After spending two post-doctoral years at the National Institutes for Medical Research at Mill Hill, London, U.K., he joined McGill's Aviation (now Aerospace) Medical Research Unit in 1968, initially as Assistant and subsequently as Associate director.

His research interests focused on the neural basis of visual perception, with special emphasis on the neural encoding of visual motion and the influence of vision on vestibulo-ocular function. He was appointed Professor of Physiology in 1978, and served as Acting Physiology Chairman between 1986-88. It is to be noted that one of the truly remarkable accomplishments of this intermediate Chairmanship was the relocation of the annual Christmas party, from the historic premises of the Physiology Department to Thomson House (with its in-house bar), which – so the story goes – had an extraordinarily beneficial influence on staff morale and was greatly appreciated by all. Dr. Mandl retired

from full-time active duties in 1994 and has since been Professor (post-retirement) in the Physiology Department.

From Daniel Guitton:

It is with profound sadness and tears in my eyes that I write this message, recognizing and thanking George Mandl for the immense contribution he made to my life. I first met George when, as an aeronautical engineer and research scientist in fluid dynamics, I decided to switch fields and become a neuroscientist studying how the brain “works”. This was indeed a major transition and challenge (which could have been interpreted as naïve and unrealistic) given that I had had no training in biology. To actualize my transition I looked about for a position as a graduate student in many labs in Canada and the USA. I was most fortunate to be accepted as a graduate student in the McGill Physiology Department’s “Aviation Medical Research Unit” directed by Professor Geoffrey Melvill Jones and Professor George Mandl agreed to supervise my research program. This has undoubtedly been the most significant turning point in my life. George, with great intelligence, warmth, patience, attention, gentleness, empathy and deep comprehension of neuroscience and the barriers that faced me, suggested a research program and provided profound guidance throughout its course, teaching me, with his warm patience, the methodology and basic knowledge required to become a successful neuroscientist. I work very hard and George was always there. We ended up writing very original scientific papers which made it possible for me to be hired by the Montreal Neurological Institute and to become a Professor at McGill University. Fortunately, I did tell George how important he has been to me; my scientific father. May his memory mark McGill’s history as a testimony of how students should be mentored. .

From Tom Chang:

I first met him when he was working as a technician for Professor Sekelj. He impressed me as an intelligent and hard working scientist. He took night courses to become qualified for graduate studies in the department followed by professorial appointment in the department with major accomplishment in his

research and teaching. It is a great loss to the department and to his colleagues because he has always been helpful, enthusiastic, and friendly to all.

From Ann Wechsler:

I did not know that George had passed away! I am so sorry to hear it - he was such a longstanding member of our Department, constantly present, attending meetings, and participating in teaching and academic counselling activities! We interacted often when he was in the McIntyre building, and I always enjoyed our conversations

From Geoffrey Melvill-Jones:

Yes indeed, I came to know him well during my 30+ years at McGill. I first met him during his extended 'apprenticeship' as a neuroscience technician under Ben Burns' supervision in the early 1960. As I understand it, Ben was so impressed with both technical and intellectual aptitude of the young man that he persuaded George to register for an MSc, promising to ease his technical commitment accordingly. This was so successful that Ben gave him the further opportunity to go for a PhD. Despite the tough job of continuing technical lab work George rose to the occasion, finally graduating with a PhD as a physiologist, after a truly marathon struggle/juggle between technical duties and studying for the PhD.

It was at this point that I arrived to inaugurate a new Defense Board "Aviation Medical Research Unit" (1961) under Hank McIntosh's Chairmanship in the Physiology Dept. with an initial Defense Research pledge of financial start-up support. Hank offered me a large empty room in the Old Medical Building in which to start working up a suitable research lab. So when Ben 'played truant' and buzzed off to the British MRC in its then new London buildings, I invited George to join me to help establishing the new lab.

It was one of the best decisions I ever made. He quickly showed his merits in both scientific and technical matters, helping me as a novice to master the demanding (for me at that time) new technology of unit neural recording in the decerebrate cat. From the first it was clear that in addition to superb technical skills he quickly demonstrated a keen scientific interest in the inauguration of our early scientific quests.

His insightful participation in both technical and academic aspects of our emerging experimental programs was quite outstanding, playing a major role in as it were lifting our new Ave Med Research Unit “off the ground”. But more than this, he exhibited an enviable ability to meld us all together as a new human unit. For example I have vivid memories of a serious discord which emerged between my two new technicians, one mechanical the other electric: they began physically threatening one another! Typically, the problem was permanently resolved by George’s stern but kindly approach. Before long, we moved our Unit into the then new Macintyre Building, when George revealed an innate administrative potential in pulling together the complicated threads inevitably incurred by such a move.

It was at this time that he began to “click” into a research program of his own, focused essentially on the role of superior colliculus during vestibularly driven eye movements in the in *head-free* animal, previous international studies having been confined to head-fixed models (i.e. no vestibular input). The work opened up a whole new field of interest focused on a new concept of “Gaze control” or “control of direction of regard” during free head movement thus involving the interaction of vestibular and optical sensory inputs into the same optokinetic system. For this he attracted a particularly interesting graduate student, Daniel Guitton. As you may know, Daniel had recently completed a successful PhD degree in Aeronautical Engineering ! On visiting our labs he (Daniel) became sufficiently fascinated in our field of work to embark bravely on a 2nd PhD program in the Neurosciences, studying under the aegis of Dr. Mandl in our new labs. Meanwhile, in his own time George embarked on a related research focused on the difference between central neural response to

continuous and intermittent image movement on the retina, a program related to one of our combined studies of retinal contribution to adaptive plasticity in the vestibulo-ocular reflex. As you may know, Daniel went on to become a major mover in the field of his study under George's supervision.

I assume you are already aware of George's all too short period of acting head of department. I believe I'm not the only one to have wished he had not been bumped off the pedestal for the sake of a better known individual.

One last note on George's extra-curricular credits is the fact that he was an accomplished musician, his instrument being the 'cello. So far as I know he never went public in this musical area, but in keeping with my above comments I understand he had significant talent in the playing of his instrument. Finally, also in keeping with my profound respect for his gentle kindness; when my wife passed away in the late 1980s George and Gwen went out of their way to soften the blow in the area of Home Management.



George (L) with Geoffrey Melvill Jones, sometime in the 70's.

From Mort Levy:

Very sad, he was a true gentleman. I first met him in 1954, when I became an Honours student in the Dept....and he and Carl Pinsky were technicians for Paul Sekelj. As Ann said he was helpful in every way. We lost touch as I went through Medical School and Residency and then reconnected when I joined the Dept. in Jan. 1969.

From Phil Gold:

It's a pleasure to add something in George's memory.

There were 4 of us in the Honours Physiology program in the 1950s (Mort Levy, Irwin Kornbluth, Tom Chang and I). Paul Sekelj had emigrated from Yugoslavia in the 1940s, during the war. He was a brilliant man with a remarkable mind, a heavy accent, and a rather scattered habit of lecturing. He would illustrate a

concept on the blackboard, which the 4 of us would quickly copy and then he would say, 'but that was wrong', erase the board and off we went with another drawing.

We would have been lost, if it hadn't been for the fact that George was working with Paul, and who would then explain what it was that Sekelj was trying to tell us. He did this with patience and kindness - as the kind of person that he was. We remained friends and got together from time to time. I shall remember George with great fondness.