



Hiram N. Vineberg, 1857-1945

*(Photograph courtesy of the Journal of
the Mount Sinai Hospital, New York.)*

Hiram Nahum Vineberg

1857 — 1945*

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Résumé

Hiram Vineberg vint avec ses deux soeurs jumelles au Canada en 1862 alors que son père avait assuré leur immigration. Les auteurs de l'article mettent l'emphase sur certain aspects précis de la vie de Hiram Vineberg médecin et gynécologue célèbre.

Religieux, M. Vineberg refusa de passer l'examen un chabbat et s'en expliqua auprès de Sir William Dawson "l'homme qui contribua à faire de McGill ce que nous en connaissons". Respectant les motifs de Hiram Vineberg, Sir W. Dawson l'autorisa à passer l'examen le lundi suivant, examen qui s'avéra plus difficile. Cet examen devait stupéfier les correcteurs. Non seulement Hiram Vineberg obtint les notes les plus fortes de toute la session et de toute sa promotion, mais en outre, il se mérita la Médaille d'Or Holmes . . . lorsque l'on sait qu'il n'était éligible à aucune récompense . . . cela laisse songeur! Mais passé ce cap universitaire, les auteurs décrivent ce que fut la vie d'Hiram Vineberg, médecin itinérant. En 1882, Hiram Vineberg revint au Canada et pratiqua la gynécologie et l'obstétrique qui deviendront ses spécialités. Les auteurs pensent que H. Vineberg aurait été poussé à pratiquer ce domaine de la médecine plutôt que n'importe quel autre "en raisons des circonstances qui ont entouré le décès de sa mère" (fin de citation). Une des réflexions de feu Hiram Vineberg fut que: "il trouvait qu'il était plus intéressant de soigner les femmes" Les auteurs Harry et Samuel Ballon font une longue liste énumérant les différents postes, fonctions et titres honorifiques de Hiram Vineberg dans cette branche particulière de la médecine.

*We wish to express our gratitude to Mr. Norman Freedman, Montreal, for permission to quote from Hiram Vineberg's Journal.

Ample justification for a biography of Hiram Nahum Vineberg (Fig. 1) exists in the record of his outstanding professional achievements, his devotion to patient welfare, and the high regard in which he was held by his pupils and associates. Yet, beyond these qualities, he exhibited the moral courage and intellectual honesty of the true self-made man. Forced to create his own opportunities, early hardships and disappointments culminated in the gratification of fulfilment.

Hiram Vineberg and his twin sister were born in a village near Kovna, Lithuania, then part of Russia. He believed the date of their birth to be December 20, 1857.¹ His mother died of a postpartum hemorrhage, but his father soon remarried. He sensed that Jews would not participate in the reforms which followed the accession of Alexander II in 1855. Unwilling to face the recurrence of social degradation and spiritual submersion, he sold his meager lumber business and set out alone for Canada in 1858 in search of a new home for his family. As detailed descriptions of Hiram's parents do not exist, one cannot measure their transmitted qualities. Yet, in disclosing the forces which shaped the life of Hiram Vineberg, the foresight, faith, and courage of his father cannot be disregarded.

Mass emigration from Russia occurred only after the pogroms of 1881, and in 1858 the Jewish population of Canada was less than 1,200.² Hiram's father knew of the nucleus of a Jewish colony in the Indian territory of Ontario, and there he joined Noah Freedman and Luis Kellert in business. Their partnership in a general store dissolved four years later, and Hiram's father began a similar enterprise for himself at Moose Creek. By 1862, his economic position enabled him to bring his wife and three children to Canada.

Hiram entered elementary school at age five. Left by his father to his own resources, he demonstrated considerable ability at free enterprise, earning fifty cents weekly for opening a store early each morning. At age 14, he left for Montreal with his 19 year old cousin, Hyman. They called first at the J. C. McKenzie Company, dry goods merchants, and were received by J. P. Cleghorn, the manager. Hiram indicated that they wished to open a general store at Forrester Falls, Ontario, the gateway to a new and promising lumber district. Impressed by their honesty, and certain that they would repay him and prove good customers, Mr. Cleghorn agreed to supply merchandise on credit. His confidence was not misplaced. By age 18, Hiram Vineberg had established a solid financial position. He had derived strength from his ambition to become a physician, but he soon appreciated that his dreams would become a reality only if he created his own opportunities. He disposed of his interest in the business

to his cousin who, it is said, overpaid him; and, in preparation for his matriculation, he received private instruction in English for six months. In 1874 he registered as a medical student at McGill University.

During the same year, owing to the failing health of Professor Drake, the position of Lecturer on Institutes of Medicine was conferred upon William Osler, who had just returned from a two year sojourn among the great schools and laboratories of Europe. In 1875, Osler was promoted to the Chair. This appointment was followed immediately by active laboratory work in physiology, histology and pathology.³ The atmosphere of academic and scientific excellence suited Hiram Vineberg, who received a prize for scholarship at the completion of this third year.

Examinations in his final year were scheduled to be held on a Saturday. As a Sabbath observer, he was unwilling to be examined on that day. Because there existed a tacit understanding that students were welcome to visit Principal Dawson at any time, Hiram Vineberg availed himself of the privilege.

Sir William Dawson, 'the man who made McGill' and 'gave McGill an inclination towards scientific and professional studies' had a kinship with all men.⁴ He would not tolerate racial prejudice, and respected Vineberg's scruples. Although it was intimated that Vineberg would be ineligible to receive any prizes, Dawson granted him permission to write a special and necessarily more difficult examination on the following Monday. Because he obtained the highest marks for the entire course, Hiram Vineberg was awarded the Holmes Gold Medal on March 28, 1878.⁵

Sixty-five years later, on June 8, 1943, Dr. Vineberg, then 85 years old said, 'I confess to having been proud of my job in 1878 when I graduated from McGill University and was awarded the Holmes Gold Medal'.⁶

Hiram Vineberg's immediate experiences upon graduation were neither inspiring nor joyful. Unable to obtain a training position, he began practice in Montreal in April, 1878. Although he quickly built a fine practice, he considered that his future was not promising. The roving spirit seized him, and after 18 months he left Montreal for England.

After a short stay in Liverpool he moved to London where he walked the medical wards for three months. His pleasures continued to be mixed with much anxiety, and without set objectives he accepted an appointment on September 30, 1879 as doctor on the ship "Western Monarch". The journey took 89 days, ending at Wellington, New Zealand on January 2, 1880. At a testimonial dinner held in Wellington, the passengers expressed their high esteem for Hiram Vineberg, both as a professional and as a true

gentleman.⁷

Dr. Vineberg kept a longhand diary of the entire trip.⁸ The diary, which ends abruptly, contains very few references to medical experiences. It does, however, disclose admirably Hiram Vineberg's powers of observation, his tender interest in wandering, suffering mankind, and his literary qualities.

'... there was that excitement and confusion which only can be witnessed when over two hundred souls are leaving their native homes, probably forever, for a distant land and on a sea-voyage of three months duration. Here was a man hurrying along with his wife and six or eight children, and carrying about a dozen articles varying from a tin tea pot to a clothes basket. There another with a bundle of bed clothes on his back and both hands full of cooking utensils, a third holding fast on some large cases for fear someone would run away with them . . . This afforded a most affecting scene. Aged parents crying bitterly to see their children leaving them and no likelihood of ever seeing them again; wives weeping after husbands, sisters after their brothers and young women sobbing hysterically after their lovers. One parting in particular affected me very much, almost made tears come from my eyes. It was a very aged couple bidding goodbye to their daughter, probably an only one, with her husband and children. The poor old mother hung about the neck of her daughter for upwards of ten minutes, crying bitterly and trying to tear herself away, while the father with locks and beard as white as snow, stood close by endeavouring hard to suppress his emotions and stay the tears which were coursing down his wrinkled and care-worn face.'

These emotions so beautifully expressed by Hiram Vineberg at this time of parting reveal not only his sorrow at leaving London, but may reflect an appreciation of the circumstances which surrounded the departure of his father and countless other Jews from Europe.

His descriptions of many of the passengers and crew reveal not only an eye for physical detail and a flair for the literary portrait, but insight into the conflicting parts of the complex human personality.

'He is a Scotchman, of medium size, bordering on 45, but much older looking, and with a frame which impresses you as being wiry and capable of undergoing great difficulties. His countenance has a stern and peculiar expression owing in part to his disposition, and chiefly to a paralysis of the left side of his face, which renders that side of his face vacant and expressionless and gives to the eye a staring appearance. True to the national characteristic he is very obstinate . . . He has risen from before the mast, as a sailor has great experience and skill, and as a captain is exceedingly careful and keeps those under him with an iron rod. He is famous both in the colony and in England for his good passages, and is one of those individuals whose ambition is to excel in anything they undertake, whether it be of the greatest importance or of a most vital trivial nature. For instance, when playing a game of draughts he applies himself with the same zeal and earnestness as he would in an act on which depended the safety of the ship, and is almost as anxious as he would be under those circumstances. He is very opinionated and will contradict one in a statement relating to one's own profession. His ideas on some things are sound, but on others he holds the most erroneous ideas, but sticks to all with a pertinacity which makes him an unprofitable person to converse with. These traits so unpleasant in a companion in private life fit him in an eminent degree for the post he holds, and one feels safe at seas under a man of his stamp, where so much depends upon resolution and decision of character.'

As Vineberg himself noted, 'on board ship it does not take long to analyse one, not chemically, and to find out his true composition'.

The composition of Hiram Vineberg was deeply influenced by his Jewish heritage, no small factor contributing to his occasional sense of isolation.

'When their services were going on and over two hundred souls raised their voices to their Saviour, I could not help feeling a sadness come over me, as I reflected that I was the only Jew among so many, and that their style of worship prevented me from joining them.'

Throughout the diary, however, runs a thread of gentle wit tempered by a conspicuous absence of any feeling of self-importance.

'Had a walk with one of the second cabin young lady passengers last evening. The young lady passenger in the salon heard of this, and this morning after breakfast, she said that violated the laws of the ship and consequently had me tried before a select committee of three, one of which she helped to form. The Committee made the following rules for the doctor.

1. Not to go on the main deck before breakfast.
 2. Not to stay more than ten minutes with any young lady passenger.
 3. To have only an hour on main deck (second cabin passenger deck) after breakfast.
 4. No whispering, signaling or simpering to any of the lady passengers.
- I made the following counter rules for the guidance of the salon passengers.

1. Flirtation not allowed.
2. No kicking under the table during meals.
3. No pinching permitted.
4. Any evasions (white lies) forbidden.
5. No cheating when playing cards.
6. No puns to be made.

Whoever violated one of the rules was to pay a fine of two pence. When we wanted to have a bit of fun, Mr. H. and myself would say we were going to have a 'twopenny worth' of courting the young ladies on the main deck. The means to amuse are so limited on board a ship that one must endeavour to make the most of every little circumstance.'

From New Zealand, Hiram Vineberg proceeded by steamer to Honolulu. There he met Kalakaua, King of the Hawaiian Islands from 1874 to 1891, described by Robert Louis Stevenson in his *South Sea Cruises 1888-89* as, 'a large, handsome, dissipated monarch, a man of real ability and iron constitution, versed beyond any of his subjects in the history and legend of his kingdom.'⁹ Vineberg treated Kalakaua's sister, Princess Lydia Kamoheha Lilikalami, for black tongue, subsequently reporting that there was nothing wrong with her. She later succeeded her brother, and as Queen from 1891 to 1893 was the last monarch of the

Hawaiian Islands.

King Kalakaua appointed Hiram Vineberg doctor in charge of three sugar plantations on the island of Oahu, where he served all the natives within a radius of 30 miles. Vineberg later declined the post of attending physician to the leper colony on the island of Molakai; however, he became an ardent admirer of the Belgian Roman Catholic Missionary, Father Joseph de Veuster Damien, whom he described as the finest man one could possibly meet.¹⁰

In 1882, Hiram Vineberg returned to Canada, practicing for the following three years at Portage la Prairie. Still dissatisfied with his medical status and desirous of leaving his mark, he decided that gynecology and obstetrics was to be his metier. He may have been motivated by the circumstances surrounding the death of his mother. When, two years before his death he was asked why he had chosen his specialty, he replied that he considered women more worthy to be cured than men.

After a year of study in Berlin, Danzig, Prague, and Vienna, in 1886 Hiram Vineberg opened an office in New York City, first serving as assistant to James B. Hunter at the Polyclinic Hospital. Later, he worked with George Michaels Edebohls at the Postgraduate Hospital.

In 1890, Hiram Vineberg joined the staff of the Out-Patient Internal Female Department of The Mount Sinai Hospital, and was appointed Chief of that Out-Patient Gynecological Department in 1893. He continued to rise steadily within the ranks at The Mount Sinai Hospital, becoming Adjunct Gynecologist in 1900, Attending Gynecologist in 1916, and Consulting Gynecologist in 1921. He held appointments at the Montefiore Hospital as Attending Gynecologist in 1894, and as Consulting Gynecologist in 1908, and was Chief Gynecologist at Beth Moses Hospital, Brooklyn in 1919, becoming Consulting Gynecologist in 1929.

In 1895, Hiram Vineberg founded the New York Graduate Society of McGill University, and became President of that organization in 1905. He was President of the New York Obstetrical Society in 1917, and First Vice-President of the American Gynecological Society in 1925.

From 1891 to 1921, Hiram Vineberg authored 67 medical publications. An early advocate of the vaginal route to exposure of the pelvic structures, he discussed in several of his papers the correction of uterine retrodisplacement using a vaginal technique^{11, 12} The operative treatment of renal tuberculosis and puerperal sepsis comprised other areas of his expertise.^{13, 14, 15} He recognized the indication for ligation of the pelvic veins in patients with disseminated pelvic infection.¹⁶ Pyelitis in pregnancy,¹⁷ the

diagnosis and treatment of ectopic gestation,^{18,19} and the fate of ovaries left in situ after hysterectomy²⁰ demonstrate in part the diversity of subjects represented in his bibliography.

Hiram Vineberg maintained a strong interest in the etiology and operative therapy of gynecologic malignancies.²¹ He wrote of his experiences with primary carcinoma of the urethra,²² hydatid mole,²³ and chorioepithelioma.²⁴ He is best remembered,²⁵ however, for his determination of the relative infrequency of cervical cancer in women of the Hebrew race.²⁶ From 1893 to 1906, 19,800 new patients were examined in the Dispensary of The Mount Sinai Hospital. Of these, 95 per cent were Jewish immigrants from Russia, Austria, and Poland. Vineberg noted that nine of the 18 cases of cancer of the cervix diagnosed during this time occurred in the five per cent of women who were not Jewish. The incidence of cervical cancer was one in 2,154 Jewish women, compared to one in 111 non-Jewish women. A second study conducted between 1909 and 1918 confirmed this difference. Moreover, among patients admitted to The Mount Sinai Hospital between 1911 and 1918, the incidence was one in 937 Jewish women compared to one in 61 non-Jews. This relative difference was not seen with cancer of the rectum, intestines, stomach, or breast. Hiram Vineberg ascribed this protective tendency to a strict adherence by the poor class of Jewish women to the laws prohibiting sexual intercourse during and immediately after the menses, and thus to an avoidance of trauma to the congested cervical tissues.

On June 8, 1943, he received The Hiram N. Vineberg Anniversary Volume of the Journal of The Mount Sinai Hospital. The dedication read as follows:

'To Dr. Hiram N. Vineberg a pioneer in his chosen field this volume is dedicated on the occasion of his eighty-fifth birthday as a token of esteem and as an expression of appreciation, affection and good wishes by his friends, associates, and pupils.'²⁷

This tribute was not only for outstanding professional achievement, but for the highest ethical standards and interest in teaching demonstrated by Hiram Vineberg.

He was happily married until his death at age 88 on May 5, 1945. There were no children.

The following is taken from a copy of the will of Hiram Vineberg.

'Third: I give and bequeath to the 'Royal Institution for the Advancement of Learning' (McGill University from which I was graduated in 1878) the sum of Ten Thousand Dollars (10,000) to be known as the 'Hiram Vineberg Research Fund' the income thereof to be applied by its Medical Faculty in such a manner as it may determine. I ask this bequest to the 'Royal Institution for the Advancement of Learning'

in appreciation of the liberal and broad-minded spirit exhibited towards me in my student days by the University in respecting my religious scruples regarding examinations on the Jewish Sabbath Day.'

FOOTNOTES

1. The uncertainty may have related to his birth during Hanukkah. At this Feast of Lights, the ceremonial kindling of candles occurs at dusk. The number of candles is increased by one each evening for eight successive days. Births during this period were recorded by custom at the back of a prayer book according to the number of candles lit on the particular day, and not the exact date.
2. L. Rosenberg, *The Jewish Population of Canada*, Canadian Jewish Population Studies No. 2. Reprinted from *The American Jewish Year Book*, 1946-47, 48.
3. Hiram Vineberg was among the friends who compiled "Contributions to Medical and Biological Research" (two volumes) published in honor of the seventieth birthday of Sir William Osler on July 12, 1919.
4. Edgar E. Collard, *McGill The Story of a University*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1960), pp. 49.
5. Andrew Fernando Holmes (1797-1860), founder of the first medical school in Canada in 1823, was the first Dean of the Medical Faculty of McGill University. In 1864, the Faculty established the Holmes Gold Medal in memory of their late Dean, "whom no man ever lived more conscientiously and few have died more beloved". (Maude E. Abbott, *History of Medicine in the Province of Quebec* (Montreal: McGill University, 1931).
6. Hiram N. Vineberg, personal communication to his cousin Harris Vineberg.
7. Bernard Sachs, foreward of "The Hiram N. Vineberg Anniversary Volume," *Journal of the Mount Sinai Hospital*, N.Y., 10: xii, 1943.
8. A copy of the diary was made available by Mr. Norman Freedman, grand-nephew of Hiram Vineberg. The typewritten, single-spaced incomplete copy consists of 33 pages, 10 by 12 inches.
9. Graham Balfour, *The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson*, (London: Methuen and Co., 1906), pp. 282.
10. In 1890, soon after reaching Australia, Robert Louis Stevenson found in a religious paper a letter from Dr. Hyde, a Presbyterian minister in Honolulu, deprecating the labors of Father Damien for the lepers at Molakai and reviving against his memory some highly unworthy slanders. According to Graham Balfour, the letter was written in a spirit peculiarly calculated to arouse Stevenson's indignation. When Stevenson then learned that a proposed memorial to Damien in London had been abandoned, he wrote the celebrated letter to Hyde which was published in Sydney and later in Edinburgh in the "Scots Observer".
 Father Damien had died on April 15, 1889. It was a full month later that Stevenson first visited Molakai, never meeting the man whose memory he did so much to vindicate. Anticipating legal action, Stevenson entered into correspondence with Hiram Vineberg, who agreed to go anywhere the libel suit might be brought. (Graham Balfour, *The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson*, (London: Methuen and Co., 1906), pp. 306.
11. Hiram N. Vineberg, "Vaginal operations for retroversions and retroflexions of the uterus, with a critical review of fifty-seven cases of vaginal suturing of the round ligaments (The Author's Operation)," *Medical Record*, 62: 376, 1902.
12. Hiram N. Vineberg, "Vaginal coeliotomy," *Medical Record*, 47: 264, 1895.
13. *Ibid.*, "Nephrectomy for tuberculosis of the kidney, with a report of four cases," *Medical Record*, 66: 761, 1904.
14. *Ibid.*, "The treatment of puerperal sepsis," *American Journal of Obstetrics*, 48: 325, 1903.

15. *Ibid.*, "The surgical treatment of puerperal septic infection," *Surgery, Gynecology & Obstetrics*, 11: 30, 1910.
16. *Ibid.*, "Litigation of pelvic veins for puerperal pyemia," *American Journal of Obstetrics*, 59: 412, 1909.
17. *Ibid.*, "Pyelitis in pregnancy and the puerperium," *American Journal of Obstetrics*, 57: 769, 1908.
18. *Ibid.*, "Clinical notes on a series of nine consecutive cases of ectopic gestation," *Medical Record*, 63: 496, 1903.
19. *Ibid.*, "The differential diagnosis of ectopic pregnancy," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 36: 1305, 1901.
20. *Ibid.*, "What is the fate of the ovaries left in situ after hysterectomy," *Surgery, Gynecology & Obstetrics*, 21: 559, 1915.
21. *Ibid.*, "The etiology of cancer of the pelvic organs," *American Journal of Obstetrics*, 53: 410, 1906.
22. *Ibid.*, "Primary carcinoma of the urethra in women," *American Journal of Medical Science*, 124: 105, 1902.
23. *Ibid.*, "Hydatid mole," *American Journal of Obstetrics*, 64: 419, 1911.
24. *Ibid.*, "Clinical data on chorio-epithelioma with end-results of operative treatment," *Surgery, Gynecology & Obstetrics*, 28: 123, 1919.
25. Fred J. Taussig, noted gynecologic cancer surgeon stated, "As Hiram Vineberg pointed out at a meeting of the American Gynecological Society in 1919, cancer of the cervix is relatively infrequent in Jewish women, yet this disease is so widespread throughout the world that it demands the special consideration of all gynecologists". Fred J. Taussig, "The present status in the treatment of cervix cancer," *Journal of the Mount Sinai Hospital, N.Y.*, 10: 172, 1943.
26. Hiram N. Vineberg, "The relative infrequency of cancer of the uterus in women of the Hebrew race," *Contributions to Medical and Biological Research*, (New York: Paul B. Hoeber, 1919), pp. 1217.
27. Dedication of "The Hiram N. Vineberg Anniversary Volume," *Journal of the Mount Sinai Hospital, N.Y.*, 10: 1943.