

The spectacular life of Leon Elias “Volo” Volodarsky (1894–1962) – surgeon, art collector, and donator

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Born and raised under adverse conditions in rural Ukraine, young Leon Elias “Volo” Volodarsky (1894–1962) left for Belgium in his early teens to seek a future. He served in World War I, but because of illness he was evacuated to England and finally dismissed. His plan to return to Russia by ship in 1916 was changed as the ship called at the port of Kristiansand. He then disembarked to stay in Norway. In spite of difficult living conditions he managed to qualify for admission to the University in Kristiania (Oslo). He graduated as a medical doctor in 1926, and held hospital positions until he had to flee during World War II because of his Jewish descent. He then joined the allied forces in England. Back in Norway after the war he was trained as a surgeon. His hospital career was interrupted by medical commitments abroad, before he finally settled as a surgeon at the Oslo medical emergency unit (Oslo kommunale legevakt). Dr. Volodarsky was a committed art collector, and he presented to Ullevål University Hospital a monumental painting by the Indian painter Maqbool Fida Husain (1915–2011), a piece of art which still reminds us about a doctor with a quite special background.

In a narrow corridor and well hidden behind closed doors in Ullevål university hospital, Oslo one may be lucky to discover and find interest in a very special work of art. It is a large painting (Fig. 1) by the famous and internationally recognized Indian painter Maqbool Fida Husain (1915–2011), and it was originally presented as a tribute to professor Kristian Kristiansen (1907–1993) and the Department of Neurosurgery, Ullevål hospital, Oslo by his friend and colleague, dr. Leon Elias “Volo” Volodarsky (1896–1962). In this same context, the exciting course of life and unique career of Volo, an unpretentious Norwegian general surgeon and private



Fig. 1. Painting (435 x 103 cm) by Maqbool Fida Husain in Ullevål university hospital, Oslo, a gift from Dr. Leon Elias "Volo" Volodarsky Photo: "Kunstkomiteen", Ullevål universitetssykehus).

art collector, is worth notice by this late obituary many years after he passed away, and 125 years after his birth.

The background of Dr. Volodarsky

Leon Elias Volodarsky who arrived in Oslo, Norway a cold November night in 1916, as a lonely, friendless and helpless stranger, was born in a small village called Schultz in Ukraine, situated between Odessa and Nikolajev (Mykolajiv). Youngest among the six children in the Jewish family of Sara and Berl Volodarsky, he spent his childhood on his father's farm. His was not the usual happy carefree childhood, but one oppressed by prevailing prejudices. To be denied normal rights for proper education because of fear of persecution was considered undesirable for the growing child. So, in his early teens Volo was dispatched on a lonely trip to seek his future in the Jewish-owned diamond grinders in Antwerp, Belgium.

Just as he was settling down to this first vocation, the First World War broke out. In righteous indignation against the enemy, the young teen aged boy enrolled himself in the army by falsifying his age. Service in the cold damp trenches in the famous big battle of Ypres for a year resulted in illness, for which he was later evacuated to England and finally discharged unfit for further service. Penniless and jobless he roamed about the streets of London, living in slums and grabbing the first job that could give him a few shillings. Thus he worked as an assistant to a tailor, a shoemaker, a lady's hat-designer and then as an errand boy, lift boy and a waiter in a hotel.

Encouraged by an advertisement in the newspaper in October 1916, that Russian citizens would have an opportunity to go back to their country, he opted to return. On his way from London that same year his ship landed in Kristiansand, Norway. He had recognized that the conditions in Russia had become so bad that he decided to break off his return to Russia,

went on shore in Kristiansand and remained in Norway, a choice he never in his life regretted.

Volo ending up as Dr. Volodarsky in Norway

Mustad's margarine factory in Lysaker near Oslo provided the first shelter to this lonely foreigner who did not even know the local language. Here he worked as a labourer for 12 NOK a week. The young teenager started to learn Norwegian. It is no surprise that his first acquaintance with the language was through the swear words he heard during the heavy carrying and stacking sacks of salts.

Soon after, he was lucky to meet a kind and gracious lady, Miss Marie Antonia Aniksdal (1867–1957), at that time a well known female politician. She was engaged in the Norwegian Israel Mission in Oslo, and with her help and encouragement, Volo started his formal education while still working at the factory.

Accepting no hardship as too great, and taking his lead from the gypsies in his home town, he would say to himself "if gypsies can teach a bear to dance, then I can learn the Norwegian language". And learn he did; in a year's time, he passed the examination, after a syllabus made out by Hauges Minde (a private Christian gymnasium named after Hans Nielsen Hauge). Later he joined afternoon classes at the Ragna Nielsens Skole in Kristiania (Oslo). He had by now left the factory and was supporting himself by working as a telegraph messenger and doing some tutoring jobs. In two years he qualified for admission to the University (1920).

Inspired by the kindness of his teacher, he wanted to become a teacher himself, but soon realized that his proficiency in the Norwegian language – or the lack of it – would always be a barrier for him to become a good teacher. To repay his debt of kindness to mankind he decided to become a doctor, and finally he graduated from the University in Oslo in 1926 (1). During all these years of education he earned his living doing a variety of jobs in his off time and holidays. After the first term in the medical school, he compiled all the lectures in physiology and by the courtesy of his professor put out a treatise in Norwegian on physiology.

Having graduated, he served the country of his adoption in various capacities and places, i.e. in departments of psychiatry, internal medicine and surgery in Krohgstøtten hospital, Ullevål hospital and Telemark County Hospital, Skien, and then in Innherred Hospital in Levanger from 1929–1935 (2) (Fig. 2). In 1935 he came back to Oslo and worked with professor Carl Semb, department of surgery, Ullevål hospital, already famous for his "Semb's thoracoplasty", for three years. This association he valued and cher-



Fig. 2. Dr. Volodarsky having a coffee break in the garden of the hospital in Levanger, Norway, probably in 1936. (Photo: Harald Renbjør. Courtesy of Levanger Photo Museum/ Åse Aud Reitan. Picture LEM.006.10.036.13.)

ished most, all of his life. In 1939 he returned to Levanger where he was when the Second World War broke out in 1940 (Fig. 3). In November 1941, the anti-semitic persecutions under the Nazi regime made him escape from the country. Skiing across snow covered mountains, he fled to Sweden, from where he was moved to London.

Arriving in England he was attached to the Norwegian resistance movement as medical officer in the Norwegian Health Centres to serve for the Norwegian forces and personnel in Cardiff, London, Newcastle and Edinburgh, eventually even in New York (Fig. 4). At the end of the war, he was much involved among the Norwegian and Russian armed forces under the liberation of Finnmark in 1944–45, practising under miserable conditions in a small hospital unit in the ruined town of Kirkenes after the retreat of the Germans (3).



*Fig. 3. Dr. Volodarsky at his dinner table in Levanger around 1940.
(Photo: Harald Renbjør. Courtesy of Levanger Photo Museum/ Åse Aud Reitan. Picture LEM.006.F01.150.04)*



Fig. 4. Dr. Volodarsky served in the Norwegian Armed Forces in England during the Second World War, and was the personal doctor for the Norwegian prime minister Johan Nygaardsvold (1879–1952) (6). (Courtesy Levanger Photo Museum/ Åse Aud Reitan/ Hans-Magnus Ystgaard/ Karin Kjølmoen.)

Dr. Volodarsky on international missions

After the war, more or less for immediate shelter, he returned to the county hospital in Levanger, his "second home town" from before. Soon afterwards, in response to a call by UNRRA United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, he volunteered to go for a commission in China. In China his work acquired a new meaning for him. He had seen enough misery and squalor, but for the first time he had the real opportunity to help the poor and needy, and provide hope to the hopeless. He accepted the challenges of Mr. Cheng Lu, the chief of UNRRA who welcomed the foreigner with the advice, "... not to expect anything at all to help you in your work, you will find no hospital, no instrument and most likely no patients. You will have to make your own work and you will have to provide the means to carry it on". He started working in Canton (now Guangzhou) in a "hospital" which had no claim to be called so except that sick people used to be dumped there to die. "Fong Pin", meaning "Convenient", was nothing more than a "Convenient place to die". He envisaged a three point programme for his work, to provide means to control and prevent epidemics, to train doctors and nurses in the most modern methods of medicine and surgery, and to provide limitless space fully equipped for care of the sick poor.

After his initial success, a "hospital" that was shunned by everybody began to be sought by thousands of patients. Daily attendance of the "miserable wretches" who peopled Fong Pin, constant contact with the ever lengthening line that besieged the hospital doors, acted on him like a powerful stimulant and made of him an indefatigable beggar with a one trek in mind. This led the way to a new fully equipped completely competent and completely charitable "Convenient place to be cured". He begged from every possible source he could think of, and finally there rose up, adjacent to the old decrepit inadequate buildings, a four storey hospital to vie with the best buildings in Canton. It is known from a letter to Volo found after his death, that soon after he left Canton, the place was closed down. He worked in China for five years, and unwillingly and with a broken heart he left the place because of the advent of new political regimes.

While at Canton, one day Volo picked up an infant girl left behind in a gutter and brought her to his house, he took care of her, appointed a nursing aid to look after her. She soon grew up into a charming little girl, whom he loved dearly and for all practical purposes brought her up as his daughter. It may be mentioned that "Papa" Volo was a bachelor and remained so all his life. The communist regime who virtually forced him to leave Canton, would not let him take his "daughter" with him. She was

held up on the border control when Volo left China. Later in life he made all efforts to find this girl and obviously missed her till his end (4,5).

Returning to Oslo he went back to Ullevål hospital. Soon after, however, he was on his way again, now for six months mission in the Norwegian Army Field Hospital during the Korean War. Thereafter, on his way back from Korea, he met some of his old friends in WHO World Health Organization in Geneva who asked him to help them in another project in the East. Thus on 7th April 1954, he reached India as the head of a WHO team to establish a Thoracic Surgery Training Centre in Delhi. Starting from nothing, in one year he developed a full-fledged centre for surgical treatment of pulmonary tuberculosis. It was here that fate brought one of us (PNT) in contact with this remarkable man, had the rare privilege to work with him, and ultimately virtually was “adopted as a son to Papa Volo”. He thus carried the teachings of his esteemed friend Prof. Carl Semb and the name of Norwegian medicine to the Orient once again. It was only with his will to help the poor, his immense patience and perseverance that he succeeded in completing the task assigned to him in such a short time and against odds (5).

Final return to Norway

From the time of his return from India after 1954, Dr. Leon Elias Volodarsky finally ended up as consultant surgeon in the Oslo kommunale Legevakt, the municipal patient first aid station and emergency hospital in Oslo. In his capacity as a surgical specialist he continued to work there till few months before his death in 1962.

Volodarsky, art collector, donator of the painting by Maqbool Fida Husain

In the early 1960-ies, Department of Neurosurgery, Ullevål Hospital, Oslo under its leader professor Kristian Kristiansen was presented with a large and very special work of art (Fig. 1). The donor was a near friend and colleague of professor Kristiansen, doctor Leon Elias “Volo” Volodarsky, who spent a silent and retired existence as a surgeon in Oslo at the time. He had close friends after many years among surgical colleagues in Oslo, among these professors Hans Fredrik Harbitz (1900–71), Carl Semb (1895–1970) and Kristian Kristiansen (1907–1993) (1).

The occasion for the presentation of this impressive painting (435 x 103 cm) by the Indian artist Maqbool Fida Husain (1915–2011), refers to dr. Volo Volodarsky’s gratitude to his friend professor Kristiansen and his department in Ullevål hospital. This department of neurosurgery had an



Fig. 5. Professor Kristian Kristiansen (1907–1993). Chairman of The Norwegian Medical Society (Det norske medicinske Selskab) (1963–1965). (Photo: PN Tandon)

internationally high esteem. For a period of a few years from 1957 the department attracted a number of doctors from India for their further specialization in the field of neurosurgery (Fig. 5). Among them, one of the authors (PNT) was given accommodation and the opportunity to stay with "Papa" Volo in his flat back in 1957–58 (Fig. 6). In the years to follow, this large work of art has represented an exclusive decoration on the walls of Department of Neurosurgery in Ullevål University Hospital.

Beside his surgical skills, Volo was a dedicated art collector, and in his apartment in Munkedamsveien 55B in Oslo, his private collection of paintings and graphic art, silver, ivory carvings and other treasures characterized the surroundings (Fig. 6). The Husain painting meant for Ullevål hospital was taken out of his collection and presented in the early 1960-ies (4). Volo had stayed in New Dehli, India under a United Nations UN Commission back in 1954, and in an art gallery there he discovered this large painting among two by Maqbool Fida Husain. At that time Husain was neither a recognized nor a reputable artist in India. Volo bought the one picture (for 1400 rupies!) and some Indian authorities bought the other piece. Since then, the reputation of Maqbool Fida Husain as an Indian modernist has risen immensely in India as well as internationally. After his exercise in the



Fig. 6. Dr. Leon Elias “Volo” Volodarsky (1896–1962) in his apartment in Oslo. (Photo: PN Tandon)

art of modified cubism and abstract expressionism, Husain is now recognized as “an Indian Picasso” (Forbes Magazine). After a long and unfortunate dispute whether his art and motives could be interpreted as anti Hindu, the painter left his home country in 2006 after a self-imposed and accepted exile in Qatar, spending his last few years in Doha, Qatar and London. He died in London June 9th, 2011 and is buried in Brookwood Cemetery, Surrey.

A great personality

”Papa” Volo was a spectacular personality. He spent his life in solitude and passed away rather secretly without leaving any family after him. The name and renown of this Norwegian colleague of Ukraine Jewish origin, donor of a precious gift to Oslo University Hospital Ullevål, deserve to be remembered (4, 5).

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