

In Memoriam: Ronald Singer, 1924–2006

Ronald Singer, the Robert R. Bensley Professor in the Department of Organismal Biology and Anatomy at the University of Chicago, died 17 April, following a heart attack. He was born on 12 August, 1924, in Cape Town, South Africa, to Solomon and Sophie Singer, who immigrated to South Africa from Lithuania.

Dr. Singer received his MD (1947) and his DSc (1962) from the University of Cape Town. During the 1950s, he served on the faculty at Cape Town and conducted pioneering archeological and paleontological research at several important Paleolithic sites in South Africa, including Saldanha Bay and Klasies River Mouth, near Port Elizabeth. At a time of apartheid and widespread ignorance of the nation's history, Singer was seeking to drive back the story of *Homo sapiens* in South Africa. This work led to a large number of monographs and papers describing human and mammalian fossil remains from the South African

Pleistocene. Later, Singer expanded this work to other sites in Iran and Britain, including Clacton, Essex, and Hoxne in Suffolk. He later conducted research on Pleistocene fauna, which he excavated from the island of Grenada in the Caribbean, where he served as a guest lecturer in anatomy for a number of years in the 1980s. It is ironic that Dr. Singer's long-time research collaborator and friend, the prominent British field archeologist, John Wymer, preceded him in death by only 2 months.

In Cape Town, Dr. Singer trained as a physician specializing in the anatomical sciences and anatomical research. At this time in the South African system, physician-trained anatomists were integrated into the clinical academic establishment. Dr. Singer's tales of his early years discussed his role as an anatomical consultant in clinical cases and his participation as an anatomist in medical rounds.

The Cape Town years were also filled with much love of sport for Singer. His powerful build led to many active years playing rugby, where he was nicknamed "the Rhino," not only for his physical strength but for his classical facial profile.

Dr. Singer and his family emigrated to the United States from South Africa in 1962, in large part because his and his wife's active opposition to the policies of the apartheid regime had made life there untenable. Soon thereafter, he became the chair of the Department of Anatomy at the University of Chicago, a position from which he was able to exert a lasting influence on the development of the anatomical sciences in the United States.

Dr. Singer's influence was most strongly felt in the development of the modern teaching of gross anatomy, to which he connected modern research training in biological anthropology, organismal biology, evolution, and biomechanics. The legacy of this pro-

gram has created outstanding teaching and research today in the anatomical sciences at universities throughout the United States and the world. This legacy is essential in the modern era, when many scientists are struggling to create modern tools for morphological investigation to complement genomic approaches. Dr. Singer trained those capable of appreciating the subtleties of morphological structure and variation. He also taught gross anatomy as an important, modern, and living science, which is intimately connected with our understanding of the clinical sciences, the history of life, functional and structural biology, and human variation and evolution.

Singer's broad research interests in human prehistory and evolution, human development and variation, and more generally in mammalian biology and evolution created an insightful intellectual framework for the teaching of gross anatomy to several generations of medical and graduate students over a career extending 50 plus years. He was well known at the University of Chicago for his summer gross anatomy course, which he only recently discontinued teaching. This course was directed to the Medical Sciences Training Program (MSTP) and graduate students at the University of Chicago and was taught in the classic British style with continual table-side demonstrations and verbal examinations. Because of Dr. Singer's integrity, honesty, compassion, and wit, this course remains a fond memory to many former students, who have gone on to eminent careers in various branches of medicine and biological science research. A highlight of this course was the end of the course party at Dr. Singer's home, where students were delighted with Singer's wide-ranging and always fascinating stories and Mrs. Singer's outstanding cooking, while surrounded



Dr. Ronald Singer (1961). Nickolas Muray, Strip 88, George Eastman House, Still Photograph Archive. Full catalog record 77: 0188:2695. Gift of Mrs. Nickolas Muray.

with a unique collection of colonial-era South African furniture, art, and artifacts. Dinner ended with fine port and a cigar. Also, many former students fondly remember the sherry hours that Dr. Singer hosted on Friday afternoons in his laboratory, which always included witty and lively discussions about significant figures in the history of the anatomical sciences and sometimes degenerated into contests over arcane anatomical terminology between those professors with the more extensive anatomical training of the 1940s. Truly, this is a world that will not be seen again.

Dr. Singer guarded the heritage of anatomical research at the University of Chicago. Chicago's Anatomy Department was arguably the greatest in the United States in the earlier and middle years of the 20th century. In particular, the department was known for great discoveries in the field of histology and cell biology. One of the best descriptions of this world can be found in Singer's own memoir of the great scientist and histologist, William Bloom (*Biographical Memoirs*, 1993). At the time Singer became chair at Chicago, Bloom was still an active member of the department, retiring in 1969. Bloom and Singer were

not only friends and colleagues but shared a closeness forged through a common world view. Just as Singer had fought for human rights in South Africa, so was Bloom instrumental in rescuing prominent anatomists from Hitler's Europe and bringing them to Chicago. Among these scientists were Franz Weidenreich, the discoverer of the Peking Man fossils, who, like Singer, was an anatomist with a passion for gross morphology, histology, and physical anthropology. Just as Bloom had helped to bring Singer to Chicago, so Bloom had come through a connection with the famed anatomist and scientist of an earlier generation, Robert Bensley. During his years at Chicago, Singer occupied the chair named in Bensley's honor.

Dr. Singer maintained a global network of associates in his various research fields, held numerous positions in professional organizations, and addressed scientific conferences all over the world. He held coappointments at the University of Chicago in the Department of Anthropology and the Committee on African and African-American Studies. He did much work on international committees in the revision of modern anatomical terminology. His work continues to receive honors up to

the present day. His recent *Encyclopedia of Paleontology* (1999) won the 2001 Mary B. Ansari Award from the Geoscience Information Society for the "best published reference work" and in the fall of 2005 he received the Spectemur Agendo Award from the South African College High Schools in Cape Town. Dr. Singer remained active in research and was working to complete several papers and monographs at the time of his death.

Dr. Singer is survived by his loving wife of 55 years, Shirley Singer; children Hazel Singer (John Griffiths), Eric Singer, Sonia Nyberg (Jim), and Charles Singer (Katie). His grandchildren gave him much pleasure: Jennifer Griffiths, Graham Griffiths, Ben Singer, the late Ariel Singer, and Marc Singer. His loving brother, Martin Singer, still resides in South Africa.

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