

# Dr Yahya Cohen

## (1 April 1920 – 14 February 2003)

By Prof Arthur Lim

Pioneering Surgeon, Teacher, Mentor and Humanitarian, a giant in the medical profession, has become a part of the history in Singapore. Yahya Cohen is a man of total integrity and honesty, and who is prepared to take to task anybody who infringes these tenets. He was kind, humble, generous and gracious to all who needed his help. His wit and love of the language were his forte. Yahya is an internationally respected professional, a scholar and has become a legend.

Yahya Cohen was born in 1920 in Singapore. His father was a Jew from Yemen and his mother a Jewess from Iraq. Cohen is a name of Jewish origin, the word meaning "priest", and a Cohen is a direct descent from Aaron the High Priest, the brother of Moses, bearer of the 10 commandments. All the Cohens "are descended from Aaron and we are one of those who give the blessing in the synagogue." It has been said that anyone with such a bloodline can be pompous if desired but Yahya Cohen was merely delighted for being given this unexpected honour. "Yahya" is of course a Muslim name and the combination Yahya Cohen has confused some people.

As a schoolboy, when most will enjoy playing marbles and ball games, Yahya Cohen developed a lifelong passion for surgery. In Yahya's own words: "All I wanted to do from the time I was young was not only to do medicine but also to do surgery. I had known that by the time I was eight or nine years old. My father had to have an operation, and my mother used to take me to see him. And as I walked through the hospital,

*I fell in love with the smell of all the drugs, and I was so impressed by all the nurses in their uniforms and the doctors who walked past in their white coats with a swagger, I felt that surgeons were wonderful, brainy people who cut people up and made them better."*

Yahya Cohen has been a personal friend of mine for over 40 years. Although he was 12 years my senior, I knew him when I was a student in St Andrew's School. Not only were we from the same school but we studied in the same university, at the then University of Malaya. I got to know him well as an undergraduate and later as a medical officer (registrar) in his surgical unit where he was the head and the senior surgeon of Singapore.

Everyone was struck by his dedication and energy, his love for his profession and surgery, and the discipline that he imposed on everyone including himself. He was highly intelligent, honest and battled for what he believed was right. He had a unique sense of humour after work although he always seemed very stern and serious at work.

He remained a bachelor for many years and no one thought he would take a wife or that one would take him. In his extraordinary career, he was:

- A distinguished surgeon, well known internationally.
- A Queen's Scholar. The only member of the Jewish community to have held this rare distinction.
- A Teacher and Mentor to many hundreds and thousands of medical students from Singapore, Malaysia and the region.

- A member of the Board of Governors of St Andrew's School, his old and beloved alma mater for decades (1957 – 1962 and 1974 – 1978).
- The President of the Singapore Medical Association (1961 – 1962).
- A Visiting Professor to the University of Tel Aviv, Israel (1965).
- The Master of the Academy of Medicine (1968 – 1970).
- A Clinical Professor of Surgery at the then University of Singapore, the first and only Jewish person to hold this prestigious position (1969 – 1977).
- An author of innumerable scientific papers in international journals.
- The President of the Singapore Medical Council (1972).
- A member of many Boards of Trustees of Jewish Charities.

In everything that Yahya did, he did it with honour, dignity and distinction. His achievements and activities were numerous and did us proud. He had been the driving force of many organisations. The reputation he earned attracted a steady stream of surgical visitors. One of his admirers who attended some of his talks is Dr Mahathir, who expressed appreciation.

Yahya Cohen's surgical prowess was legendary. He was gentle and meticulous in technique and a pursuer of details. He was cautious in his approach, always taking great care to assess the risks and benefits. When he operated, he demanded full attention from his assistants and nurses. In his practice, he saw many senior officers, ministers and numerous ordinary people as well. But he

◀ Page 18 – Dr Yahya Cohen

never made a difference in care and attention. His courteous manners and reassuring words always soothed anxious patients.

When the Chapter of Surgeons of the Academy of Medicine set up an annual lecture in recognition of the outstanding contributions made in surgery in Singapore by our pioneering surgeon, Yahya Cohen, Mary Rose Gasmier recorded his life as a young surgeon.

**HIS DEFINITION OF SURGERY AND HIS STUDENTS**

*“Surgery is not only operations. It’s being able to look at a patient and make a correct diagnosis. In fact, a good surgeon will not go rushing in with a knife – he would see how much can be done to help the patient without cutting him up. I know some people who did cut patients up – and they never became good diagnosticians.”*

*“The patient is the drawing board of the surgeon – that is from one of the medical textbooks. I told my students during the bedside teaching: You should not just look at pictures in books, you should look at the patient. It’s not the textbook information you rely on, the patient is reality. It’s your patient, he’s depending on you – who else is there that’s more important?”*

*“I really truly loved teaching. I loved training surgeons and I’m very proud that there is a lot of surgeons here even now whom I helped to train, like S S Ratnam who became an internationally known figure in obstetrics and gynaecology, and Arthur Lim, who is also an internationally known ophthalmic surgeon. They worked very hard and they were on call anytime – and, if I may say with some pride, these people who were trained in general surgery learned the ART of surgery.”*

**HIS MOST MEMORABLE PATIENT – A CHINESE TRIAD MEMBER WHO NEEDED TREATMENT AFTER A GANG CLASH**

*“I don’t believe in drama in surgery.*

*But I was called up to court once because there was someone who was in a gang who had gone and tattooed his hand. I had to cut all that off and put on a skin graft – and David Marshall managed to get him off by telling the judge the man had tried to eradicate his association with the triads.”*

**THE WARY YEARS**

*“Jews were all interned in Changi jail. We weren’t killed. It was the Chinese who were knocked around. Many of them were decapitated – I lost a lot of my friends and classmates that way.”*

*“I lost my father and mother. They were both out on a Japanese boat being sent to Kuching and their ship was bombed and I lost them both in one shot. Who bombed the boat? I think it was the Americans. They had captured the Philippines, they had a powerful air force and they could roam about anywhere, so when they saw a Japanese ship... It’s horrible to think that my parents might have been killed by ‘friendly’ forces.”*

**HIS RETIREMENT**

*“I liked to operate standing up – the only time I operated sitting down was when I was doing reconstructive surgery on a baby with a cleft palate, for example, when the child’s head was almost on my lap. But my knees began giving me a lot of trouble. At one stage, I had to learn to walk again. I don’t know what went wrong. In fact, I saw an excellent neurologist, an awfully nice man, and he told me I must exercise and get a physiotherapist. I revolted at first – I said: “Why do I have to do these exercises! What’s wrong with me?” And he said: “Your nerves and muscles are not working very well.” But what he was trying to tell me was: “You’re getting old, my dear fellow”, but in a very nice way.”*

**HIS WIFE, NINA**

Nina met Yahya Cohen in 1965 when

he was the Visiting Professor and Head of the Surgical Unit of the largest and busiest hospital in Tel Aviv. He found time for the occasional evening out. This was how he met Nina Cohen, about three weeks before he was due to return to Singapore. He was invited to a dinner where he met a woman he rather liked the look of. Never one for melodrama, Yahya proposed to her days later in the following words: *“Would you like to come to Singapore to see if you would like to live there?”*

In three months, Nina arrived in Singapore. The community was surprised, *“Yahya getting married?” “To an engineer?”*

We thought it would be a severe lady dressed in white overalls; instead, the engineer was a pretty amusing woman, who was soon loved and admired by everyone. Nina and Yahya were married soon afterwards, and lived in a bungalow, on the grounds of the General Hospital, next door to the eminent physician, Prof (later Sir) Gordon Ransome.

It is interesting to know that Nina Cohen, now 72, was away in Israel to visit his mother who was ill. She thought that his proposal *“Would you like to come to Singapore to see if you would like to live there”* was the funniest and unusual way of proposing to her and she said *“Yes!”*

One of Yahya Cohen’s favourite quotations was from an old Sanskrit proverb:

*“Listen to the dawn,  
Yesterday is but a dream,  
Tomorrow is but a vision,  
But today well lived,  
Makes every yesterday a dream of happiness,  
And every tomorrow a vision of hope,  
Look well therefore to this day.”*

Yahya Cohen was indeed a son of the land – a true Singaporean and a pioneering surgeon, an extraordinary surgeon who gave much to his colleagues, his students, his patients, his friends and the community. Farewell, my dear friend, my teacher, my colleague. ■