



This issue is dedicated to Dr. Ernst Fischer, who recently retired after 30 years of service to the Medical College of Virginia. The QUARTERLY is pleased and proud to be able to honor Dr. Fischer in this manner.

Dr. Sydney Solomon, professor of physiology at the University of New Mexico, and formerly Dr. Fischer's associate in Richmond, suggested the idea; and Dr. Ernst Huf, once Fischer's student in Germany, gathered the manuscripts from his friends and colleagues around the world.—Ed.



Photographs by Wirt Christian

Ernst Fischer

Thirty Years of Service at the Medical College of Virginia

Born in 1896, in Breslau, Germany, Dr. Fischer received his early education, leading to the M.D. degree, in Frankfurt (Main), Germany. In 1928, he received the degree of Dr. med. habil. physiol. from the University of Frankfurt, and he made as a student of Dr. Albrecht Bethe a brilliant start in the academic career. This, however, ended abruptly in 1934. Harassed by the ruffians in Germany who took it upon themselves to decimate the rows of humanitarians, true liberals, and intellectuals, Dr. Fischer was one of the many who were dismissed from their positions. He eventually found refuge in the USA of which he became a citizen in 1944. His decision in 1935 to settle down in Richmond, Virginia was, in part, the result of the strong impression that Dr. William T. Sanger, then president of MCV, made upon Dr. Fischer, and, in part, because of Dr. Fischer's love for Richmond as "a good place to raise a family." Moreover, Dr. Sanger, with a keen sense for superior human qualities and scholarly accomplishments, found in Dr. Fischer one more good man whom he needed for his institution to develop MCV to greater heights as a teaching and a research institution. Thus began a deepening personal devotion of Dr. Fischer to the numerous functions of MCV (or, as Dr. Fischer calls it with unexcelled affection: MC-We.)

Endowed with a strong, healthy physique and an unusual mental alertness, Dr. Fischer applied these gifts unselfishly and always with great joy to the fulfillment of his many duties. A man of vision, tireless energy, zest for knowledge of professional matters as well as of human affairs, he soon became a Nestor to whom presidents, deans, colleagues, and especially students, turned for advice in times of trouble. The rewards were the many lasting friendships which he sincerely appreciates and which he nurtures through extensive worldwide correspondence. Dr. Fischer's brilliance in the art of dialectics is legendary, and is often commemorated by those of his contemporaries who argued with him. A good listener, untroubled by self-consciousness, Dr. Fischer frequently led the team of debaters to the point of no return. A smile on his face then gave the signal that he considered the dispute as having reached its endpoint. This is just one example of Dr. Fischer's refreshing attitude (so much more typical for Americans than for Germans!) to look at himself with some degree of humor, rather than with tenacious sternness.

Dr. Fischer's *teaching sessions* were characterized by great clarity of exposition, and were filled with peppery remarks about student's attitudes. He knew how to stimulate them and keep them moving. In no uncertain terms, he made it clear

that students must work harder. As a counselor, he judged the students with great fairness, but never lost sight of the need for applying increasingly higher standards for performance in all the professional schools but especially in the School for Graduate Studies. Most students appreciated Dr. Fischer's judgement, they found it easy to talk things over with "their professor." Often there existed some degree of difficulty in communication which, resulted, in part, from Dr. Fischer's strong German accent. It remains a remarkable fact that a man so highly sensitive to the rapid changes in the world of ideas and the visual arts is virtually insensitive to the world of music. Forty years of teaching of acoustics and the physiology of hearing have not overcome a defect which accounts for the state of perplexity that many freshman students experienced when they attempted to jot down some notes from the spoken words of their beloved professor. This problem, however, was actually solved, once and forever, years ago by President Sanger, as recalled by Dr. Robert W. Ramsey. Dr. Sanger advised the students: "Listen carefully and grasp what you can. It is better to understand five minutes of a lecture by a wise man than to understand an hour's lecture by a fool."

As an *administrator*, Dr. Fischer was not a man who operated from his seat on the throne. He rather

liked to see himself as a part of the whole department, the *primus inter pares*. Departmental affairs were discussed at regular staff meetings. Expressions of differences in viewpoints were encouraged rather than suppressed. If he had any prejudices, he did not show them; and if they existed, it is doubtful that they influenced his rational but mindful actions. His sense for punctuality remains unchallenged. He led his staff of co-workers largely by setting up an example of enthusiasm for work. Only occasionally was this amplified by sometimes camouflaged, sometimes not-so-camouflaged, hints that the solutions of the problems of teaching and research in the physiology department, which functions as a semi-infinite system within MCV, requires the knowledge and proper application of certain boundary conditions. Higher authority never frightened D. Fischer, who was a champion of law and order and a courageous spokesman for human rights. His persuasiveness had many triumphs from which he drew well-deserved personal satisfaction. He was a good loser on rainy days.

As a *scientist*, Dr. Fischer enjoys the distinction of being an internationally known expert on the physiology of skeletal and heart muscle. This is not the place to write about details. Suffice it to say that during his academic ca-

reer he has published well over one hundred papers on muscle physiology, many of which are as significant today as they were at the time they were published. Some of the problems he explored in muscle research emerged from his deep interest in physical medicine, which is interesting because it reflects again on the inner nature of the man. As a laboratory scientist, he sought and found a way of expressing his concern for his fellow man, especially for the physically handicapped. Dr. Fischer had a wide range of interests in the large fields of physiology and medicine, even though he concentrated his efforts in the laboratory on studies of muscle. He was well read in many areas. This accounts for the fact that he was always a stimulating, and often formidable discussant at scientific meetings.

At the age of 70, Dr. Fischer left MCV, functionally speaking, a "young man." Full of vigor he will continue to teach physiology at the Hacettepe Medical Center, Ankara, Turkey, under a Fulbright Fellowship. He was the dynamic architect of a modern department of physiology that fulfills to the limits possible, the needs of a growing institution, combining several professional and a rising graduate school. It will not be easy to fill the vacancy which D. Fischer's retirement has created.

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