John J. Kepes, MD
(1928–2010)

John J. Kepes, MD, Professor Emeritus of Pathology at the University of Kansas, died after a long illness on February 2, with his daughter by his side. He was preceded in death by his wife, Dr. Magda Kepes, and is survived by his daughter, Marta Kepes.

John’s early life was one of challenges. He and his family survived the Nazi occupation of Budapest because of sanctuary given by the Portuguese embassy. John, his pockets stuffed with glass slides from “interesting cases,” escaped from Hungary on foot with Magda and Marta in 1956. To assist the family’s entry into the United States, Dr. Paul Yakovlev of Harvard Medical School wrote a letter about these “well-trained Hungarian pathologists,” attesting that “Dr. John Kepes and his wife will have no difficulty finding employment in their specialty once they are in this country.” How right Dr. Yakovlev was! John completed part of his training at the Mayo Clinic, which he always affectionately called the WFMC or the World Famous Mayo Clinic, under the mentorship of James Kernohan. He spent the rest of his career at the University of Kansas.

At the University of Kansas Medical Center, he single-handedly conducted biweekly neuropathology conferences for 25 years. The conferences were meticulously presented tours de force of common, uncommon, and rare diseases. “How did he get a case of Alexander disease or Canavan disease?” his trainees wondered. Dr. Kepes also presented weekly at the community-wide neurosurgery conference, with definitive slides prepared and the answer always at hand. He was so good at these conferences that he was invited to join the neurosurgery department as their pathologist.

The residents and neuropathology fellows at Kansas spent months in the carefully organized clutter of his office, with shelves of books and stacks of papers throughout. When Dr. Kepes read slides, he would pull an article precisely located, often one he had written himself, mention the salient points of the slide, and type and fax the report, always with a gracious note attached. The rotation also was notable for his ability to explain cogently and patiently to his trainees the mechanism of almost any neurological disease or phenomenon about which we cared to inquire.

Dr. Kepes’ local legacy included the 100 to 200 second-year medical students he taught annually for more than 3 decades in large and small groups and the community pathologists who considered him a mentor. He did not advertise his competence in general pathology, but it was widely known. The Kansas City Pathological Society established an annual symposium that they renamed the Kepes Symposium in his honor.

Dr. Kepes’ accomplishments in neuropathology included a description of the pleomorphic xanthoastrocytoma, also known as Kepes tumor. He described a series of patients with tumefactive multiple sclerosis mimicking glioblastoma. When he received referral cases of tumefactive demyelination, he invariably called the source of the referral with the advice to “give steroids.” Dr. Kepes wrote a beautiful monograph on meningiomas, the first such book since Harvey Cushing’s, decades previously. John wrote the book, “with trepidation” he said in the introduction, but need not have; it is a magnificent and elegant work. He confided once that he spent every weekend for two years working on it, indicating his attention to meticulous detail and devotion to academic rigor in the practice of neuropathology.

But what if Dr. Kepes had not become a neuropathologist? He had a great passion for classical music, particularly opera, and was himself a talented pianist. He had seriously considered a career in music and was known to say that if he had not been a neuropathologist, he would have enjoyed being a music critic for the New York Times. He also had a vast knowledge of language, history, religion, and politics, from the international to the personal. He and Magda lived in Kansas City, MO, never abandoning the city during a period of suburban flight. His innate kindness led him and Magda to adopt a Vietnamese physician and his family as their own second family. After John’s recovery from the
2006 car accident that took his beloved Magda, he began giving lectures again to the residents of his new home, Village Shalom. His compassion extended to a health care worker, who confided his fears about a brain tumor he himself had been diagnosed with years before. One day, John invited the man to his apartment where they pored over neuropathology books and pictures so that he could teach the man about his tumor and offer some reassurance about the likelihood of its recurrence.

Dr. Kepes’ demise prompted a number of people to send in their reminiscences of his extraordinary life and the enduring impact he had on our field.

Dr. Kathy Newell notes that until the very end of his life, Dr. Kepes was interested in challenging cases. “My daughter and I visited Dr. Kepes a week before his death. I wanted to share with him a recent case of an unusual tumor that appeared confined to the lining of the spinal cord and brain and had been clinically suspected to be meningitis. I also wanted to thank him for his article on this rare entity, so uncommon that only a handful of cases appears in the world literature. He reported 3 such cases, and his description was very useful to me. I brought along a copy of his 1985 article, and he was immediately keenly interested in holding that article and gestured for his glasses so he could better see the photomicrographs, which we studied together. When we said goodbye, he was still looking at the article.” Even now, in his absence, Dr. Kepes continues to teach us from his legacy of writings, lectures, memorable sayings (“tumors don’t read the books”), and from his example of excellence.

Dr. Daniel H. Jacobs, a practicing neurologist in Florida and family friend of the Kepeses, recalled that his 3-month neuropathology rotation was a highlight of his neurology residency at Kansas. “Such mundane activities as ‘getting the mail’ brought slides of exotic brain tumors from every part of the globe. All the cases brought forth teaching moments. When you don’t know what it is, listen to the little tape recorder in the back of your brain asking, ‘could it be a melanoma?’ was one of the many pieces of wisdom Dr. Kepes dispensed. Another memory was his statement, 25 years ago during brain cutting, that it was ‘not true’ that multiple sclerosis is a white matter disease, as he demonstrated a cortical plaque. Another was his observation that Russell and Rubinstein’s tome about brain tumors was ‘worth memorizing, A to Z.’”

Dr. Lucy Rorke-Adams recalls that, “John was the ultimate in erudition, and no diagnostic problem was too difficult for him to unravel.” Dr. Kepes grew up in Hungary, “a land he loved but which rejected him and his family at a stage in their lives when they were ready to contribute gifts of healing to their countrymen. The Kepeses’ desperate escape from horrors brought them to our country, where John ripened into one of the most learned and distinguished neuropathologists of our generation.”

Dr. Doug Anthony writes about the first time he met Dr. Kepes. “At the time, I was in training at Duke and on my first trip home to my native Kansas City (about 1985), Dr. S. Vogel told me that I had to look up Dr. Kepes, ‘one of the best neuropathologists in the world.’ Of course, I brought a case to share. He looked at it about a minute and knew exactly what it was. I said I wondered whether he was familiar with the entity... He said, ‘Of course. It’s been reported more than once!’”

“I learned two important things from this meeting. First, I learned never to try to trip him up again. The second thing I learned from him on my first visit is that by the time something has been reported more than once in the literature, I am EXPECTED to know it! You can’t get intellectually sloppy around a grand master like John Kepes.”

“I stopped by to see him whenever I came to Kansas City. He was kind and helpful and had a very soft heart, showing genuine concern for both me and my patients. And he was absolutely meticulous about every detail of every case!”

Dr. B.K. Kleinschmidt-DeMasters trained with Dr. Kepes and said that he “never turned a learner away and often accepted trainees from foreign countries to study with him.” As a refugee himself, he accepted everyone with grace and gave unselfishly of his time.

Dr. Luis Moral, another former trainee of Dr. Kepes, recalls the “incredible opportunity of working close to him. When I arrived in Kansas City from Ecuador to begin my fellowship in 1990, Dr. Kepes met me at the airport. He then proceeded to carry my luggage, which was bulky and heavy, walking fast, and without allowing me to help. When at some point he tripped and almost lost his balance, I became embarrassed and nervous, yet he only looked at me and said: ‘Luis, your luggage is really a special one.’ Although he was not smiling, he made me understand that I was about to start a special relationship with someone who would positively influence the rest of my life.”

“I was intrigued by the fact that he could not care less about men’s fashion; he didn’t need to because he was born with his ‘soul wearing a black tie.’ I wonder if now in Heaven he is again telling jokes and amazing stories, writing papers, advising students, teaching everything, admiring soccer, traveling around the world, eating exotic foods, speaking many different languages, making people feel happy and important, walking fast, asking about the wife and kids, sponsoring foreigners, talking politics, dancing with Magda, listening to classical music and operas... I am sure he is and will forever love. The Morals will forever remember Drs. John and Magda Kepes with immense gratitude. Living in a different country, he represented a wonderful and unique father figure to me... although he preferred to think of me as his brother. Until I see him again, I will remain thankful for having been such a great teacher, mentor, father, brother, and with all due respect, friend.”

Dr. Arie Perry dedicated one of his recent talks at an international symposium to Dr. Kepes, underscoring John’s seminal contributions to the field of neuropathology. Many members of the American Association of Neuropathologists consider themselves better neuropathologists because of the fundamental observations and numerous publications of Dr. Kepes. His influence on our specialty will continue for a long time.

Dr. Rorke-Adams sends this thought: “At the beginning of Cicero’s treatise entitled ‘On a Life Well Spent’ he said, ‘The best Armour of Old Age is a
well-spent Life preceding it; a Life employed in the Pursuit of useful Knowledge, in honourable Actions and the Practice of Virtue; in which he who labours to improve himself from his Youth, will in Age reap the happiest Fruits of them; not only because these never leave a Man, not even in the extremest Old Age, but because a Conscience bearing Witness that our Life was well spent, together with the Remembrance of past good Actions, yield an unspeakable Comfort to the Soul.”

Rest well, dear John, in the knowledge that yours was truly a Life Well Spent.

Daniel H. Jacobs, MD
Douglas Anthony, MD, PhD
Luis Moral, MD
Lucy Rorke-Adams, MD
Kathy Newell, MD
B.K. Kleinschmidt-DeMasters, MD