

Pierre Soupart 1923–1981

Pierre Soupart left us one afternoon last spring. His death was not unexpected. Those of us who were close to him witnessed his long and courageous fight, first against heart disease and, finally, against cancer. Yet, we were shocked by his untimely death at the age of 57, and his absence will be felt for a long time.

Pierre Soupart was born in Morlanwelz in Hainaut, Belgium in 1923. He obtained his M.D. degree in 1949 from the Medical School of the Université Libre de Bruxelles. His interest fixed on biochemistry and he spent a year of postdoctoral training in this field at the Rockefeller University working with Professor Stanford Moore. Upon his return to Belgium, he joined the faculty of the Department of Biochemistry at the Medical School of the Université Libre de Bruxelles and became Agrégé de l'Enseignement Supérieur in 1959. His alma mater recognized his scientific achievements by awarding him the title of Membre permanent du Corps Professoral in 1974 and of Professor Agrégé à titre définitif in 1975. In 1962 he came to this country and became a member of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology of Vanderbilt University Medical School, where he remained until his death on June 10, 1981.

While in Belgium, Pierre Soupart worked on the problems of aminoaciduria in pregnancy and his research culminated with the publication of a monograph published by *Acta Medica Belgica*. Upon his arrival at Vanderbilt, his interests turned to the study of the mechanism of sperm capacitation, which led him to studies of fertilization, and it is in this area that he made his major impact on the field of reproductive biology. In 1972, working at the Tripler General Hospital in Honolulu, Hawaii, in collaboration with Dr. Larry Morgenstern, Pierre Soupart was the first to provide convincing evidence that human eggs could be fertilized *in vitro*. I remember vividly the day when he burst into my office holding excitingly the electron micrograph showing clearly the fertilizing sperm tail in the egg vitellus. It was very sad that, because of a moratorium imposed by the federal government on research on the human embryo, he was not able to continue his pioneering studies while work was progressing quickly in other countries. Some might have been discouraged, but Pierre Soupart used every avenue at his disposal to convince and educate the public on the need for research in this area. As Visiting Professor and Guest Lecturer, in the year before his death, he presented 27 seminars or lectures on this

subject in Europe and the United States, more than one per fortnight. His passionate efforts were rewarded when, as a Visiting Professor at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, he participated actively in the work of the Australian team. He had the satisfaction of learning a few weeks before his death that a child had been born as a result of one of the several successful fertilizations achieved during his stay there. He was deeply concerned both by the human problems felt by the infertile couple and by the ethical problems connected with *in vitro* fertilization. He left us his thoughts in one of his last articles, "Present and Possible Future Research in the Use of Human Embryos," published in the symposium on "The Concept of Person and Its Implications for the Use of the Fetus in Biomedicine."

For his friends, Pierre left another legacy: his remarkable courage and lucidity during the last months of his life. He received the diagnosis of his fatal illness in January 1981 while working, and without breaking stride. He spoke of his illness quite matter-of-factly; we, although immensely saddened by the prognosis, were obliged to model our attitudes after his. He continued working as before, as if nothing had changed. Even when he at last was confined to his house, he continued working with collaborators who visited him regularly. A month before his death, we had a joyful, if bittersweet, picnic reunion at his house with his colleagues from Vanderbilt and many friends, some coming from great distances. Even though he was very tired, he spent the afternoon in animated discussion with all, speaking of his and others' research and giving horticultural advice to all who could use it, for flower raising was a second passion with him. His conversation during this last public moment epitomized Pierre Soupart as a scientist, as a friend, as a man with boundless curiosity and enthusiasm, and it will remain an undying memory for all those privileged to have experienced it. And, of course, we saw Pierre as the family man he was, surrounded by the loving and attentive care of his wife Simone, his three daughters Evelyne, Antoinette, and Pascale, and enjoying his small grandson, of whom he was immensely proud.

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