

CHRISTIAN FRIEDRICH SAMUEL HAHNEMANN

Sometime ago we received a letter from N. C. Marathe of Poona, India. As a regular reader he praised our magazine for the variety of its contents. "However", wrote N. C. Marathe, "I never find any mention of Dr. Hahnemann, the father of Homoeopathy. It is a pity that he does not seem to find any place in your magazine, although he was born and brought up in your country. . . . If you could publish any photograph, life story, specimens of his handwriting, etc. I am sure it would be appreciated by all followers of Homoeopathy, particularly in India".

With the following article we are complying with the request of our Indian reader by providing an account of some outstanding stages in Samuel Hahnemann's eventful life.

CHILDHOOD AND EARLY LIFE

A stele in the municipal park of Meissen, a town that is almost 1,050 years old, is dedicated to the memory of Christian Friedrich Samuel Hahnemann. Many of the children who play here have possibly asked their parents who Hahnemann was. A square, barely 500 metres from the park, also bears his name, recalling the fact that the house where he was born once stood there. In the registry of the Meissen Frauenkirchè Church his date of birth is entered as April 11, 1755, although Hahnemann in his autobiography wrote: "I was born on April 10, 1755 in Meissen in the Electorate of Saxony, one of the most beautiful parts of Germany." It is believed that the confusion arose because he was born at the stroke of midnight.

As the son of a porcelain painter—European porcelain had been discovered just 46 years earlier—Samuel Hahnemann should have had an untroubled childhood, but the Seven Years' War that began in 1756 overshadowed his infancy. Matters were worsened financially for his father by an ever increasing family. So it was hardly surprising that Samuel Hahnemann, a delicate child, often had to stay away from school either because of illness or because his father could not afford the fees. Fortunately, after eight years of schooling, the talented boy received a scholarship in 1771 to the Sankt Afra Royal School in Meissen (where thirty years previously Gotthold Ephraim Lessing had studied).

A few years later his father scraped together twenty thalers and sent him off to Leipzig to study at the university there which was already famous far beyond the borders of the German principalities.

STUDENT YEARS

His knowledge of Greek and English that he had acquired at the Royal School enabled Hahnemann to translate medical works and thus finance his studies. His chief interest at the university was medicine but he found the

lectures on this subject too uninspiring and theoretical; his aim was to acquire practical experience. So he saved up his money till he could afford to travel to Vienna where, thanks to the help of a Viennese physician, he was able to take up practical studies. Later on, while in the service of a Transylvanian Governor, he improved his knowledge of Greek and English and also learnt French, Italian, Hungarian and Romanian. He is believed to have gained proficiency in the Hebrew and Chaldean languages too. In 1779 he obtained his doctor's degree in Erlangen and set about opening a practice.

His strong attachment to his Saxon homeland obviously influenced his decision to set up a practice in Hettstedt in the Mansfeld area, which at that time belonged to the Electorate of Saxony. But in this town which only had three to four thousand inhabitants he found little use for his medical knowledge. And so he decided to move to Dessau, the seat of a ducal court, where he hoped to find a more congenial atmosphere. Nevertheless, Hettstedt was useful to him in so far as it provided him with opportunities to study metallurgy—a major industry of the Mansfeld area—and chemistry, knowledge that stood him in good stead later on.

In 1782 he married Henriette Kucherlin, the step-daughter of Dessau's town apothecary. They remained united until her death 47 years later and had eleven children. Despite the burden of a growing family Hahnemann never managed to settle down for long anywhere—he moved to Dresden, Leipzig, Hamburg, Gotha, Gottingen and Brunswick and the records indicate that this restless physician changed his residence more than thirty times.

A WRITER AS WELL AS A DOCTOR

Hahnemann's first published paper was entitled *Anleitung aller Schaden und faule Geschwure grundlich zu heilen* (Guide to a Radical Cure For Chronic Ailments And Septic Ulcers). In this publication he demonstrated the importance of hygiene, a subject which years later he again brought into the limelight at a time when a severe epidemic was raging. Narrow streets, the lack of canalisation, no public services for the collection of refuse or street cleaning, stagnant moats surrounding the towns, cramped and overcrowded dwellings whose windows were kept shut—all these factors were conducive to diseases and epidemics, he claimed. He also drew medical attention to the danger attached to administering arsenic compounds which had hitherto been regarded as having curative powers. And a bold step in those days, he publicly denounced the outdated medical methods of his fellow practitioners. His verdict was justified when Emperor Leopold II of Austria died after one of Hahnemann's colleagues had taken blood from him four times in the course of 24 hours. Hahnemann was a resolute opponent of blood-letting since he considered it necessary to strengthen the body's powers of resistance during illness and not weaken them.

In 1792 when Samuel Hahnemann moved to Gotha the reigning prince allowed him to establish a mental hospital in a wing of Schloss-Georgenthal

In his work as a psychiatrist Hahnemann never resorted to the brutal corporal punishment that at that time was the usual treatment for the insane. His view was: "I never feel that I am insulted by them because a person who lacks sanity cannot be insulting." His treatment, which produced some successes, was generally based on maintaining a respectful and calm attitude to the patient. Idiosyncratic in his dealings with others, modern in his methods, Hahnemann used to correspond with his patients and prescribe prophylactic treatment. He never gained recognition from his medical colleagues, although he found supporters who tenaciously propagated his theories. A teaching appointment at Leipzig University gave him an opportunity to propound his views. But after the initial interest had faded his listeners melted away, and he left the city, once again a disappointed man. His work as a translator did not bring in enough to keep his large family, and after 1780 he felt no inclination to continue his work as a medical practitioner. So he was constantly beset by financial troubles. His unsettled life was also partly a result of his public controversies with physicians and apothecaries.

It was not until after the turn of the century that he settled down for seven years in Torgau on the Elbe. Here he wrote most of his works, the chief of which is the *Organum der rationellen Heilkunst* which contains the exposition of his system, which he called Homoeopathy. In 1830/31 Hahnemann—by now in Kothen—achieved renewed popularity and considerable success with his homocopathic methods of treatment during a cholera epidemic. He died in Paris at the age of 88. Eight years previously he had married a young French woman.

Homoeopathy, which is still a much disputed field of medicine, has gained many followers all over the world. A tomb monument to Hahnemann was erected at the Père-Lachaise Cemetery in Paris by U.S. followers of Homoeopathy 55 years after he had been laid to rest in an anonymous grave in Montmartre.

—G. D. R. Review, June 1978