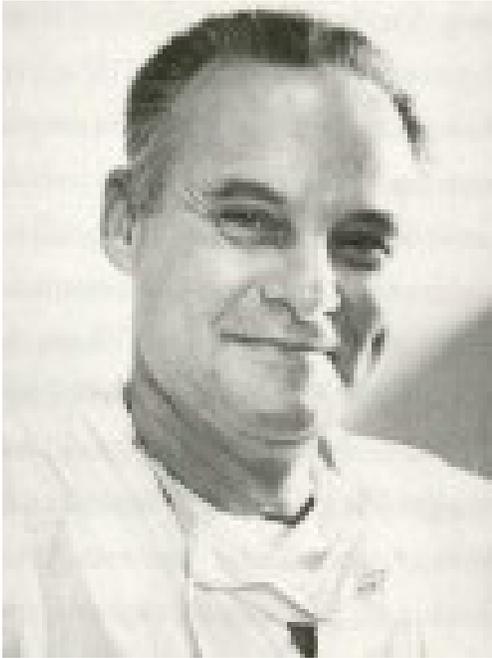




# Aaron Julius Gissen



In 1917, the world was still at war when Aaron Julius Gissen was born May 11 into a family of Russian American émigrés. His parents were a product of that Russian Jewish culture so marvelously recorded by Sholom Aleichem and stunningly depicted in one of the great, adapted Broadway musicals, “Fiddler on the Roof.” Born in the Crimea, Dr. Gissen’s parents brought with them to America a culture rich in Jewish tradition. But like Tevya’s children, they broke free of the geographical confines and emigrated to New York City. His father was in the business of passementerie. His mother was a homemaker and raised two children in the Flatbush section of the borough of Brooklyn.

Aaron, the first born, was precocious enough to enter the public school system at 4 ½ years of age. Because of his youthful, European attitudes, those early years in the New York school system were apparently socially difficult. However, as he grew more confident, and conformed to the ethos, he complemented scholastic achievement with involvement in many social activities. Thus, he became a class leader at Boys High School in Brooklyn, and graduated at age 15. He was a member of Arista, the society that recognized distinguished academic achievement.

Because the family was one of insubstantial means, there was especial rejoicing when Aaron Gissen was awarded a full-tuition scholarship to Johns Hopkins University. In 1932, during his second year at Hopkins, he contracted a disease characterized by migrating joint pains and low-grade fever, the syndrome of rheumatic fever which went unrecognized and, in those days, had no medical remedy. Unwittingly, the cause of his ultimate death was foreordained.

A stellar student, he graduated with election to Phi Beta Kappa in 1936. Once again there was great celebration in the Gissen clan, by now a lower middle-class family, when Aaron was accepted at New York University Medical School and Bellevue Hospital. But there was great concern as well since the family could summon little of the financial support necessary. His brother, Harold, volunteered to delay plans for his own additional education to help with expenses. By means of loans and odd jobs, Aaron completed

medical school in 1940---again with honors in elevation to Alpha Omega Alpha. Parenthetically, it was while engaged in the physical diagnosis course that Gissen first came to understand rheumatic fever as the illness he had contracted at Hopkins.

The next two years were consumed in a rotating internship at the Cumberland Hospital in Brooklyn. The world was once again at war, but, because of a heart murmur, Aaron was denied enlistment in the armed forces. Characteristically, he volunteered to help in the war effort and served as a draft-exempt physician at the Hercules Powder Plant in Roanoke, Va. He returned to New York City in 1943 as a resident in general surgery at Mount Sinai Hospital. It was there that he met his wife-to-be, Janet Greenberg, who was a medical intern. After Aaron worked for three years as a surgical house officer, he and Janet departed Mount Sinai to spend the next 12 years as family physicians practicing out of their home in Westbury, Long Island. Aaron sustained his abiding interest in education by becoming a member, and then president, of the local school board. In that capacity, he had the pleasure of presenting his daughters with their high school diplomas.

Gradually, Aaron became dissatisfied with the pressures of family medicine. And because his practice embraced all but the major surgical interventions, Dr. Gissen understood, through firsthand experience, the importance of the then-emerging specialty of anesthesiology.

Therefore, at age 40, he sought the counsel of Professor Emanuel M. Papper, Chairman of the Department of Anesthesiology at the Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center. Dr. Papper wrote of their early interactions: “I met Aaron Gissen sometime in 1957, when he was 40 years old and wanting to change his career from that of general practice with an emphasis on surgery to anesthesiology with an academic career in mind. As chairman of anesthesiology at Columbia and only 2 years older than Aaron, this first encounter to say the least, was an unusual and extraordinary experience for both of us.

“From the very beginning of our relationship I learned much about the human condition, and the way in which career development can occur among people of great imagination coupled with sturdy convictions. That first encounter would never be forgotten and I decided that it was in my own best interest, let alone for that of the department I was charged to lead, if I were to continue to learn from Aaron Gissen’s maturation and from his views.

“With a life experience totally untuned to the then still relatively newly developing specialty of academic anesthesiology and with no discernible background or experience in that field prior to age 40, Aaron Gissen made remarkable strides and most notably, without negative impact upon other people as he was moving tactfully and quietly past them at a rapid pace toward achievement of goals which had to be difficult to attain for anyone—and certainly for “an older resident””.

As an anesthesia resident, Dr. Gissen sought no special consideration either for his age or experience to become, by tacit consent, a leader of his peers. Clinical skills were developed rapidly, his scientific

development in keeping with the patterns of scholarship in the department at that time, where highly intelligent people would have the opportunity to study with distinguished basic scientists as Columbia's College of Physicians and Surgeons. Dr. Gissen learned his science from Professor William Nastuk in the Department of Physiology, and was soon recognized locally as an expert in the understanding of the electrophysiology of excitable membranes, as affected by anesthetics. A publication coauthored with Johannis Karis on "The Effect of Halothane on Neuromuscular Transmission," which appeared in a 1966 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, is considered to be of benchmark quality. His growing reputation as a scholar was recognized by an assistant professorship appointment in 1965, followed in 1970 by appointment as associate professor of anesthesiology, and then as chief of neuroanesthesia at the Neurologic Institute.

In 1971, Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary enticed Dr. Gissen to come to Boston to become anesthetist in chief of the infirmary's Department of Anesthesiology and professor at Harvard. However, after a year it became clear that the administrative responsibilities of a chief of service seriously eroded his time available for bench research. After seeking counsel of the medical leadership at the infirmary and especially of the school's Dean Robert Ebert, he accepted a position of chief of neuroanesthesia at Massachusetts General Hospital.

In 1979, Aaron Gissen joined a long-time professional colleague at the newly created Brigham and Women's Hospital where Benjamin G. Covino had just been appointed anesthesiologist in chief. Dr. Gissen became his residency program director, and was consequently able to resume his studies on the effects of anesthetic drugs on excitable membranes. These activities coincided with the emergence of that anesthesia department's preeminent position in regional anesthesia. Professor Gary Strichartz, Dr. Gissen's research colleague, wrote, "Aaron was a mainstay of the newly developed research laboratories inspired by Dr. Covino's chairmanship. Addressing the scientific basis for the clinical observation of differential functional loss during regional anesthesia. Aaron applied techniques he had learned at Columbia to the study of impulse inhibition in isolated nerve. With focus and determination, he made a series of discoveries, published as six original reports, that challenged the half-century-old (and incorrect) belief in the greater susceptibility of smaller nerve fibers to local anesthetics. His purpose was not diverted by initial widespread unwillingness to accept those findings, an opposition that would have swayed one less resolute."

During this period, his work was recognized by a co-investigatorship of a continuously funded NIH grant. He coauthored a definitive review on differential nerve block in the *Handbook of Experimental Pharmacology*, mentored numerous junior faculty in the department, and hosted national and international faculty on sabbatical leave. He also was honored as a recipient of the Excellence in Research Award of the American Society of Regional Anesthesia. His research continues to provoke further studies in anesthesia and pain control.

Leroy D. Vandam, the Brigham's professor of anesthesia, *emeritus*, described Dr. Gissen's impact:

“When Aaron arrived he brought with him a much-needed mantle of calm, stature, and accumulated wisdom. We had been working with a relatively young staff and a chairman who at first was able to be in the department for only one day a week. Having an elder statesman, full professor, researcher and clinician at hand was the catalyst need to keep the department on track.

“Aaron had the unique ability to see all sides of a problem or controversy, and the wisdom to explain options so that only the best choice was implemented. He was available at all times to any who sought his help. He provided depth to the clinical side, experience on the research side, and was able to present and implement the new chairman’s mandates without coloring his own judgement. Subsequently, as the melding of the three former divisions of anesthesia became a reality at BWH, Aaron had the time and opportunity to carry out original and novel studies in our division of neuroscience.”

At age 65, Dr. Gissen relinquished the clinical setting to work full time in his research laboratories. In 1987, he became professor *emeritus* and was awarded the Distinguished Service Award by the American Society of Regional Anesthesia for his research leading to a greater understanding of the effect of anesthetic agents on nerve membranes. He was then able to indulge in a lifelong hobby of raising award-winning orchids in a spacious greenhouse attached to his home.

Behind all of these stellar accomplishments, and without complaint on his part, Aaron was beset with a deterioration of his heart and circulation, the result of the scarring by that once-dreaded disease, rheumatic fever. A previous operation for repair of multivalvular cardiac dysfunction had to be redone, even the followed by relentless deterioration, recurrent anemia and the need for periodic blood transfusion. As befitted his character and courage, he was a vital force until the end.

Aaron Julius Gissen succumbed to heart failure on Dec. 10, 1989. He is survived by his wife of 45 years, Janet. He also is survived by his daughters, Carolyn, a radiologist at the Lahey Clinic, and Elizabeth, an architect in Boston. His only son, David, practices anesthesiology in Nevada. Aaron’s brother, Harold, who later completed his medical education, recently retired as a pediatrician in White Plains, N.Y.

Respectfully submitted,

Richard J. Kitz, *chairman*

Janet Gissen

Leroy D. Vandam

Gary Strichartz

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Helen Gallahue