

Ilza Veith (1912-2013) and Genevieve Miller (1914-2013): long lives dedicated to the history of medicine

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Abstract *This article analyzes bibliographic aspects of two historians of medicine: Ilza Veith (1912-2013) and Genevieve Miller (1914-2013). Both women trained at the Institute of History of Medicine at Johns Hopkins University and both had the historian Henry Ernest Sigerist (1891-1957) as their intellectual mentor. Both women were the authors of original works, Ilza in the field of oriental medicine and Genevieve in the field of the history of science, and throughout their careers they made important contributions to research, teaching and the dissemination of the history of medicine, which was marked by their pioneering activities.*

Key words *Ilza Veith, Genevieve Miller, Historians, History of medicine*

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My first contact with Ilza Veith and Genevieve Miller was when I was researching biographical data about Henry Ernest Sigerist (1891-1957). The first information I found was that both had been students of Sigerist, a man who was considered to be the most important historian of medicine during the first half of the twentieth century, and that both women were part of the first group that was dedicated to a field that was then in the process of being institutionalized at Johns Hopkins University – the history of medicine.

I knew that Ilza was the first female PhD in the area of the history of medicine, and that she had been the only student to be supervised by Sigerist. I also knew that she had been a research assistant and secretary to Sigerist and that she had organized his complete bibliography.

I subsequently widened my knowledge about these female historians, principally from reading their autobiographies and some other studies^{1,2}.

Before speaking more about these two women it is important to highlight the importance of Sigerist, a figure who accompanied their lives for many years. He was born on April 7, 1891 in Paris, the son of Swiss parents (Ernest Heinrich Sigerist and Emma Sigerist). At the age of 10 he moved to Zurich, where he subsequently graduated in 1910, and in the following two years he studied oriental languages in Zurich and London. From 1911 to 1917 he turned to medicine and attended the universities of Zurich and Munich, obtaining the title of Doctor of Medicine from the University of Zurich. He started his academic career as a *Privatdozent* (Assistant Professor) of the History of Medicine in Zurich in 1921, and he was Professor of the History of Medicine and Director of the Institute of the History of Medicine at the University of Leipzig from 1925 to 1932. In 1932 he transferred to the Johns Hopkins University where, in the previous year, he had been a visiting professor. He remained at Johns Hopkins University until he returned to Switzerland in 1947, where he lived the last ten years of his life in the city of Pura, near Lugano. He died on March 17, 1957. From his extensive work, which became a mandatory source of consultation in the history of medicine, and in areas of social and human sciences, some examples can be mentioned: *The Great Doctors: a Biographical History of Medicine*, 1933; *Civilization and Disease*, 1944 (translated into Portuguese, publisher Hucitec/Sobravime, 2011), *Primitive and Archaic Medicine*, 1951; *Early Greek, Hindu and Persian Medicine*, 1961 and hundreds of articles, for example, *The Special Position of the Sick*, 1929³.

Ilza and Genevieve had long and successful academic careers, although when Ilza decided to carry out postgraduate studies Sigerist warned her of the precarious future for a historian with these words: “Well, you can always teach German or something else”¹. This was in 1943: years later she would face not the problem of a career, but a serious disease.

The two women came from different countries and academic backgrounds: Ilza was born in Germany in the city of Ludwigshafen on May 13, 1912 and studied medicine in Geneva and Vienna. Moss³ reports that *If she completed her medical studies, as seems likely, before leaving Europe with her husband in 1937, she never practiced medicine or used the initials MD after her name in the US.*

Genevieve was studying for her bachelor’s degree in chemistry at Goucher College in Baltimore and was dazzled when she heard Sigerist speak for the first time. This occurred in 1934 when she was twenty years old; she was born on October 15, 1914, in Butler. In 1935 she was accepted at the Institute of the History of Medicine at Johns Hopkins University, where she completed her master’s degree in 1939².

Ilza and Genevieve followed different paths in the field of the history of medicine but both their careers were influenced by their training and experience of working with Sigerist, which began in the 1940s and 1930s, respectively.

Ilza was awarded her doctorate in 1947 and she worked in various universities. She was Associate Professor in the History of Medicine at the University of Chicago (1949-1963), Professor of the History of Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco (1964-1979) and also Professor Emeritus at the same university. She became an expert in the history of Chinese medicine, which was her main point of contact with Sigerist since her first meeting with the historian. When Sigerist learned of her translation of a Chinese text, he suggested that her thesis should be the translation and analysis of the *Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine*⁴, which would become a reference work. She also dedicated himself to the history of psychiatry (she wrote a book about the history of hysteria⁵) as well as numerous articles, including one about acupuncture⁶ and another that drew parallels between AIDS, leprosy and syphilis⁷.

In 1964 Ilza suffered a hemiplegic stroke which left her with serious after-effects. Later, in 1983, she wrote a moving account of her experience of the illness entitled *Can You Hear the Clapping of One Hand? Learning to Live with a*

*Stroke*⁸. In the opinion of Moss³. *It remains a classic of the genre*, permeated by the voice of a historian, the memories of a medical student, and a *severely wounded spirit*. Ilza possessed a profound knowledge of Eastern culture and her book's title is a reference to a Zen Buddhist koan, *You Can Hear the Sound of Two Hands When They Clap Together* (which was impossible for Ilza to do after her stroke) *But Now Show Me The Sound of One Hand*⁸. At the end of her story she confesses that, "although I may have gotten used to my permanent disability I do not believe I have been reconciled to it" and that it good that she had not followed his mother's wishes for her to become a violinist, and certainly not to have followed the medical career that she herself had considered – that of a plastic surgeon. Overcoming great difficulties (the use of orthopaedic aids and a wheelchair, unable to use her left hand and in chronic pain) the disease did not stop a brilliant academic career^{3,8}.

Genevieve's career was not only marked by her publications in the area of the history of medicine, but also by her bibliographical research, which was also one of the interests of her intellectual mentor Sigerist. This was certainly one of the reasons why, in 1954, two weeks before the first cerebral accident that would lead to his death three years later, Sigerist called Genevieve and told her that the best that could be done, and which would show that his life had been useful,

would not be an extensive obituary, but the publication of his complete bibliography. From Sigerist's wish, Genevieve made a splendid tribute, in whose preface she writes: *As a disciple, former research secretary and assistant to Henry Sigerist at Johns Hopkins, my obligation to this man, who had true greatness of spirit, will never cease*⁹. Before that, in 1955, Genevieve defended her doctorate in the history of science, with a thesis entitled *The adoption of inoculation for smallpox in England and France*, at the University of Cornell. In addition to the bibliography of the works of Sigerist, which was published in 1966⁹ (there is a copy of the first edition in the library of the FCM/ Unicamp), Genevieve organized the bibliography of the history of medicine in the United States and Canada during the period 1939-1960¹⁰. It should also be noted that Genevieve was the first non-medical director of the Dittrick Museum of Medical History at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) in 1967, where she was a researcher and Assistant Professor of the History of Medicine in the School of Medicine since 1953¹¹.

Both women died in June 2013; Ilza died on the 8th, at the age of 101, and Genevieve on the 23rd, at the age of 99. Both had long careers devoted to the history of medicine, and both were pioneers in the field. They left a respectable body of work and they also helped to train numerous researchers, who have given continuity to their work.

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