

## Dr. Benjamin Breakstone of Chicago

By Philip Bregstone<sup>1</sup>

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(In 1883, Benjamin H. Breakstone) had been brought by his parents to the city of Scranton, Pa., from Suvalk, Russia. He attended the schools of Scranton and after graduating from high school he came hither. He was eager for a medical career; an ambition coupled with an ideal, for the practice of medicine would present wide fields for human service. His parents were poor and could give him no assistance. He made his home with his uncle and aunt, Selig and Hannah Bregstone. Shortly after his arrival in the city he successfully passed the Federal Civil Service examination and after a brief interval was appointed to the local post office. He worked at night and the day he used for study. And so by dint of self-denial and hard work he succeeded in completing his studies in the Rush Medical College which was already affiliated with the University of Chicago. Soon thereafter he passed the State medical examination and was admitted to the practice of medicine. A year later he had conferred upon him the degree of Bachelor of Science. From the very beginning he had an aptitude for surgery and devoted himself exclusively to that branch of his profession. Young, energetic and skillful, he became before long, one of the most prominent surgeons in the city.

Unlike most scientists, Doctor Breakstone was intensely interested in social welfare; he took part in the early beginnings of all the Jewish institutions on the West Side. He was active in the building of the Home for the Aged, the Marks Nathan Home and together with the young Jewish "Intelligentsia" he interested himself in the establishment of a Hebrew Institute. However, his greatest ambition was to create a Kosher Hospital. In this aspiration he was not alone; almost every Jewish doctor on the west side indulged in the same dream, and nursed the same hope. The reason becomes obvious only when the attitude of the members of the staff of Michael Reese Hospital towards their Jewish colleagues is made known. Since the beginning of the existence of the Michael Reese Hospital a group of physicians and surgeons whose fathers were contributors towards its maintenance formed a monopoly and permitted no Jewish doctor who was not of German descent to become a member of its staff, regardless of his ability or renown.

Even the interns, although selected by competitive examination, were oddly enough, all German Jews. This condition was not only an insult to the Jewish doctors on the West Side, but it even affected their economic position. When one of them had to send his patient to the Michael Reese Hospital, it meant the loss of a patient; for he was barred from attending him and giving him further medical treatment. To protect themselves the Jewish doctors practicing West of the Chicago River were compelled to adopt a policy of retaliation; wherever possible they avoided sending their patients to Michael Reese Hospital and rarely called into consultation any member of the Michael Reese group.

This silent war continued for many years and the doctors boycotted by their co-religionists nourished the desire to have a hospital of their own on the West Side. It would really have a threefold purpose: it would mark the consummation of the freedom of the Russian Jew from his dependence on his German brethren; it would provide the religious patient with a Kosher hospital and Jewish atmosphere, and it would give the excluded doctors an equal opportunity with those who discriminated against them.

The resentment of the Jewish Doctors against the Michael Reese Hospital grew more and more bitter; they refused to be identified with it or its staff in any manner or for any cause. Their bitterness increased as they chafed under the unfairness of their exclusion, but they saw no chance of retaliating. Doctor Breakstone, among the others, saw in the boycott the frustration of his ambitions and his fighting instincts were aroused. Though naturally a gentle, easy-going person, he possesses a lively temper which is touched off by the slightest suspicion of injustice or unfair discrimination. And though he risked the antagonism of a powerful force, he cried aloud at the great wrong perpetrated by a minority against a majority struggling for a mere existence.

Translating his words into action he organized a movement for a Kosher Hospital on the West Side. Those who joined in the movement at the beginning were his colleagues in the medical profession who had been included in the boycott. Today he can say in the words of the great champion who dedicated his life to human freedom and human rights: "I did not conceal from myself what frightful antagonists rank, influence and wealth are ... I knew this without being restrained by it. The obstacles, the sacrifice, the dangers did not frighten me; but had I known what unworthy, and infamous slanders would be cast at me, how the purest motives would be twisted and perverted into their exact opposite and what ready credence the most miserable lies could find; well, I hope my resolution would not have been changed, but it would have cost me a hard and painful struggle."

Doctor Breakstone may be loath to admit it but the fact is that he is the victim of his own ambitions and his fighting qualities. Recognized by friend and foe as one of the ablest surgeons, he had no difficulty in attracting to the cause most of the West Side medical men and soon the movement embraced the entire community. Men in all walks of life joined in the rebellion of this last phase of the emancipation.

Doctor Breakstone, as a skilled surgeon, must have had a thorough knowledge of the human body but he demonstrated a lack of understanding of human nature. He placed too much confidence in those whose cause he was fighting. He abided his trust in them, and believed that they would always stand by him, but it was they who cast the first stone and aided in the attack that almost crucified him.

By the strenuous efforts of the Orthodox community, the Maimonides Hospital was finally completed. The building on California avenue and Fifteenth street was by no means a pretentious one but every brick therein represented the soul of the people who so laboriously worked for its achievement. All sorts of auxiliaries were organized in all parts of the city for the benefit of the institution. Esther Breakstone, the mother of Doctor Breakstone, organized a women's auxiliary in the Lawndale district with a membership of nine hundred.

It was at the completion of the hospital, when the rooms were all furnished and the doors thrown open to receive patients that the war for extermination was waged against it by the Associated Jewish Charities. Intrigues and vicious politics took the place of erstwhile ideals and high-minded principles. In the midst of it all, Doctor Breakstone was betrayed and deserted by his former friends. All the mishaps that took place (and the infant organization had its share of mistakes inevitable in any new, inexperienced institution) were unloaded on his shoulders and he was made the scapegoat.

Maimonides Hospital could not long survive the terrific pressure it was subjected to—both from within and without. Its doors closed shortly after they were opened and "scientific charity" was once more the victor over sentiment and uncontrollable ambition. Doctor Breakstone swallowed his disappointment and if he was disillusioned in the

goodness of his fellowmen he gave no sign of it.

Doctor Breakstone is the possessor of certain natural gifts and great virtues. As a surgeon he enjoys a reputation which is almost national in scope. He has travelled far and wide, in many parts of the United States, at the invitation of leading medical men to perform operations. Although impeded in speech he is a splendid lecturer and always absorbs the attention of his audiences. As a man, he is capable of friendship that knows no limits and many of the ills he has suffered are due to his generosity and boundless loyalty. He suffers from one great fault which is likely to prejudice those who do not know his inherent sincerity. I refer to his egotism. It is amusing to hear him discuss his accomplishments just as if he were speaking of some one else. However, this is no mere superficial egotism born of a smallness of soul but rather a great confidence and trusting faith in his own ability.

About four years ago I visited him at his hospital, and on entering his private office, found him engaged in a telephone conversation. When he hung up the receiver, he turned to me a mien; expressive of worry and anxiety and said: "Some more trouble. That was a call from the University of Illinois, informing me that my son is very ill. The symptoms indicate appendicitis. He will be brought here about six o'clock and must be operated on at once: Will you take care that my wife hears nothing of this and keep her out of the way until I am through with the operation?" I inquired calmly: "Are you going to perform the operation?" He retorted quickly, and without a trace of self-consciousness: "Why not? He is my son and deserves the best I can give him. I certainly cannot give him better surgical attention than my own." His reply came with simplicity and I knew that this was no *beau geste*. True, it was the height of egotism but there could have been no surer evidence of his belief in himself than this act of assuming the responsibility of his own son's very life without having even the knowledge and support of his wife. Doctor Breakstone, like all men who attain distinction in certain fields of endeavor, is endowed with a genius that comes from the gods and is subject to the frailties to which all humanity is heir.

The Maimonides Hospital stood vacant for some time until the associated Jewish Charities took it over, changed its name to "Mount Sinai Hospital" added a new building and made other improvements. Almost all of the evils that prevailed in the Michael Reese Hospital were eliminated, for which a great deal of the credit belongs to the efforts of Doctor Breakstone and his group of West-Side physicians.

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from Philip P Bregstone, Chicago and Its Jews, 1933, pp. 213-217