**The half plate in the kitchen cabinet**

**Tong Yong Chen**



**Dr. Kristopher Fotland at 92, in his home in Oslo, Norway-1997**

Dr. Kristopher Fotland, tall and slender, was in his early sixtties when I met him the first time. According to what I had heard, he went to China as missionary medical worker in his early years. After Communist took over China, he was put in prison. Later he was released and came to Taiwan. He worked in Pingtung Christian Hospital as a surgeon and the president of the hospital.

During that time in Taiwan, polio was an epidemic disease, many children suffered from it. It was very common for polio victims to have flaccid legs. For these patients, as the time went, muscles would become weaken and contracted, joints deformed, that caused the child unable to straighten his legs and unable to walk. In order to wear prosthesis and to walk, the shortened muscles needed to be surgically lengthened, deformed legs to be corrected. Besides, extensive physical therapy was also important. Without that, many victims would end up as a cripple, crawling on the ground in their whole life, being ridiculed by ignorant bystanders. Worst of all, some would end up bedridden for life.

Dr. Fotland was a missionary doctor. He would see any types of patients, operated on any surgeries as far as he could. One of his specialty was “tendon lengthening”. This was a procedure that cut the skin open in the groin area and release the contracted tendon which had caused the legs unable to stretch out. Another procedure was “Triple Arthrodesis” that was to reconstruct the ankle joint and fused it to keep it in approximately 90 degree, so the prosthesis can fit, and patient can walk.

Since my childhood, I had been dreaming about being an orthopedic doctor. In the hospital, I loved to go to operating room to help Dr. Fotland do the surgeries. This operating room was my favorite place, because Pingtung was hot and humid in the summer and it was the only air-conditioned room in the hospital.

I also like to watch the children who were operated by Dr. Fotland just several weeks before, happily and actively practicing physical therapy skill in the backyard. That made me felt rewarded. Even my contribution was small. In addition, children always welcome us with cheerful screams and calling which were very heartwarming.

One day, the chief nurse told me that I could go to the kitchen to pick up my lunch. This was free lunch provided by the hospital to hospital staff. She led me into the kitchen, there was no refrigerator. I saw only a tall wooden chest that with screen doors. Inside the cabinet, there were ten or more plates of lunch, which included a piece of meat, a portion of vegetable and a scoop of rice. I noticed all the plates were almost identical in their size and contents except one. Surprisingly, this plate had only half of what the other plate had. I asked the nurse, why this plate was different? Whom was that for? The nurse told me, this was for Dr. Fotland. He wanted to save the other half for the children. Later, I found out Dr. Fotland was in Taiwan alone. His wife and two boys were still in Norway. The nurse also told me that the Missionary headquarter in Norway was responsible for Dr. Fotland’s salary, and he asked the authority to pay him only $100 per month, he used this income to support his family in Norway. Dr. Fotland likes to drink milk in the morning. In order to save money, he kept a goat in hospital campus, to supply him free milk.

One day, I saw the lady in the kitchen was cooking “Mantou” (one kind of Chinese roll), but I noticed there was no man-tou (white steam bun) in our lunch. I asked the woman what was the Mantou for? She said Dr. Fotland was going to Keelung Harbor to pick up his visiting family, Mrs. Fotland and two boys from Norway. They came by ship. Dr. Fotland would be going to take a 10 hours train (At that time, there was express train that took only 6 hours, but more expensive) ride to meet them, and the Mantou was for their lunch. Dr. Fotland didn’t like to eat in the restaurant, because it would be too expensive.

Starting 6 AM every morning, I would follow Dr. Fotland and a nurse to make ward round. We went to each bed, checked wounds, changed dressings, re-shaped or took off plaster cast. In those years, hygienic condition in Taiwan was poor, bacterial infection was common. Wounds were all filled with blood and pus. We had to gently and patiently clean up the wounds, then put the dressings on tidily. Every child was all Dr. Fotland’s baby. Many times, while cleaning the wounds, how thoroughly to change the dressing is a dilemma. If it was to be gentle, it wouldn’t clean the wounds well, if it to be more thorough, it would be extremely painful. I believed the expression of the kids’ faces hurt him dearly. Watching those young yet brave children trying to bear the pain, holding back their tear while not to pull away. I cannot remember, how many times my eyes were blurred.

I could never forget this three month-old infant. He had several big boils in his back that filled with pus, He was quite sick and running high fever. To save his life, Dr. Fotland held a surgical scalpel, cut into each boil and to drain the pus. To thoroughly clean the wounds, he had to use a long handle clamp, holding a gauge ball and spread the whole back wound under the skin. That next morning, Dr. Fotland asked me to change this baby’s dressing, I had to follow the same procedure, using the long clamp to clean the pus extensively under the skin of the whole back. My heart ached with each step of my cleaning, I felt I was torturing this baby. I can never forget the face of his mother, the tear-filled eyes, the shaking arms holding the baby and the hesitation of wanting to cry out: Stop! Stop! Unfortunately, at these years, there was little anesthesia service in Taiwan, I am sure, until now, there are many people left with this horrible experience. Fortunately, such a life threatening infection was controlled by the dressing change and antibiotics. The baby finally was cured and discharged home.

Before each surgery in the operating room, Dr. Fotland would always hold the patient’s hand, bowed and prayed to the God to lead his hand to perform the surgery.

Every week, we had a Morning Prayer service. All the hospital staff would gathered in a small chapel in the hospital. I wasn’t a Christian, I only attended church occasionally. However, I was interested in all kinds of religions and open to various religious theology. I also like to join the morning service, because I felt the medicine won’t be complete without a spiritual component.

One morning, we were having service in the chapel. it was pouring rain outside. Suddenly, we noticed the ceiling of the chapel was leaking, the rain water had dropped on the ground in front of our seats. Dr. Fotland stood up form his seat on the stage, came to the floor, pulled out his white handkerchief, kneeled down and started to mop the floor. Everyone else sit on the seat quietly watched. I felt uncomfortable, I got up and took out my handkerchief and helped. When I watched him going back to his seat, suddenly, I felt enlightened. Yes, I saw His back shadow!!

Dr. White was a pediatrician. She was also form Norway. She came to the hospital only one or twice a week. I didn’t have much contact with her. She was polite to me, but not warm. I had seen her home outside the hospital. It was in the residential area of the US Military Consult Unit located in a suburban area of Pingtung. The house was a frame house, facing a big green lawn, very beautiful.

One day, I was following her seeing patients. After finished the clinic, she turned to asked me, : “Dr. Chen, are you a Christian? “ I didn’t know how to answer.

In the next few days, each time she saw me, she would say to me: “Dr. Chen, you have to accept Jesus and be a Christian.” Strangely, I remembered, Dr. Fotland had never asked me whether I was a Christian. Until today, I still don’t know how to answer this question? According to many of my good friends and family members, I cannot be considered a Christian. But in my heart, I believe I have seen that back shadow more than forty years ago. The shadow I have been trying to follow for these years.

Note:
I came to the US 1972. Due to my busy work, I didn’t keep contact with Dr. Fotland. In 1997, I wrote to Pingtung Christian Hospital and found out Dr. Fotland had retired and moved back to Norway. I wrote to him, Mentioning several occasions in the past in order to bring up his memory of me. Week later, he wrote back to me in his own hand. He also attached a picture of himself, a gray haired old gentleman, sitting in a lounge chair in a small condo back yard, reading newspaper.

In 2001, I took a tour to Norway. When I stopped by Oslo, I called him, hoping to meet this first mentor of my medical career. Disappointed, he and his son had moved. I asked his neighbor, he told me, there was a family of Fotland. But they didn’t know where they had moved to, not to mention that they ever know this old man, in his life time, had helped children regain their health and smile and had saved life and soul in a place called Taiwan, half world away from Norway.

Dr. Fotland’s letter:

Dear Dr. Chen!
Thank you for your kind letter! And thank you for the time we worked together thirty two years ago.
I have finished my medical work and live quietly with my wife in a little flat, not far from our youngest son with his family who has taken over our house in Solveien.

Sorry, my memory is poor, I cannot remember the things you wrote about, happening 32 years ago in Pingtung—that I starved myself to have more to give away. No-The half plate in the kitchen cabinet

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