

## The Back Story

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### Carl Djerassi (1923-2015) The Man of Multiple Lives

Much has been written about Carl Djerassi. By me. By others. And by Carl, himself.

Carl was indefatigable. He lived many lives, each so full of achievements and adventures that to live just one of them would be sufficient for most of us. He was an industrial chemist—co-inventor of the first commercial antihistamine and the first commercial birth control pill. An academic—professor at Stanford University and author of well over 1000 scientific publications and many scientific books. A writer—poet, playwright and author of fiction. A memoirist, author of three or four or even more autobiographies, depending on how one counts. An art connoisseur at the highest level. A major philanthropist. A highly decorated individual. In a room, he was a presence, especially with his Bulgarian-Austrian accent and stock of glorious hair, a physical attribute of which he was quite proud. A ladies' man, also an attribute of which he was quite proud.

Once he graduated from poverty and refugee status, Carl was to be “linked” with the in-crowd, the royalty. He was always the center of attention, at the head table, wearing the costumes of the upper crust. Even when it came to the most unanticipated connections.

Which brings us to this edition of *The Back Story*. In 1957, to resolve a tubercular knee, Djerassi chose a surgeon who was practicing in Mexico City. Yes, that does seem like an odd decision.

As Carl wrote in his first autobiography,

In 1957 I took a 2-year leave of absence from Wayne State University to return to Mexico City as a research vice president and board member of Syntex—a company for which I had served as a consultant in the intervening 5 years. Syntex had just been sold by its Mexican owners to an American investment banking firm and was about to go public, a move that would permit a substantial growth in its research expansion. Even more important was the great physical pain in my knee from which I suffered during Detroit winters. In 1957, I was living on 24 aspirins per day and had to use crutches. I decided to go to

Mexico City for a major operation: a permanent knee fusion to be performed by an internationally known Mexican surgeon, who himself had undergone such an operation. Somehow, I felt more comfortable with a surgeon who knew from personal experience what it meant to live with a fused knee joint. The operation was so successful that I have since resumed skiing, even though this involved developing a new “fused-knee” technique.

That surgeon was Dr. Juan Farill. Dr. Farill can be seen in his portrait painted by the famous Mexican artist Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) in what is also a Kahlo self-portrait. Why Kahlo and Farill?



*Self-portrait with the portrait of Doctor Farill.* © 2019 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

In 1925, Kahlo, returning home from school, was severely injured when the wooden bus in which she was riding was in a major collision. The bus's iron handrail impaled her pelvis, among other injuries. Kahlo was in pain for the rest of her life. Dr. Farrill performed seven surgeries on Kahlo's spine in the early 1950s. In her diary, Kahlo wrote, “Dr. Farill saved me.” One interpretation of this painting is as follows: Kahlo is the suffering ill person who was saved by the saint, Dr. Farill. Kahlo, in her wheelchair, uses a pallet that resembles her bloody heart.

As for Djerassi, he drew some measure of pride to have shared Dr. Farill with Frida Kahlo. And the fused left knee did not seem to hinder his life. As Carl wrote, “I have learned to cope well with a stiff knee ... I also enjoy the fringe benefits ... first-class plane travel and excellent opera and theatre seats ... [when skiing] I have even been known to show off in public.”



*Djerassi in his Vienna apartment, ca. 2012. Photograph courtesy Carl Djerassi.*

Even in Carl's choice of a surgeon, there was a uniqueness to his story. This is a matter worthy of savoring. How does one compactly yet fully describe a person of singularity? Unanalyzable, no. Irreducible, yes.

Carl had an immediate impact on all who interacted with him. Indeed, those effects were quite idiosyncratic. And Djerassi was himself idiosyncratic. His perception of others was acute as was his perception of himself. He could be and often was brutally honest. Nonetheless, he refused to alter his own behaviors to achieve some of the very personal necessities he so deeply desired—perhaps to be liked and welcomed, certainly to be considered—and was so poignantly wounded in their absence.

On January 15, 2015, just 15 days before Carl's death, Roald Hoffmann wrote me, "He is going from us, I can feel it." Upon Carl's death, I wrote to Hoffmann, "The only way that he could be stopped was in death." Roald responded, "Yes, Jeff, he's gone. A true force of nature is what he was."

### **American Chemical Society Spring 2021 Meeting**

The Spring 2021 national meeting of ACS will be entirely online. It will consist of 10 days of live sessions during the weekdays between April 5 and April 16, 2021. The meeting's theme will be Macromolecular Chemistry: the Second Century, the theme that had been in place for the cancelled Spring 2020 national meeting.

HIST is planning programming for the Spring 2021 meeting including a symposium on the history of polymer science, one on a decade of SpringerBriefs in History of Chemistry, and general papers. Submission of abstracts will be open December 16, 2020, through January 19, 2021. Please note that if you submitted an abstract for the cancelled HIST programs for either 2020 meeting and if you would like to present it at the spring 2021 meeting, you will have to submit the abstract anew: previous submissions will not carry over.

While the division looks forward to in-person symposia in the future, we recognize the opportunity that the virtual format presents for members for whom travel to national meetings is difficult. Presenting and/or attending could be easier under the virtual format.