Moments in Surgery

The story of an old photograph

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There are 2 ways to learn surgery. The first is to listen to your teacher and to follow his steps. The second is to do what the rest of the world has been doing, and to try it on your soil. Both ways are important for perfection. Although no teacher means no knowledge, no global view means that you end up isolated, regardless of how skillful you are.

Almost 100 years ago, Dr William J. Mayo wrote: “The advantages of travel for medical study are very great. One may read with profit of the various clinics and of the men who direct them, but this is in no way to be compared with the actual observation of the hospitals and with meeting personally the controlling minds. In this way one may obtain an insight into the psychology of the groups of scientific men, and return from such an investigation stimulated to better work and inspired to higher ideal.”

Recently, during the celebration ceremony at the Military Medical Academy of St. Petersburg, Russia, for the 165th anniversary of the Department of Faculty Surgery, formerly the Hospital Surgery founded by the noted Russian surgeon Nicolay Pirogov, attention was attracted to an old photograph, dated 1912 (Figure), of a few gentlemen in civilian suits among a group of Russian military officers. The photograph, first published in 1968 and 1972 in articles by A.T. Ivanova, and then in 2003 in a book by A.I. Nechay, “Chronicles of Fedorov Memorial Department of Faculty Surgery,” is said to show the famous Mayo brothers sitting on either side of the noted Russian surgeon, Dr Sergey P. Fedorov, professor and Head of the Department of Hospital Surgery at the Imperial Military Medical Academy of St. Petersburg. At least, this is what these publications claimed.

During a visit to The Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, I noticed a small picture of Dr S. Yudin hanging among others in its historical museum. Dr S. Yudin emphasized in his memoirs that the Mayo brothers treated all foreign visitors with a great respect and interest in the peculiarities of medical practice in other countries. I showed the old photograph, which I had brought with me, to Dr Renee E. Ziemer, the coordinator of the Mayo Historical Suite. “Here you can see William and Charles Mayo together with Professor Fedorov and his team in St. Petersburg in 1912,” I said. “This would be impossible,” she replied, “because the brothers Mayo would never leave the Clinic at the same time. In this picture, that is Dr William Mayo with Dr Christopher Graham, not with his brother Charles.” As I learned later, Dr Graham was their partner, and his sister was married to Charles Mayo.

In 1914, Dr William Mayo published a report entitled “Short visit to the surgical clinics in Russia, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Belgium” in The Lancet, in which the correct names of the travelers were listed. Moreover, that trip most likely took place in 1914, rather than in 1912, inasmuch as Dr Mayo mentioned that Professor Antoine Depage, President of the International Surgical Association, visited the United States in 1914. Obviously, he would not be able to know about that in 1912.

Still, why did Drs William Mayo and Christopher Graham decide to visit Russia, a remote country, about which they had such little information and which required a long and risky journey? In his report, Dr Mayo wrote: “There are in Russia over one hundred million people. Six million, called

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White Russians on account of their peculiar dress, live on the western border adjoining Poland; twenty million of the Little Russians, who are small and dark, live in the southwestern part adjoining the Balkans; and eighty million of the Great Russians, a large, strong people, very religious and sober in character. When speaking of ‘Russians,’ that is to the Great Russians that I refer. However, the major aim of Drs Mayo’s and Graham’s visit was to gain an impression about surgical hospitals of Moscow (Martynov’s clinic) and of St. Petersburg (clinics of Professors Ott, Fedorov, Vreden, Turner, and Zeidler). So they left only brief notes about the Red Square, Kremlin, St. Basil’s Cathedral, Hermitage, and the Museum of Alexander III. They were more eager to learn about the state of the Russian health care system and medical science.

Where did this interest come from? What could inspire the Americans to undertake such a long journey? As Dr William Mayo mentioned, the United States had been visited by a number of Russians, including Professor R. R. Vreden, one of the founders of orthopedic surgery in Russia, and well known beyond Russia as the author of the Manual for Field Surgery and the Head of the Orthopedic Institute in St. Petersburg from 1906. Professor D.O. Ott who was world renowned for his theoretical and practical validation of the effectiveness of intravenous saline infusions to anemic women in labor, and a pioneer of transvaginal surgery and of hysteroscopy and laparoscopy. In 1911, Dr Vladimir Shamov, a student of Prof Fedorov, defended his doctoral thesis, “The importance of physical methods for the surgery of malignancies,” and was given a fellowship to visit England and the United States in 1913. He visited the surgical clinics of Dr Alex Carrel (New York), Dr G. W. Crile (Cleveland), Dr H. Cushing (Boston), and the Mayo brothers.

It is quite possible that Drs Vreden, Ott, and Shamov could have dropped a word about Prof Fedorov of St. Petersburg, an expert in the surgery of urinary and bile systems, vertebral surgery, and oncology, as well as an enthusiast of then new cystoscopy, esophagoscopy, and laryngoscopy. Could that have inspired Dr W. Mayo to go to Russia to meet with him? The American visitors attended several operations performed by Prof Fedorov, including a nephrectomy for pyonephrosis and a pyelotomy. It was at his clinic where the picture of the great American visitors was taken together with Dr Fedorov and his colleagues in 1914. In that photograph were (first row, left to right) Alexandr Opokin (1978–1930), the founder of Russian thoracic surgery; Victor Shevkunenko (1872–1952), the prominent Russian topographeranatomist and

![Figure](image-url)
surgeon; William J. Mayo; Sergey Fedorov; Charles Graham; and Pavel Ikonnikov (1879–1915), a surgeon with an interest in blood pathology and bacteriology. The third surgeon from the left in the second row is Vasili Dobrotvorsky (1867–1937), who was the first in Russia to perform and describe gastroenterostomy and its consequences.

Now, looking at that old photograph of many outstanding surgeons of the early 20th century together, one may wonder how strong these professional ties could have become and what the benefits might have been to the education of each. William Mayo recognized the achievements of Russian surgery, traumatology, orthopedic surgery, obstetrics and gynecology of that time, and Russian surgeons appreciated the skills of the American and European surgeons, their brothers in arms.1 Unfortunately, just born, this cooperation could not bloom in full, for soon after that Europe was involved in World War I, followed by the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the political isolation of Russia from the rest of the world. And then, World War II, the Cold War, and the “Iron Curtain.” Historical circumstances and ideology favored patriotism, and we almost forgot that surgery as art and science should not recognize any borders.

May this old photograph be a reminder.

REFERENCES
1. Mayo WJ. A short visit to the surgical clinic of Russia, Finland, Norway, Denmark and Belgium. Lancet 1914;34:451-5.