



Jacinto Convit

World  rganization



Interview
with doctor
Kerdel-Vegas



Content

- 1-** Inspiration in medicine
- 2-** Relationship with doctor Convit
- 3-** Different personalities
- 4-** 25 years of work with doctor Convit
- 5-** Escuela Vargas
- 6-** Training of new students
- 7-** Treatment for doctor Convit in New York
- 8-** Diplomatic phase
- 9-** Doctor Convit's legacy



Our team had the exceptional opportunity to interview doctor Francisco Kerdel-Vegas, a renowned physician, dermatologist, diplomat and professor, born in Venezuela currently residing in Spain. Worked for more than 25 years with doctor Convit in research and clinic on infectious diseases.



What inspired you to specialize in dermatology? Was it your uncle, doctor Martín Vegas?

Essentially, my admiration for my uncle Martín Vegas inspired me because I was born and raised under his influence; he was my mother's older brother. My grandfather mostly lived and worked in the countryside, and the young physician married at 40. My mother translated for him new studies published in French, to English so he could read them.

Also, there must have been someone in my family who suffered from leprosy and I believe that's the reason my uncle was so interested in the disease. I remember that when I was single, I would go to my grandfather's house and see my uncle in his overalls in the garage of

the house performing tests with chaulmoogra oil, which was the only treatment for leprosy at the time.

Later, sulfone was found to be effective and I remember that at a meeting of the American Academy of Dermatology in New Orleans –I was already married to Martha– I told her let's go to the Louisiana state leprosarium, which is the only one left in the United States so you can see it. It's like a golf course, very beautiful, like a club. When we got there, we saw many of the old lepers already deformed, which shocked us.

I was born in a family of physicians. My grandfather was also a physician but he did not specialize in anything because at that time medical specializations did not exist, but after he graduated he went to France and studied all kinds of specializations at a time when physicians only specialized in obstetrics and traumatology.



Doctor Martín Vegas

You and doctor Convit were both physicians and researchers. Do you think this mix has been lost? Do you believe that this penchant for research was one of the factors that drew you the closest to doctor Convit? How was your relationship with doctor Convit and why did you decide to stay at Hospital Vargas?

"The only person interested in changing the system was Convit and from the very beginning I was very in tune with him and when we exchanged opinions, he was very receptive"

When I returned from the United States, I found that doctor Carlos Julio Alarcón headed the dermatology service. He was a dermatologist trained at the Paris School in classical dermatological morphology, and was more interested in diagnostics than anything else. This was a specialty with 2,000 diseases with 2,000 different names and it was difficult to try to memorize these diseases for which 90% did not have treatment, but it was important. Of the group that was in Hospital Vargas at the time, doctor Alarcón was the head of the department. He was, let's say, a good clinical dermatologist but nothing more.



Doctor Jacinto Convit

The only person interested in changing the system was Convit and from the very beginning I was very in tune with him and when we exchanged opinions, he was very receptive.

I convinced him that we had to collect funds abroad, for which an association for dermatological research was founded and we



Cecilia Pimentel

obtained support from our social circle, and that's how we begun. On his part, Convit achieved something that I found very interesting –maybe you know more about that than I do– which was to convince Miss Pimentel, who had established an association for lepers and collected money, but when she felt she was too old to continue,

she transferred the funds to Convit. That was very odd because she was a very strong woman. She was the sister of Captain Rafael Pimentel, the man that Gómez tortured and strung up by his testicles in La Rotunda for being one of the military officers who rose in revolt against Gómez. She spent her entire life collecting money for the lepers and doing small things for them. Today, the problem of the lepers is that the residual patients are like the ones in the Carville leprosarium of Louisiana and have deformities such as loss of fingers. I don't know if you've seen that movie that takes place in Jerusalem 'The Kingdom of Heaven' where the King wears a silver mask because his face is completely deformed. It's a good movie and worth watching.

We went to Vietnam right after it was liberated, in



Carville leprosarium of Louisiana

2002-2004. There was no tourism then but there were many lepers.

Today, you can mainly rely on technology to diagnose; in fact, I had obtained certain technological skills when

the dermatology convention took place in Washington. It was the first time that it was transmitted via satellite and the patients were in London. I was chosen to make the diagnosis and that was about 50 years ago.

According to the literature, you two had very different personalities. Is that true that doctor Convit was shy and introverted and you are talkative and an extrovert?

Convit was very reserved and cautious. He had his plans but he wouldn't reveal them and I, on the contrary, was very extroverted and would tell him everything. Many times he authorized me but I didn't know up to what extent I could proceed.



Doctor Francisco Kerdel-Vegas

“Convit was very reserved and cautious. He had his plans but he wouldn't reveal them and I, on the contrary, was very extroverted and would tell him everything”



Doctor Jacinto Convit



Hospital Vargas

How was it working directly with doctor Convit for 25 years and on top of that, sharing the same office?

I have to tell you that I greatly esteemed and admired him and never felt tempted to usurp his place, power or relevance, but always gave him my support so that we could develop something together. My attitude in life has always been that if another needs to do something because his ego compels him, it's better to give in to the pressure so that things get done.

At that time, when we stayed at Hospital Vargas, everyone said "These two are crazy, it's obvious they won't get anything." When we obtained the first grant of \$100,000, we thought it was a lot of money. In addition, we were given the money unconditionally so that we could develop a whole project; we then spent it on equipment. Before the Hospital de Niños -now Hospital de 'Niños JM de los Ríos'- was relocated to Avenida Vollmer in San Bernardino, it was situated next to Hospital Vargas. The original building that had been specially constructed for Hospital de Niños, was left empty and its facilities



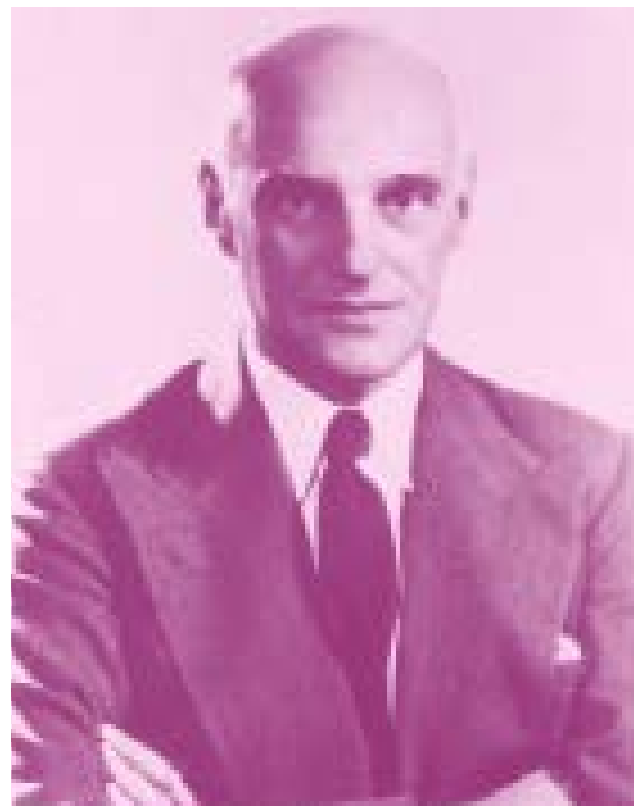
Hospital de Niños JM de los Ríos

were allocated among the different departments of Hospital Vargas. We were assigned a big classroom with spaces for laboratories. Actually, we got the greatest number of spaces in that building, which were very large, so we were able to install all the equipment we were purchasing. That was the first core of the dermatological project and we hired a full-time biologist who worked there until he grew old and passed away. At a point in time, I made a separate life but I never had an impasse with Convit, never.

"When we stayed at Hospital Vargas, everyone said "These two are crazy, it's obvious they won't get anything." When we obtained the first grant of \$100,000, we thought it was a lot of money"

Why did you decide to stay at Hospital Vargas after the renovation? Did you decide to change your focus on the existing medicine at that time?

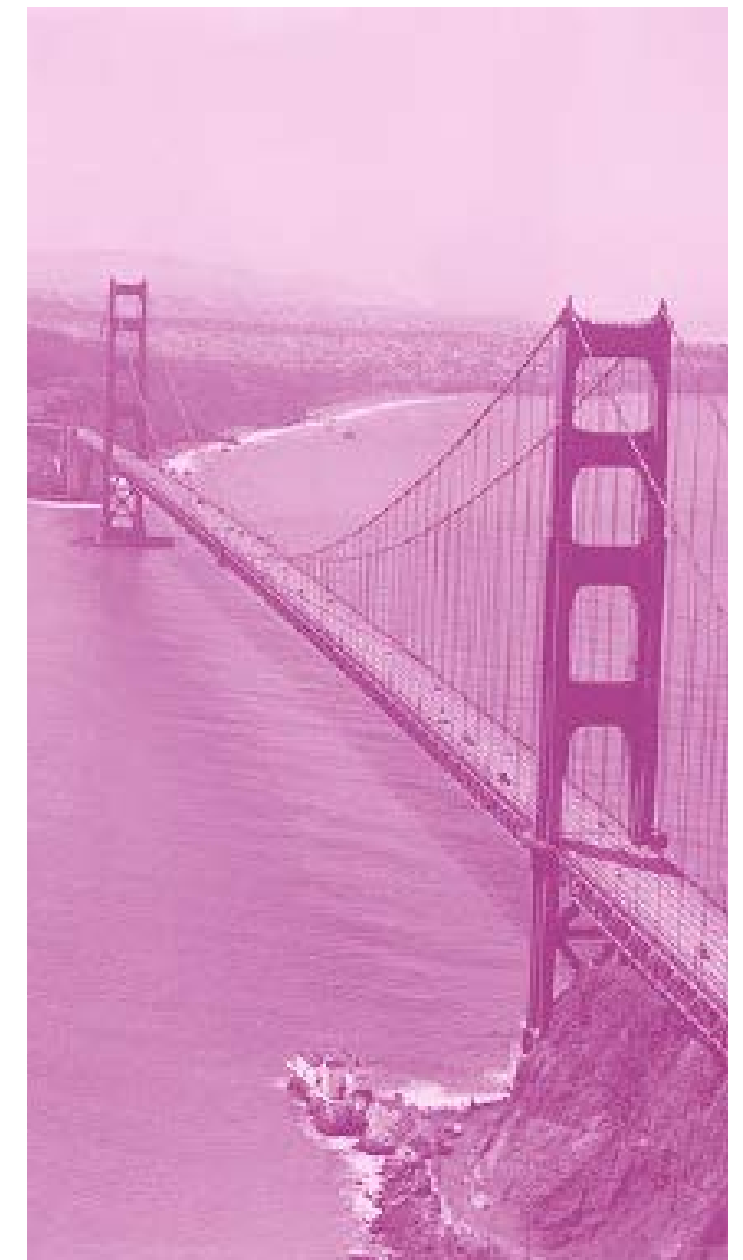
When the Escuela Vargas was founded, it was at the old hospital. The promoters at the time, trained by doctor Francisco Montbrun, Otto Lima Gómez, Fernando Ruben Coroni, immediately accepted for Convit and I to join them. They were big leaders of the project, and I proposed we contact Stanford University; and I will tell you the story of why Stanford University.



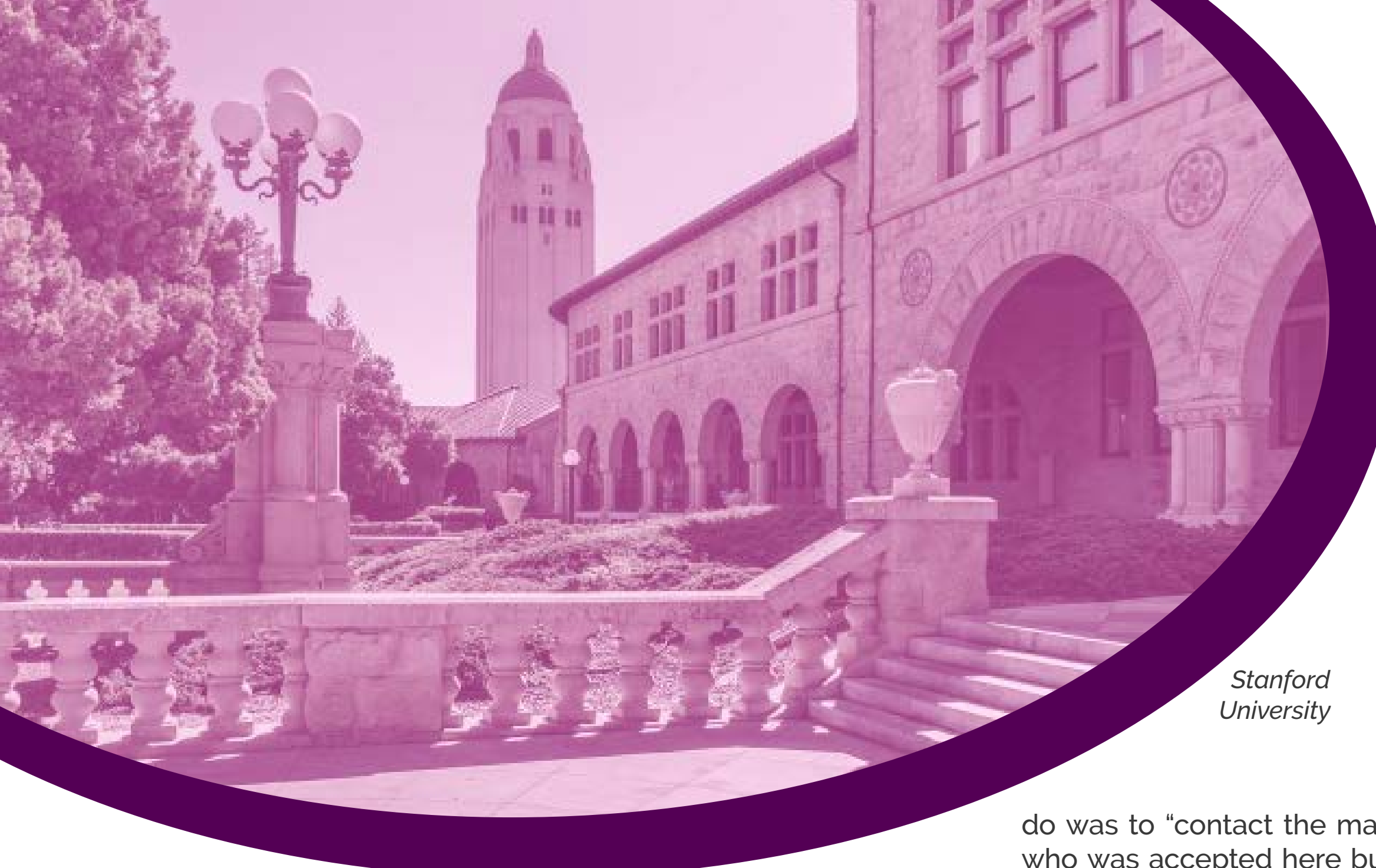
Doctor Marion Sulzberger

When we started this project, doctor Marion Sulzberger, who was my dermatology professor and one of the grand masters of dermatology in the world, was retiring from New York University. The dermatology department at the school appointed a committee to find a professor and they noted that among

their favorite candidates was Eugene Farber, the professor of dermatology at Stanford University in San Francisco. Stanford had decided to build a new campus and move from San Francisco, which meant that all the professors would teach full-time because they could not continue with their private practices, which has been the tradition in medicine for centuries; like I did all my life: go to the hospital in the morning and my private practice in the afternoon, which is where you really earn your living. This was happening at that time



San Francisco, United States



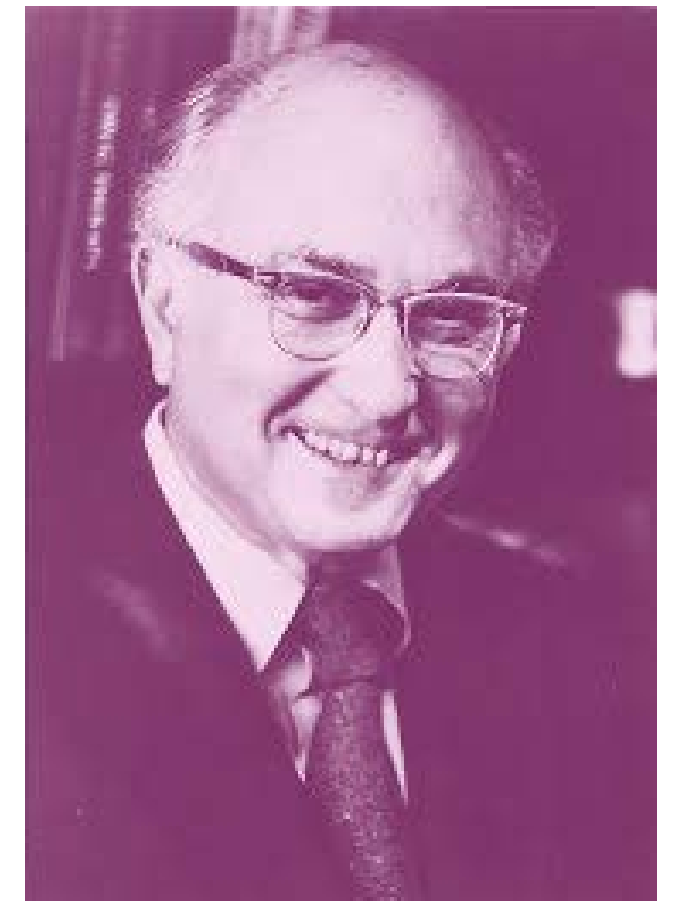
Stanford University

in the United States and Farber had been invited to New York to offer him the chair. It was difficult for him but he finally rejected and decided to stay in Stanford and move, eliminate his private practice and stay at

the new hospital in Stanford University. By the way, the new hospital was built by a great architect at the time, the man who built the Chicago Towers. So I asked Sulzberger and he told me that the best thing I could

helped us a lot, without our godfather nothing of what we have would exist and we must give him our due recognition, even though he died.

Stanford's support was essential. Persons such as the founder of Hewlett-Packard and the Nobel Prize in Medicine winner and the Vitamin C discoverer, Albert Szent-Györgyi, were his close friends.



Doctor Eugene Farber

do was to "contact the man who was accepted here but rejected the position; he's an enthusiastic young man who can still help you because I won't have any more influence here to help you". And so I reached out and from then on Eugene Farber became the godfather of the project in Venezuela. He

You forged great international alliances and also sent and received students to train. Did you always have in mind to arrange training with the great specialists?

How did you obtain financing and funds for these activities?



International course in leprosy, Caracas, Venezuela

The first was doctor Mauricio Goihman, who today is one of the great specialists in Venezuela. He was my first disciple and trained as an immunologist in Stanford, he holds a PhD.





How did you help and convince doctor Convit to undergo treatment for his problems in New York?



That was very serious. He lost a kidney in New York and his wife, being of Italian descent, saw this as a tragedy, that Convit had days to live, and that wasn't so. He lived a very long life with a single kidney. But it was very traumatic.

He was being treated in Venezuela and was given the wrong diagnosis and treatment. When he was treated in New York, he had lost the kidney which had to be surgically removed, which was the standard procedure at that time. He constantly drank water and the kidney was working all the time.

What made you venture into the diplomatic world as Ambassador in the United Kingdom, UNESCO and France?

I had a lot of contact with England because I spent a sabbatical year in Cambridge where I made many friends and just when I started my sabbatical year, Miguel Ángel Burelli Rivas was appointed Ambassador of Venezuela to Great Britain. I knew him from Caracas and was friends with him and his wife, María Briceño, the daughter of doctor Mario Briceño Iragorry, the great Venezuelan citizen, writer and literary figure. When I arrived there, Miguel Ángel called me and said

“Look, I want you to pinpoint an important project; I want to do something significant, think of something, you tell me and we’ll see how we can make it work”. I had heard of a study program created during the First World War that was called American Studies, so I went and looked it up in the library and discovered that the study program was founded by Cambridge University as a token of gratitude to the United States for entering the war and tipping the scales in favor of

*Cambridge
University*



the allies, for democracy; and against Germany and Austria-Hungary, the central powers at that time. I went and requested an appointment with the chancellor of the university who is actually the vice-chancellor because the chancellor in the universities of the United Kingdom is a title reserved for royalty or important scientific figures, so the vice-chancellor is actually the chancellor. At the time, the various masters of the colleges functioned on a rotational basis, as Oxford and Cambridge are like federations of colleges and each have different charters and are practically

independent. The vice-chancellor at the time was Professor Arthur Armitage, who was the master of Queen's College. I requested an appointment with him and he graciously welcomed me, as he was a very well-mannered gentleman. I explained my idea to him and asked him if it was feasible. He answered, well, let me study it and I'll let you know if it's feasible. A few days later he called me and said "If you obtain the money, we'll create the chair." At the time, we had a great idea but we didn't have the money to develop it. One day, Miguel Ángel called me and said "Come with me

Queen's College



to ask for money" and during a trip to Shell [company] in the ambassador's car, he said to me "We're going to ask Shell for the whole sum, but you'll do the talking, so I will introduce you and you'll explain the project." I had done my research and the CEO of Shell at that time was an American who had been a professor at Stanford, closely linked to teaching and academics. When we got there, Miguel Ángel introduced me and said "I authorize doctor Kerdel to explain to you the wonderful things that can be done with an individual who represents the Latin American culture in Cambridge named Simón Bolívar" and so on. He replied that he thought it was a great idea and was willing to collaborate. I interrupted him and said "Not collaborate, we're asking you for the entire sum, one million dollars." He turned pale and said to me "I don't have the authority to do that, I must take it up with the board of directors." We told him "Don't worry, take



*Miguel Ángel
Burelli Rivas*

whatever time is necessary but keep in mind that this is a formal request of the Venezuelan Government." And that was how the Simón Bolívar Chair in Cambridge was created.

Then, another problem rose in Venezuela. The president was Dr. Raúl Leoni, who was against the chair project in Cambridge because he said that it was a way to evade taxes on the one million dollars. The project was cast aside until one day the legal advisor of Shell came to me



*London,
United Kingdom*

for a skin problem and asked me how the chair project was coming along. I replied "Terrible. It's halted because of this man's [Dr. Leonil] position." He thought for a while and said "Give me a few days and I'll think of a way to do this." Then, he called me and said "If a donation is made to a government institute it does not pay taxes, and this institute in turn makes the donation to your chair project, and you receive the whole sum. Do you have that government institute? I replied that I didn't have it but that I would find it. I started my search for government

institutions and the Minister of Culture [of Venezuela] at that time accepted and told me "That's not a problem, you give us the check and we'll endorse it immediately." Not only did we endorse the check, we both got on a plane with the check and went to Cambridge to deliver it to the chancellor.

All this happened while I was there as a visiting scientist at the University of Cambridge. I said this could not be the end of it, but that a permanent scholarship had to be established for graduate students, and 12

scholarships were created. I collected the money for each one, for sentimental reasons if you wish, but for example for the Sanchez family, the scholarship was called María Luisa Sanchez Scholarship, and so on.

[Martha, wife of doctor Kerdel-Vegas, comments on his later diplomatic career]. What nobody understands is that he continued to see his patients and was doing all this at the same time. He saw more than 50 patients a day. Then, one day he arrived at his office at 7 in the morning and they tell him, the President called. Francisco says: the president of the academy or

the president of what? No, it's the President of the Republic. Francisco thought that doctor Jaime Lusinchi wanted to consult him as a patient, but the President told him "I want you to be my ambassador in London, and I won't take 'no' for an answer, you are the right person." He left his patients and clinic in the care of several dermatologists, which was traumatic for him and he told me it was going to be a sabbatical year, but turned out to be ten years. We lived in London for five years and then five years in Paris with



Jaime Lusinchi



Gamal Abden-Nasser

the two embassies because he joined UNESCO-France by request of President Caldera. [End of Martha's comment].

One thing always leads to another and I remember an interesting anecdote with the creation of the Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho Scholarship Program, through which I met Martha. I decided to perfect my German in Goethe Institute located near Munich,

where my cousin Nicolás Rolando Vegas was living in a village on a lake an hour away from Munich. I arrived there as a registered and established medical doctor and found that all my fellow students were Egyptian teenagers that Colonel Nasser had sent there [on scholarships] to learn German in order to transform Egypt into a world power. That idea seemed interesting to me. I made friends with these Egyptians in the 2 or 3 months I was there, and realized the magnitude of Nasser's project. When I returned to Venezuela I met with Miguel Ángel Burelli and told him about my experience during those months in Germany and the interesting scholarship project of Nasser's government. Miguel Ángel -who had already had the experience with the Cambridge program- in turn commented this to Gumersindo Rodríguez, who was the Minister of Cordiplan [Central Planning and Coordination Office] in the first presidency of Carlos

Andrés Pérez; and to Luis Manuel Peñalver [Minister of Education] who had been my Spanish grammar and literature teacher in high school, an excellent academic and then my professor of tropical medicine. Miguel Ángel was looking for the most suitable way to develop a similar project in Venezuela. However, I realized that the Ministry of Education wasn't the right channel to achieve the creation of this project.

Miguel Ángel called me and said "I spoke with Gumersindo again and he wants to talk to you". Gumersindo, who I knew only by reference and had seen him once in London, called me. Thinking that this was going to take time, I called in sick to the clinic and transferred my patients to the doctor on duty and said I wasn't going that afternoon. Gumersindo arrived at 2 p.m. and left at 11 p.m. I outlined for him the plan from A to Z, starting with the name 'Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho' because it was the anniversary

of the birth of Gran Mariscal, as well as all the details. That is how the creation of the Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho Scholarship Program began. They appointed me to the board of directors, where Martha who was working for Cordiplan, was also a member of the board. At this moment Martha and I started dating and working together.

Gumersindo Rodríguez



What should we do as an organization to continue doctor Convit's legacy?

Convit became the emblem of how a physician should be as a human being, because he was a generous man and unattached to money. In Convit's case, he definitively had no monetary interest in anything he did during his life and that's a good thing, because he was able to do great work because he had no interest in money. Just so you can see how people are and

how envious they can be, some persons who I consider respectable and with criteria, told me that it wasn't Convit's

merit at all, but that he was forced to retire from private practice because his patients didn't want him to treat them because he was in contact with lepers and could infect them with leprosy; that's their explanation.

It reminds me of what I was told about Eugenio Mendoza, by a member of a rival family in the business. According to him, Mendoza had established a foundation for infantile paralysis to ingratiate himself with Roosevelt, who had contracted a paralytic illness during childhood and could not move his legs, and was confined to a wheelchair, so that he could benefit from the contracts and special laws

that allowed the import of stretchers and other things during the war, and become rich based on his relationship with Roosevelt. I answered "Maybe what you say is true, but I don't care, what's important for me are the results." This foundation has done great work in Venezuela and Eugenio Mendoza, the man responsible for it, must be given the credit he is due.

This has been my attitude in life, to refute those slanders, because everybody makes up whatever they can think of, but do not give credit to those who deserve it!

I must confess that I am surprised that people still recognize in Convit what Convit represents for Venezuela, because there are many forces capable of burying and changing purposes.

You have to study the history of medicine to realize that each time there has been a breakthrough, it has

"I must confess that I am surprised that people still recognize in Convit what Convit represents for Venezuela, because there are many forces capable of burying and changing purposes"

faced tremendous opposition within the profession itself. Ignar Semmelweis, the man who invented asepsis was almost driven insane, they didn't accept him. The work of the man who invented the vaccine was rejected by everyone in the Royal Society including his friends; they told him that wasn't so, it's not acceptable, we're not going to publish your work, so he paid to publish his work out of his own pocket. One of the great achievements of humanity is to have eradicated smallpox.

“Convit became the emblem of how a physician should be as a human being, because he was a generous man and unattached to money”



Doctor Jacinto Convit



**Interview with
doctor Francisco
Kerdel-Vegas
conducted by
Jeismar Carballo, PhD.,
Project Coordinator
at Jacinto Convit World
Organization, Inc.**

(From left to right, Martha Ramos de Kerdel, Francisco Kerdel-Vegas and Jeismar Carballo, December 2019).



Official translation by

*Marie-José Alsina
Certified Public Translator
English/Spanish*

Design by

*Fabianna González
Intern of Jacinto Convit
World Organization, Inc.*