Jonas Salk, Officer: Recalling a Medical Hero

By Caitlin M. Hawke, Chevalier

In 1955, a young mother of two with another soon to come, the artist Françoise Gilot was living in France when news broke about Dr. Jonas Salk’s successful vaccine against polio. Françoise recalled that her father Émile, an agronomist and chemist, and her mother had been strong advocates of vaccinating against diseases. Françoise was twelve, and even though her children were vaccinated, she strongly recommended the go at once to have her children vaccinated. Françoise heeded his advice, becoming one of the first mothers abroad to see her children receive the Salk vaccine. Little did she know that she and Jonas Salk would wed fifteen years later and share their lives until the scientist’s death in 1995.

The year 2014 marks two important anniversaries. April 26th will be the 60th anniversary of the start of the mammoth and legendary polio vaccine field trial. It involved 1.8 million school children and was led by an early mentor of Salk’s, Dr. Thomas Francis, Jr., of the University of Michigan. October 28th will be the date upon which Jonas Salk would have turned 100. To commemorate this American scientist's enduring legacy, major symposia, as well as panels and lectures open to the public, will be held in New York, Pittsburgh, and San Diego, key American cities in the progression of Salk’s career.

Says Peter Salk, M.D., the eldest of Salk’s three sons from his first marriage to Donna Lindsay, “These centenary events will provide an opportunity to focus attention on themes of importance to my father, including vaccination, global health and international cooperation.

He devoted his life to improving human health, beginning with his work on the first influenza and polio vaccines and continuing with the founding of the Salk Institute and his research on cancer, multiple sclerosis and a vaccine for HIV/AIDS.” Peter is president of the Jonas Salk Legacy Foundation (www.jslf.org), which is serving as the catalyst for centennial plans involving major American institutions such as Salk’s alma mater: The City College of New York and New York University School of Medicine, where he received his undergraduate and medical degrees respectively. Commemoration plans are also afoot at the University of Pittsburgh where Salk conducted his polio research as well as at The Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California, founded by the scientist in 1960.

“Jonas Salk's legacy in public health truly into perspective one must recall the terror of infantile poliomyelitis before his vaccine’s introduction in 1955. Polio was the most dreaded childhood disease of the prior half century. It struck fear in parents, who dutifully kept their children indoors in the warm summer months favorable to the spread of the infection. Abandoned drained swimming pools. Once vibrant children now stricken with paralysis. The dreaded but life-prolonging iron lung. These were all images that seared the public’s consciousness.

In Nemesis, his last work of fiction, author Philip Roth captured the feeling of collective grief and helplessness: “It was impossible to believe that [the child] was lying in that pale, plain pine box merely from having caught a summertime disease. That box from which you cannot force your way out. That box in which a twelve-year-old was twelve years old forever. The rest of us live and grow older by the day, but he remains twelve. Millions of years go by, and he is still twelve.”

But the dread was not to last, thanks to the triumph of science. In his Pulitzer-winning account, Polio: An American Story, David Oshinsky tells of a uniquely American confluence of forces that brought on a medical miracle, and will to fund research for the polio vaccine. The desire to prevail came from a combination of post-war optimism and belief in technology; of a corps of titans — fearing for the well-being of their baby-boom children — willing to go door to door collecting funds for research; and of a private foundation known as the March of Dimes begun by polio’s most visible victim, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and run by FDR’s confidant, Basil O’Connor.

It was O’Connor, known as Doc, and his colleagues at the March of Dimes who determined which scientists to fund in the frantic quest for a vaccine. Doc O’Connor invested heavily in two men with very different approaches: Jonas Salk's inactivated-virus, injected vaccine and Albert Sabin’s live-virus, oral vaccine. Both scientists ultimately prevailed and their vaccines continue to be in use today in global eradication efforts.

However, Salk’s vaccine was ready first. On April 22, 1955, to a rapt American public and room full of media, Dr. Francis announced the results of his field trial: “The vaccine works. It is safe, effective and potent.” Jonas Salk was instantly catapulted onto the front page of every U.S. newspaper and into every American living room with a television set. The press was rhapsodic; the country was exhilarated. Demand for the vaccine soared: from a peak of over 21,000 U.S. cases of paralytic polio, the disease was sidelined by the Salk vaccine resulting in just 988 cases of paralysis by 1961. This notable success gave millions faith in the power of preventing disease through vaccination.

Among many honors, Jonas Salk received the Albert Lasker Award, this nation’s highest regarded medical science prize. He received a citation and a Congressional Gold Medal from President Dwight D. Eisenhower. And in 1977, President Jimmy Carter honored Martin Luther King, Jr., posthumously along with Jonas Salk with the nation’s highest civilian award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. President Carter remarked: “There are many Americans who do great things, who make us proud of them and their achievements, and who inspire us to do better ourselves. But there are some among those noble achievers who are exemplary in every way [and] who reach a higher plateau of achievement….I have chosen to honor two great men, one who has alleviated suffering and despair in the field of health and one who has chosen to alleviate suffering and despair in the field of human freedom.”

Among the first foreign countries to celebrate him, France named Salk Chevalier in the Legion of Honor in 1995. He was later promoted to Officer. On December 7, 1982, he received the American Society of the French Legion of Honor Medal for Distinguished Achievement in the presence of his wife, ASFLM member Françoise Gilot, who herself in 2009 was promoted by President Nicolas Sarkozy to the rank of Officer.

The French-American couple met in La Jolla, California, in the fall of 1969. She initially resisted his attention, thinking they had nothing in common. The day after they met, Jonas took her on a tour of the Salk Institute, designed by Louis I. Kahn. She said, “He was showing me the child of his heart so to speak, his institute. I was very receptive because apart from painting, I love architecture. It was a moment of mutual discovery.” Through the years, Françoise has continued to play an active role as a champion of the Institute, one of Jonas’ greatest legacies. And her art still may be found within the iconic Kahn buildings on the dramatic Torrey Pines bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

A little known fact: France played a role in the formation of the Salk Institute. In her enthraling, newly-published history entitled “Genesis of the Salk Institute: The Epic of Its Founders,” Suzanne Bourgeois recounts the story of what she calls the Pasteur connection and the Spirit of Paris. It was there at the Institut Pasteur, she says, that “a nucleus of the founding faculty of the future Salk Institute [including French Nobel laureate Jacques Monod] was constituted.”

On a more personal level, France was a sustaining force in Jonas’s life, in great part thanks to Françoise. She encouraged him to

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spend time there so he could clear his head of the politics that swirled around him and the glare often cast by what can only be called his celebrity. No stranger to such a glare, Francoise herself had found peace in New York and knew the value of changing one’s surroundings. She says, “Jonas learned French not a little, but very well. Learning the language made him interested in French culture. So that was a great link for us.”

So 100 years after his birth, why is Salk’s legacy as relevant as ever? In part, because he still stands out as a great American achiever. From a modest immigrant background, he grew up in Jewish neighborhoods of New York and was a singular product of a public education. His determination led him to achieve many a goal. His name is synonymous with the power of prevention through vaccination. His legacy as relevant as ever? In part, because he embodied in the great quest to eradicate polio without his vaccine. Tantalizingly close to its goal, global eradication is a massive effort involving the World Health Organization, funded and led by a public-private partnership (ASLF) member and Chevalier of the Legion of Honor, Caitlin Hawke was the Executive Director of the Pasteur Foundation for 22 years. She has conducted in-depth research on the public health history of polio and influenza and is currently an advisor to the Jonas Salk Legacy Foundation. To contact her, please email: caitlin.hawke@jslf.org.

The Newport Jazz Festival – 60th Anniversary by George Wein, Chevalier

hen I was in high school in the early 1940s, before I was drafted into the army in 1943, I had the opportunity to go to a ballroom on Massachusetts Avenue—not far from where Berklee College of Music is now—in Boston. It was my first opportunity to hear Duke Ellington live. That evening changed the direction of my life. As I matured, after three years in the army and four years at Boston University, the memories of that evening lingered, and when I finally decided to make jazz the focus of my life, I’m sure the seed was planted that night at the Roseland State Ballroom.

I’ve been producing the Newport Jazz Festival since 1954, and I’m proud to announce that the Festival will be celebrating its 60th Anniversary on August 1-3, 2014, three full days of performances by established and emerging artists. Performers will include the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis, Bobby McFerrin, Trombone Shorty, David Sanborn & Joey DeFrancesco, Dr. John, Dave Holland, Lee Konitz, and many more. We are thrilled to open the Festival on a Friday with an entire day of musicians who have emerged on the scene with distinctive stories to tell through their music. We’re not just selling these artists, we might be selling the future of jazz. In fact, the only reason for me to be in the Festival business at this point in my life is because these musicians and others must be heard. This may be the first time you’re hearing from me personally, but I know I’ve met many of you Festival-goers while riding around on my golf-cart, known as the “Wein Machine.” It’s always great to talk with fellow jazz-lovers. In case you haven’t been to Newport before, it’s one of the most beautiful Festival sites in the world. Narragansett Bay is alive with fleets of sailboats and yachts against the historic backdrop of Fort Adams. The Festival features three stages, presenting 35 major artists of all styles of jazz each day. The town itself is as picturesque as any seaport town in North America and, for you foodies, you can’t beat a Newport lobster roll.

I remember well, in 1954, when we had Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie and the startling booking of Eddie Condon’s Chicago-style group with Bobby Hackett, Pee Wee Russell and Wild Bill Davison on the same Festival as Lennie Tristano’s ultramodern band featuring Lee Konitz. Without realizing it, this was a pioneering move, beyond creating the Festival itself. It was in 1954, that we made the public realize that jazz was a music from J to Z and should include everything from the traditional beginnings to any contemporary creative movements. The 60th Anniversary program continues that concept.

The most poignant memory that I recall from that first Festival is when we asked Billie Holiday to sing with Lester Young, Teddy Wilson, Jo Jones, Roy Eldridge and the others who had made those quintessential records of the 1930s, which cemented the reputation of Lady Day as the ultimate jazz singer. “Prez” (aka Lester Young) had not spoken to or played with Billie in over ten years, despite being responsible for giving her the name Lady Day. He did not go on stage when he was announced after Billie and I remember asking him if he was going to go on. His words, “I guess I’ll have to go up and help the Lady,” have been imprinted in my mind ever since.

Since then, there have been hundreds of vignettes associated with what became the blueprint for jazz and music festivals all over the world. I’m looking forward to what will unfold this year for our 60th Anniversary. We are the granddaddy of all jazz festivals. Once jazz becomes a part of your life, it never disappears. It is always there. All I can say is that a love of jazz music enhances your enjoyment and appreciation of what life has to offer.

For a complete schedule of the Newport Jazz Festival go to www.newportjazzfes.org. George Wein, Chevalier, has been a Life Member of our Society since 1999, the year he was decorated. He lives in NYC.