



CALIFORNIA

Dr. Esther Somerfeld-Ziskind, 101; Pioneering Physician

BY ELAINE WOO

NOV. 22, 2002 12 AM PT

TIMES STAFF WRITER

Dr. Esther Somerfeld-Ziskind, a pioneering neurologist and psychiatrist whose seven-decade career spanned much of the history of those specialties in Los Angeles, has died. She was 101.

Somerfeld-Ziskind was seeing patients and attending weekly learning sessions at Childrens Hospital Los Angeles, where she was the oldest former resident, until shortly before her death Nov. 13 from natural causes. She died at her home in Silver Lake, said her daughter, Emile Jacobson of Los Angeles.

A Chicago native, she was one of the first doctors in Los Angeles to prescribe lithium for depression, former colleagues said. With her husband, Dr. Eugene Ziskind, she also helped introduce group psychotherapy to Southern California.

“She was a legend,” said Dr. Roberta Williams, vice president for pediatrics and

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entered Rush Medical College in Chicago, where she received her degree in 1925.

She moved to California later that year to begin an internship at what was then Los Angeles County General Hospital. She then served a pediatric residency at Childrens Hospital, but practiced pediatrics for only a short time. In 1928, she married Ziskind, whom she had met as an undergraduate in Chicago, and joined him in specializing in neurology and the then-fledgling field of psychiatry.

When she began in the field, there were few options for treating the mentally ill. She often told of working with a prominent psychiatrist in Rosemead whose treatment of depressed patients consisted of bed rest and milk every hour. “The milk,” she explained, “was to build you up.”

But advances were coming. Soon the Ziskinds were experimenting with insulin and electric shock therapy. Over the 70 years of Somerfeld-Ziskind’s career, she would witness other changes, including development of psychotropic “wonder drugs,” such as lithium and Prozac.

She and Ziskind started their own small general practice on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles during the Depression. Because of the number of patients who could not afford their services, each worked for pay only half the time, deciding they could get by on essentially one salary.

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which cited that contribution when it presented the couple with an award for distinguished service in 1987.

In 1939, the couple founded a free psychiatric clinic at the old Cedars hospital. It gave rise to the Los Angeles Psychiatric Service, which continues today as the Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center.

Somerfeld-Ziskind also headed the psychiatry department at Cedars of Lebanon during the 1940s, when most of its members were men.

She later joined the faculty at USC's medical school, teaching child psychiatry, group therapy and psychopathology.

She also collaborated on research with her husband. In 1932, they won a research prize from the California Medical Assn. for their work on tuberculosis-meningitis. She wrote her master's thesis in psychology at UCLA about a four-year study showing that the sedative phenobarbital did not impair the intellect of epilepsy patients.

Somerfeld-Ziskind never fully retired, even though she relied on a wheelchair and a driver to get around during her last years. She was the most faithful attendee at Childrens Hospital's "grand rounds," weekly sessions where faculty members learn about new developments in pediatrics. And, until a few months ago, she continued to see a few patients at her home.

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“When I asked [the editors] if they had any idea she was 100 years old, they looked at me and laughed,” said Williams, the Childrens Hospital vice president. “It was obvious to me they had no idea of her age. They probably knew her as the one reviewer who would turn in her reviews on time.

“There was nothing about her writing or speaking that would give her away.”

A voracious reader who had books piled high on her nightstand, the centenarian belonged to two book discussion clubs. Glen Hamor, a former professor of pharmacy at USC who was co-chairman of a book club for the university’s retirees, said Somerfeld-Ziskind was a vibrant, witty participant who rarely missed a session in the last 10 years.

She was the oldest member “by quite a few years,” Hamor said, but had no trouble keeping up with the younger ones, whose specialties ranged from business to physics.

“She’d leave the book discussion,” Hamor recalled, “and then go to a double-piano workout with someone.”

Somerfeld-Ziskind is survived by her daughter, two grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Her husband of 65 years died in 1993.

Her family asks that any memorial donations be sent to Childrens Hospital Los Angeles, 4650 Sunset Blvd., Room MS29, Los Angeles CA 90027.

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