“Bruges possesses many treasures of art from previous centuries, but the living treasure of Bruges is certainly Professor Sebrechts” (1). With these words, Queen Elisabeth honoured the surgeon with whom she had closely worked with the Belgian Red Cross (Fig. 1). A few weeks later, on Easter morning, March 28th 1948, Joseph Sebrechts passed away due to bleeding oesophageal varicose veins, as a consequence of cirrhosis caused by hepatitis. At the age of 63, after a hectic yet ascetic life, he stopped working on the eve of Palm Sunday, said goodbye to patients and collaborators, returned home, asked for the last rites after a massive haemorrhage, and died after being treated by his assistants and nurses during the entire Holy Week. His death was unexpected: in between operations, he was known to vomit blood now and then, but he hid everything from his nearest and dearest right up to the very end in order to not upset them needlessly. He died as he had lived: calm, only concerned about his patients, brave, full of confidence, and deeply faithful.

On April 2nd 1948, he was honoured with a princely funeral procession. His coffin was carried by six assistants from his house to St. Salvator cathedral, with thousands from all strata of society mourning in the rain along the route, hearing the chimes of the triumphal bell in the Halletoren. After all, the term “zeebrechten” had become synonymous in West-Flanders with “surgery” (2), and in the eyes of the people he had become a legend.

Bruges had lost its most famous citizen. The clock in the front of the Minnewater clinic was stopped on the day of his passing, and has never operated since.

After his death, the city changed the name of ‘Gasthuisstraat’ at the Minnewater into the ‘Prof. Dr. J. Sebrechtsstraat’, “in recognition of the exceptional merits of the late Professor Sebrechts, whose great compassion will live on in the appreciative memory of the people of Bruges”. The beautiful garden of his patrician house, which was visited by Queen Elisabeth and by Princess Josephine-Charlotte, became the city park “Hof Sebrechts”, with a memorial plaque as a gift from the family to remind passers-by of their famous fellow citizen. A bronze bust in his likeness (Fig. 2) was placed in

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1 See PANNIER, 1985.
2 See DE WOLF, 1942.
the hall of St. John’s general hospital, and a wooden
door on which the assistants, which numbered thirteen
at the time of his death, had burned their names for
years (Fig. 3) was preserved as a precious reminder of
the “school of Sebrechts”(1).

The Life of Joseph Sebrechts.

Joseph Sebrechts was born on February 11th 1885 in
Willebroek as the youngest of six children. His father
was a notary in Mechelen, but became hemiplegic when
his little son was only five years old, and passed away in
1895, leaving his wife alone with the burden of raising
the family, more so since her eldest daughter joined
a convent. His great-grandfather Corneille Sebrechts
received a gold medal for obstetrics in 1793, and
another great-grandfather was a physician as well.
Joseph was raised in a very religious family : one sister
and four aunts were members of the Sisters of Mercy,
taking care of orphans, lunatics and incurables.

Joseph grew up amid the fascinating years at the turn
of the century, with the discovery or introduction of
electricity, radioactivity, X-rays, radio, motorbikes, cars,
airplanes, helicopters, metro, trams, atom, relativity
theory, neon, incandescent bulbs, aluminium, Kodak,
film, gramophone, air-filled tyres, ballpoint pen, vacuum
cleaner, sewing machine and, last but not least, the
Belgian Congo. He had been an enthusiastic guide for
his family during the World Fair of 1900 in Brussels.

As a child he stood out due to his pleasant disposi-
tion, sacrificing spirit, and his technical ingenuity. For
example, he surprised everyone by equipping the parental
home with electrically operated roller shutters using a
homemade induction coil, and also by making quality
photographs using a camera of his own design. This
talent would later prove to be of exceptional value for
his surgical techniques and also for the ultramodern
furnishings of his home and hospital practice (4). The
‘frame of Sebrechts‘ to facilitate exposure of the intra-
abdominal organs during surgical procedures is still in
use.

He was educated at French-speaking schools (5) in
Mechelen, Ghent (St. Barbara) and Aalst, where he
maintained excellent grades. At the age of thirteen, he
approached the Fathers of the Congregation of Scheut,
but was rejected because he seemed too weak for the
demanding mission to China. At the age of fifteen, he
travelled to Rome with two comrades to see the Pope.
With a Motosacoche (a precursor to the motorcycle),
bought with money wheedled out from his sister, he
would later make the trip via back roads to Leuven
(Louvain), where in 1908 he was promoted magna cum
laude to doctor of medicine. He remained assistant for
one more year in the department of surgery to Professor
Théophile Debaisieux, before taking a study-trip to
Germany, Austria and France.

At the end of 1909, at the age of 24, Joseph moved to
Bruges with his sister Eulalie, after a debate between his
beloved Professor Debaisieux and the Augustinian
Sisters of Meaux, who had fled France to Bruges in
1905 due to Combes’ law, imposing the separation
between church and state. Doctor Sebrechts, as a young
well-trained surgeon came to Bruges only to find him-
self being the right man in the right place at the right
time.

After the bloom of the “Venice of the North” under
the rule of the Burgundians, around 1850 after the first
food riots of the young Belgian nation, Bruges decayed
to the point where it received the title of ‘poorest city of
Flanders‘. For the first time since the middle ages there
was famine, paired with cholera and typhoid fever,
caused by the economic and agrarian crisis. In Bruges,
moreover, it was compounded by the loss of the lace

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1 One of his last assistants was his son Paul, the late U.S. Navy
Captain, who specialized at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn.,
served as Chief of colorectal surgery at the U.S. Naval Hospital in San
Diego, then the world’s largest hospital, and became Professor of
Surgery at the University of California.

4 Examples of these furnishings include central heating, electricity,
the first cold-warm mixing tap (from his own design, to the surprise
of the local plumber), a water mains delivering groundwater, and an
autoclave remodelled to serve as a pressure pump for car tyres.

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autoclave remodelled to serve as a pressure pump for car tyres.

5 In those days French was the official language and the only one
allowed by law in Flanders’s secondary schools and universities, even
though in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium ! The ruling was
changed in the 1930s.
industry. Baudelaire spoke of the “ghost town, mummy town”. However, in 1892, when Georges Rodenbach brought the city back into international notoriety with his novel “Bruges la morte”, the standard of living had already sharply risen. At that time, restoration works in neo-gothic style were commonplace for public buildings, and construction of the port of Zeebrugge and the sea canal had just begun. It was a lively provincial city with 40,000 proud inhabitants, amongst which an important English colony had introduced tennis and football. Public life had gradually become more Flemish-oriented after the death of the local famous poet Guido Gezelle. Tourism industry extended its first tendrils, thanks to the exceptional preservation of the city’s medieval character (6).

Meanwhile, modern surgery became possible due to the advances of anaesthesia and asepsis, and went through a period of explosive growth at the end of the 19th century. The first successful operation for a perforated appendix was performed in 1885, the year of Sebrechts’ birth (7). After the creation of the Belgian Society of Surgery in 1892, the elevation of status and fresh recognition of the surgeon in society could finally be seen. Finally, after the turn of the century, the “quacks” that had operated on the market square gradually disappeared from the scene.

Joseph Sebrechts had to wait more than six months before receiving his first patient, since he would only accept surgical pathology. Meanwhile the sisters built St. Joseph’s clinic, later known as ‘the clinic of Sebrechts’, which opened in 1910. It became rapidly clear that the premises were too small for the huge demand of patients upon it. According to her eldest son, his exasperated single mother said: “Louis, it is incredible how much money our Jefke is costing me. I should sell a forest. You’re an adult now, what do you think of this?”

In 1912, Sebrechts was also appointed assistant-surgeon to St. John’s hospital (8), where five years later he became head of the department of surgery. Fifteen years later, he was appointed chief physician, after he had increased the yearly number of surgeries in Bruges tenfold, together with Sister Angele, his chief staff nurse. One local newspaper mentions an astonishing number of 1430 operations in 139 consecutive days (9). Perhaps he needed as little sleep as Napoleon? Within a few years, he had turned the dated provincial hospital, which was furnished with world-famous Memling paintings that he loved to show to foreign visitors, into a post-university centre of excellence. The surgical results were spectacular: in 1930, he presented a series of 243 laparotomies for ruptured extra-uterine pregnancy with auto-transfusion of blood, without a single mortality (10).

Meanwhile, both the hospital and the clinic were continuously expanded and modernised, according to his detailed instructions. In 1935, feeling most unhappy because he could not get a new building, he moved the surgical department to the renovated Minnewater Clinic, which was later used as a military hospital in 1940. For many years, the board of the hospital could only be reluctantly convinced to fund these activities, since in the previous century, they had been continuously obliged to save up for the next possible disaster. Now, they attributed the reason for the explosive growth of the hospital mainly to one single person, claiming that this growth was disproportionate to the needs of the local population (11). In his quest for perfection, Dr. Sebrechts himself expended fortunes on surgical instruments. Those, which remained unused, were donated after his death, to the University of Lovanium in the Belgian Congo. Professor Paul Hennebert would later report the case of a young girl whose leg was extended by 17 cm using one of these instruments (12).

In 1911 he married Jeanne Van Caillie, the daughter of a justice of the peace from Ostend, who was, in accordance with the usual customs of the day, solely raised for purposes of matrimony and motherhood. She would give him eight children. Maurice, Frans and Joseph were born in 1912, 1913 and 1914 respectively. At the outbreak of the First World War, Jeanne was sent to England with the three infants. The first months of their exile were very trying, until the parishioners of St Paul’s Anglican Church at Ramsbottom, Lancashire got word of her situation, and organized collections to pay for house rental and food until she could establish contact with Belgium via Holland to finance her further stay. During the First World War, the new “Bruges at sea” (Zeebrugge) was a U-boat harbour of strategic importance for the Germans, and bombs were dropped on Bruges regularly. Nevertheless, Joseph remained on the scene working as a young surgeon and being a temporary bachelor. He gained valuable experience treating civilian victims, while his elder colleagues worked behind the front lines in field hospitals led by A. Depage (13). In 1920, what the Belgian people had suffered during the war became internationally acknowledged when Antwerp was allowed to organise the Olympic games. Our national athletes, even though they...
were exhausted from war and Spanish' flu, managed to win 36 medals, amongst which were 14 gold medals.

Jeanne came back home after the war, having been separated from her husband for more than half their married life to date, after which she gave birth to Paul, Etienne, Marie-Jeanne and Ignace in 1919, 1920, 1922 and 1924 respectively. Fate struck when their youngest baby died in 1924, and subsequently, when her husband became severely ill in 1926 with hepatitis. He barely recovered from this disease, which supposedly had been caused by a puncture accident. When the beloved doctor was in danger of dying, thousands were mobilised for three pilgrimages to 'Our Lady of Assebroek', and for two 'Ommegang's of the Holy Blood'. Joseph was administered the last sacraments in the presence of 25 doctors, almost the entire compliment of those available in the region (14). In spite of a poor prognosis, as confirmed by the experts of the University of Leuven, Joseph recovered thanks to the determination and expertise of his assistant Dr. Andre Goffaerts. (Fig. 4) (15). As gratitude for his unexpected recovery, Joseph Sebrechts financed the construction of an art-deco chapel with a statue of St. Therese of Lisieux in St. Salvator Cathedral (16, 17).

Soon after the war, and particularly after the devaluation of the Belgian Franc, the economy revived fully for a few years. Just before the great depression, Dr. Sebrechts went on a boat trip to North America in 1929 to attend a congress on hospital management, and to research medical infrastructure. Within two weeks, he managed to visit many centres, thanks to a special train, and the constant company of special motorcycle policemen for the members of the First International Congress of the Hospitals. This study trip inspired him to further modernisation of infrastructure and medical care in Bruges, even though he considered the American system much too expensive: daily cost for one patient equalled 140% of the average workers daily wage whereas in Bruges it amounted to only 35%. Even so, he was most impressed by the great degree of tolerance between the clergyman and the laymen, at the service of the patient.

Back home, after the stock market crash, not having invested in shares, he managed to buy the 730 hectares "Domain De Lint" in Oud-Turnhout, with moorland, swamp, sand dunes, pinewoods and bird reservation. On rare occasions, he enjoyed some well-deserved, but always too brief breaks with his family. His love of nature was an inherited gift from his father (14).

Jeanne was very proud of her famous husband, "le grand patron", for whom his career was the top priority leaving little time for his wife and children. She took care of all the rest, single-handedly and dutifully, always courageous, but sometimes despairing, since she was severely disabled by rheumatoid arthritis and varicose veins (19).

Apart from having been in most European nations, Dr. Sebrechts also visited Lebanon and Egypt on the occasion of the International Congress of Surgery in 1936. He returned from Egypt with mementos of the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamen in 1923, which left a deep impression on his children.

But then the Second World War broke out. During those frightening days of May 1940, he remained at his post, while all military doctors were sent to France for a fruitless stay during the short Belgian campaign. Bruges lay right behind the front lines, and Dr. Sebrechts, together with his assistants, provided shelter for tens of thousands of refugees, and for the many wounded allied and German soldiers. At one time, 1200 injured arrived by train in a single night. He mobilised everyone, and set up 3200 beds in a few days, while surgical operations were performed around the clock. Eight ambulances unceasingly carried the wounded across the front lines, and when they were disallowed passage, Dr. Sebrechts relied on the King to convince the military commanders...

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15 Dr. Goffaerts later had an impressive career in Aalst, but unfortunately died at the age of 48 from a horse-riding accident.
17 Two years later, his youngest daughter was also named Therese after this recently canonised and very popular saint. Her birth was quite a surprise to the already 45-year-old mother.
18 His father had written a book entitled ‘The rustic conifers of Belgium’.
19 She was living in a golden cage, and secretly used his commodious income for all kinds of charity. Nevertheless, she had the reputation of being a rigid and tough lady, even in the opinion of the numerous house staff. She suffered her first heart attack only a few months after Joseph passed away. Fortunately, she was looked after, until her death in 1961, by her youngest daughter, who, following the example of past generations, ended up sacrificing her youth.
with a simple statement ‘par ordre du Roi’! (20) (Fig. 5). After the capitulation, when the German military commanders realised that their soldiers had received the same treatment as the allied forces, they expressed their thanks.

In 1945, he coordinated aid to the many farmers who had been driven from their land by artificially created floods, and at the end of the war he and his son Frans, using his own vehicle, led the re-supply convoys that travelled to Zealand Flanders to bring food and clothing, and to transport the sick to safety. He broke many civil and military regulations, and recklessly endangered his own life, but in the end, he brought salvation in the midst of despair. In 1946, Queen Wilhelmina of The Netherlands nominated him ‘Commander of the Order of Orange-Nassau’ with the words, “I thank you, doctor, for all you have done for my people”.

**Reputation and Character of Joseph Sebrechts.**

Joseph Sebrechts dominated surgery in our country during the interbellum, and, together with other eminent surgeons, ensured that surgical developments kept pace with foreign centres. The names of Antoine Depage, Albert Hustin, Albin Lambotte, Fritz De Beule, Robert Danis and Albert Lacquet should be remembered for generations (21).

Dr. Sebrechts had exceptional technical ingenuity, organisational talent, ethical principles as a surgeon, a feeling for a correct diagnosis, and also as leader of many organisations, strong judgment of human character. Moreover, most outstanding was his love and respect for his patients, whom he always tried, to the best of his abilities, to save from stress and pain. This was not always evident at a time when suffering and pain were considered part of the disease, and were even looked on by the Church as soul saving.

In a calm, humble and loving fashion, he invested the majority of his time taking care of his patients, always succeeding to give each individual the illusion that he had all the time in the world for him or her. He followed in the footsteps of Ambroise Paré, of whom King Charles IX had once asked on his sick bed that he be treated better than patients in the hospital, only to receive the response “That is not possible, Sire, because I treat the poor as kings”. For Dr. Sebrechts, there was no distinction between paying and non-paying patients, and for the latter, he often bore the costs, including those of Vitallium prostheses made in the USA. He also introduced metallic hip-replacement in Belgium. When the city of Bruges refused in 1924 to start an ambulance service, he did it by himself, with his own car and driver, and with his wife as bookkeeper. The city took over the service two years later, when it had become profitable. He once told his eldest brother : “Imagine, Louis : it has occasionally happened that they’ve brought me a farmer’s wife carried in a horse-drawn carriage, on a bed of hay. How could one possibly save such a poor soul, when she has been shaken about so much on her journey?” Occasionally, patients paid *in natura*, which was not always a bad thing : in 1939, Constant Permeke, later to become a very famous painter, gave Dr. Sebrechts a painting in repayment for his treatment, with an accompanying letter, from which can be deduced that the surgeon could not find the time to visit the artist’s atelier to make a choice from the paintings himself.

At his nomination as a member of the Royal Academy of Medicine, surgeons of the ‘school of Sebrechts’, gave him an appropriate souvenir : a bronze bas-relief work of sculptor Octave Rotsaert, bearing a likeness to the Good Samaritan, but modified to have the doctor’s facial features. We also have a stained glass pane in our possession depicting a similar scene.

Early on, and at his own expense, he introduced radiotherapy for tumour treatment. Several years later, the hospital bought the device in question. This is the reason why the provincial council consequently entrusted him with the organisation of cancer control, even though the University of Ghent was also a candidate (22). He was convinced, just as his wife, that his days as a surgeon were numbered : insufficient radioprotection gave him, like many other pioneers in this field, serious radiodermatitis of both hands.

Being a capable diplomat, he always remained above controversy. As a result, he was praised by Royalty,

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22 See Anonymous , 1925.
French-speaking upper classes in Flanders, Flemish elite, common people, the Church, not to mention his colleagues, who spontaneously relied on him for many duties. In 1925, he had been named Associate Professor of Surgery of the University of Leuven, and he was also vice-president of the National Red Cross, led by Prince de Merode. He was a member of the High Health Council, and was the driving force behind the White-Yellow Cross and Winter Help, as well as being president of the Royal Academy of Medicine, of the French Society of Anaesthesia, the Belgian Society of Surgery, the Provincial Medical Council of West-Flanders, the Belgian Society of Anaesthesia, the Belgian Society for Gastro-Enterology, the Belgian Society of Gynaecology and Obstetrics, the Flemish Society of Medicine and Gynaecology, and of the Alumni of the University of Leuven. He was also a member of many other scientific societies and councils, and he was a Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine and of the Association of Surgeons of Great Britain and Ireland (26).

His authority remained unaffected throughout the war. During the liberation in 1945, he helped to free the father-in-law of his son Etienne, a brewer and Bruges resident, from prison where he had been locked up for one night after false accusations of conspiring with the enemy. He, himself, of course, had to explain how it had been possible for German surgeons to witness surgical operations in Bruges during the occupation, and why he had been so involved with the Flemish Winter Help.

That he performed surgery on members of the court was fortunately not public knowledge. In 1941, Princess Marie-José, daughter of Albert I and Elisabeth, wife of Prince Umberto of Piemont, who would later briefly be king of Italy, made a visit. Due to the special circumstances brought about by the war, she was admitted anonymously to St. Joseph’s clinic in Bruges as “la Marquise de San Maurizio”. After the operation, Sebrechts gave her some Cuban Havana cigars, which she was known to smoke frequently. Despite this vice, she lived to the ripe old age of 94.

Some time later, at the express request of the Royal House (owing to the house arrest of the King), Dr. Sebrechts, only assisted by Dr. Jules Helleputte, performed surgery in the castle of Laeken on the Princess of Rethy, Lilian Baels, the second wife of King Leopold III. He had already treated her youngest sister Solange for sequel of poliomyelitis. When he returned home, he complained that a similar adventure outside of his familiar surroundings was not to be repeated. In September 1942, Princess Josephine-Charlotte, later to become The Grand Duchess of Luxembourg, underwent an urgent appendectomy at St. Joseph’s clinic. Looking for anonymity outside the clinic due to the German occupation of Belgium, she recovered, and even took her first steps in Sebrechts’ private house in Bruges.

Dr. Sebrechts was a confirmed Flemish man, in a French-speaking and French-minded environment. He supported the struggle for Flemish recognition by the strength of his personality, without ever provoking anybody, which at the time was a very difficult balance to strike. In this way, he ensured that the aloof Belgian Red Cross also became solidly anchored in Flanders after the First World War, and ready for new challenges. In 1924, he played an important role in the foundation of the ‘Vlaamsche Leergangen’ (27) in Leuven, which provided Dutch language teaching at the University of Leuven through private financing. After his election as a member of the just founded ‘Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Geneeskunde’ and being faithful to his Flemish persuasions, he took his leave from the ‘Académie Royale de Médecine’ (27). It made a big impression when the latter French-speaking academy named him honorary member after this move, making him the only Belgian to be a member of both academies. On the day that professor Frans Daels was banned from the Belgian Society of Gynaecology, Dr. Sebrechts did not hesitate for one moment before founding the Flemish Society of Gynaecology, and becoming its president (27). Even so, that he had not burnt his bridges was demonstrated in 1941 when he bowed out from leading the soon to be instituted National Order of Doctors due to “an excessively busy practice.” Dr. Fr. Van Hoof, who was appointed in his place, was sentenced to 15 years’ prison by a court martial in 1947 for having accepted the position (27).

He was devoutly religious, but for him this had always been a private matter. There was as yet no social security, but a widely spread network of charitable aid organisations. Whilst the needy were treated in hospitals for a small yearly fee, the more well-to-do could find treatment in the private clinics. At the time, the Sisters were more concerned with the moral and religious guidance of their hospitals’ needy, which often had been built close to the cemetery for practical reasons. However, attention was moved gradually by the physicians towards a curative treatment, thanks to recent breakthroughs in surgery, and an increase in the overall quality of life. Despite being Flemish, he did not regret the cooperation with the French Augustinian sisters, because they were more pragmatic than the Flemish “Zwartzusters” (Black Sisters), particularly with regard to surgery on men. Dr. Sebrechts became a friend of

24 See note 5.
26 See Anonymous, 1925.
27 See Van Bever, s.d.
bishops Waffelaert, after he had cured his brother, a general, upon his return from the front. He miraculously managed to obtain approval from the bishop for adapting medieval convent habits to the needs of modern medicine.

**Surgical Activities of Joseph Sebrechts.**

Apart from his publications, Sebrechts through his words and examples gave daily lessons to his assistants and to many surgeons who came to visit him, so that his influence was larger than might have been expected, not least abroad. One visitor during the roaring twenties was William J. Mayo, who was so impressed by the Halletoren (Hall Tower) with his carillon bells, that he was inspired to build the Mayo Clinic’s Plummer Building with the Rochester Carillon atop, intended to be an expression of the spiritual element of medical care.

Being a notary’s son, Dr. Sebrechts kept a meticulously complete archive of all his patients, and he standardised every operation to the smallest detail, so that even his assistants could perform them quickly and easily. After a few years, the techniques were always evaluated according to the results, and adapted if necessary, which kept him abreast of the state of evolution of other medical centres. He operated daily, from early in the morning, alternatively in St. Joseph’s clinic and St. John’s hospital. In the latter, the doorman would warn everyone, in accordance with an ancient custom, of the doctor’s arrival by ringing a loud bell (28). In the evening, he would pay visits to everyone who had received surgery. On Sundays, he would make a large tour of the various wards, and would often travel throughout the country to assist colleagues who were at their wits’ end in their treatments. His loyal driver, Cyriel Pillen, drove him everywhere, and sometimes on the way they would eat at the same table, which was quite revolutionary at that time.

His “catechism”, used as a guide by the assistants, started with the following words: “These days, a good surgeon does not have to be skilful and dexterous ... he should be a good doctor above all else...” Science, technique and organisation came second place for him, even though he considered them to be very important.

The patients placed a limitless confidence in him personally. As an example of psychogenic death, Professor Dr. F. Thomas, in the class for Medicine in Law in Ghent, gave an example of a patient whose stitches needed to be removed, and who refused to let anyone but Sebrechts do this. When an assistant removed the first stitch jokingly, the patient had a cardiac arrest and died.

Sixteen of his publications deal with spinal anaesthesia, with exceptional results thanks to his meticulous technique, which is still in use today. He started with this activity in 1910, and applied it progressively to 67% of his procedures (29), reaching a total figure of 40,000 by 1934. He also stated that anaesthesia was better suited for specialised hands. E.g.: C.H. Mayo was 12 years of age when he was allowed to administer anaesthesia for his father W.W. Mayo.

He published nine papers on aortic aneurisms, gallstones, gastric ulcers, Caesarean sections, bone grafts and hospital management, and nine papers deal with tuberculosis of the lung, spine and kidney. Dr. Louis De Winter, famed lung specialist, referred to Dr. Sebrechts as his “secular arm”, recalling the Inquisition. He took cured patients and lengths of ribs from thoracoplasties by bus to the Brussels’ meeting of the League against Tuberculosis, where this caused a large commotion (30). During World War II, Dr. Sebrechts also successfully performed the first pulmonary resection in Belgium. Only a few months after his death, streptomycin became available, and, thankfully, heroic thoracoplasties became obsolete.

Due to the many superlatives that were repeated time and again by all those who knew him personally, we made intensive enquiries into whether or not this great man might have had any shortcomings. Apparently he was too diplomatic, and did not publish as frequently as one would have hoped. His wife and children were relegated to the roles characteristic for the time, since “modern man” was still to be invented! Even so, he was always available, friendly and competent, in that order, which is still hopefully the goal of any ‘good’ doctor.

One week after his death, the World Health Organisation was founded, and shortly after that, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was written, heralding a new post-war era, especially for surgery, which was about to witness spectacular changes.

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28 See VAN DEN BON, 1947, 457.

29 See HUBENS, 1990, 247.

30 See DESBARAX, s.d.

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E. Sebrechts, M.D.
Zennelaaan 62
B-1800 Vilvoorde, Belgium
E-mail : erik.sebrechts@advalvas.be