

Anonymous Too Long: Readers Rapidly Identify Renowned Scientist

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When your name carries as much weight as Irene E. Karl's, you can only keep it out of the picture for so long.

Last week, this bureau aimed to identify five women in a photograph taken in the 1940s at Jewish Hospital of St. Louis.

It shows the late Dr. Michael Somogyi, a physician and biochemist at Jewish (now Barnes-Jewish Hospital) and Washington University.



Dr. Michael Somogyi of the Jewish Hospital of St. Louis in the 1940s, with then-unnamed assistants. Four readers of the Post-Dispatch have identified the woman in the back row, on right, as renowned biochemist Irene E. Karl. Photo courtesy of the Science History Institute.

With him are five women, labeled only as "five female laboratory assistants."

But it took less than 72 hours after the story was published for four readers to recognize Karl — back row, on right.

"I absolutely love this; you made my day," said Terry Karl, Irene Karl's daughter. "My mother was a real path breaker."

Indeed, "path-breaker" comes closer than "laboratory assistant" in describing Karl.

But the historical lack of recognition women have endured, in science especially, is what spurred the original search for the women's names.

To observe Women's History Month in March, the Science History Institute in Philadelphia posted the photo on social media.

"Women scientists are often invisible in the historical record, even when they're staring right at us," said Rebecca Ortenberg, the institute's social media director.

Ortenberg and institute curator Hillary Kativa selected the Somogyi photo because it contained a known time period and place, and because Somogyi is known for his groundbreaking work with diabetes.

But back to Karl.

Karl was a pioneer in identifying and understanding diabetes and sepsis (blood poisoning) and was an authority on muscle metabolism, her Washington University biography states.



Dr. Irene E. Karl, renowned biochemist. (Photo by Washington University)

Karl (nee Stark) was born in 1915 in Milwaukee, the oldest of three children of Hungarian immigrants.

She graduated summa cum laude in 1937 from the University of Wisconsin — the only woman in a class of 400. Then she went on to become the first woman in school history to earn a doctorate degree in a science, biochemistry.

In 1941, she started working at Jewish as a biochemist. That same year, she married her high school sweetheart, Dr. Michael M. Karl, himself a renowned professor and internist.

In 1983, the Karls became the first married couple to be honored by Washington University with a named professorship.

Terry Karl said the key to understanding her mother is the "Murder, She Wrote" television show.

"I always wondered why my mom loved that show so much, until I finally realized that she is Jessica Fletcher," she said.

"She was a detective and she searched for killers, whether that was diabetes or sepsis or viruses. My mom always had to understand the puzzle, always had to figure out things," she said.

Terry Karl is a political scientist and professor emeritus at Stanford University, where she once headed the Center for Latin American Studies.

She takes pride that her mother "believed in equality more than anybody I ever knew. Race, gender, all of that, was completely irrelevant to her."

"Around the hospital, she was known as the 'Candy Lady,' because she bought candy on holidays for just about everybody," she said. "And the parking lot attendant got the same box as the head of her department."

Terry Karl also described her mother as unassuming.

"She never presented herself as a scientist. She always came off as a tiny Jewish mother/grandmother type," Karl said, who then laughed when asked her mother's height.

"She was maybe five feet, and then she shrunk."

Sue Koritz remembers her godmother as a "warm loving person."

Koritz said her mother, Melba Koplars Rosen, worked at Jewish in the 1940s as a phlebotomist. It was there that Rosen and Irene Karl, and their husbands, became friends.

"If you needed something," Koritz said. "Aunt Irene was always right there to help."



Dr. Irene Karl (nee Stark) is shown at left in December 1944 with her friend, Melba Koplars Rosen. (Photo courtesy of Sue Koritz)

Another child of another friend of the Karls, Dr. David Berland, called her scientific career "illustrious, groundbreaking."

And like Koritz, he called her Aunt Irene. "Not biological, but psychological."

Berland said his father, Dr. Harry Berland, and Michael Karl were friends from Milwaukee who came to St. Louis for internships and residencies.

"My father and Mike hung out ... and Mike was dating Irene. My mother worked in the same lab as Irene ... Irene fixed up my

father and mother," Berland said. "The rest is history."

Koritz also said Irene Karl had "an amazing green thumb."

"She had a greenhouse at their home in Ladue and Aunt Irene loved to get down and dirty with her plants," Koritz said.

Terry Karl said that for her mother, juggling a career with keeping a home and raising children, "that garden was her salvation."

Irene Karl was 90 when she died in July 2006. Her husband died five months later.

Terry Karl said her mother's memory still lives with her, especially now as the world grapples with the coronavirus.

"I remember she would always say, 'We're in a war with the bugs—and the bugs are winning.'"

Editor's Note: Anyone with information about the other women in the photo with Somogyi can send an email to jholleman@post-dispatch.com.