

**PAULINA SATANOWSKY**

(1896-1985)

*The first woman ophthalmologist in Latin America*

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**Abstract**

This is a tribute to Dr. Paulina Satanówsky, the first woman in Latin America to practice ophthalmology at a time when very few women dared to embrace a destiny within this field.



Paulina Satanówsky de Neuman

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## Paulina Satanówsky de Neuman

Paulina was born in Fremenchuck, Russia, in 1896. She moved to Argentina with her parents and spent her childhood and youth in Bahía Blanca, where she graduated from high school in 1914. She started studying medicine at the School of Medicine of the University of Buenos Aires while the dean was Dr. Güemes (known as “*the doctor of the presidents*”, at least six former presidents of the nation were his patients). While in medical school, Paulina was exempt from paying student fees due to the family limited economic resources.

Quite young, she showed a strong inclination towards ophthalmology. On repeated occasions, to improve her ophthalmic knowledge, she travelled with her mother to Vienna.

Paulina belonged to a very particular family: her sister Sara was a distinguished surgeon and became the first woman to lead a surgical orthopedic service in 1935.



Sara Satanatowski

Sara was also an extraordinary teacher, and was president of the Traumatology and Orthopedics Society of Argentina. Their brothers, Marcos and Isidro, were two well-known lawyers. Marcos came to a tragic end, a story we'll return to later, because of the great influence it had on the family.

In March of 1921, Paulina became Head Teaching Auxiliary at the Department of Ophthalmology directed by professor De

María; in 1923 she was appointed a Head Clinical Teaching Auxiliary and in 1928 she began working as an assistant professor, culminating in her being named Associate Professor in Ophthalmology in 1934. Her thesis described some issues about Basedow's disease with unilateral and bilateral goiter.

Dr. Satanówsky also had a degree in biology, career which she studied alongside her medical degree. By the time she graduated, she had already published important studies such as: “*Paralysis of the lateral rectus muscle after spinal anaesthesia.*”, “*Harmful neon lighting.*”, “*Lipoid degeneration of the cornea.*”, etc. These were followed by 50 more works related to her specialty, including an important study about acute keratoconus caused by allergy and tumors of the ciliary body called diktyoma. She also described some cases of optho quiasmatic meningoencephalitis with Dr. Balado as neurosurgeon.

For many years she taught a large number of complementary courses in her field of specialty, both at the University of Buenos Aires and national and international societies. Later in her life she was named Head Ophthalmologist at the Hospital Israelita in 1948.

Paulina attended the first Argentinian Congress in 1936 whose president was Carlos Damel. This came to be as the first of many Pan-American Ophthalmology Congresses and World Ophthalmology Congresses from 1937 onwards, where she was sent as a delegate by the School of Medicine. The first World Ophthalmology Congress where she was present was held in Cairo. Even today it remains interesting to read the reports Dr. Satanówsky wrote for the deans after each of her journeys.

Teaching was of great importance to her, and her letters to the deans suggesting modifications to teaching methods to improve students' learning experiences, are of considerable interest.

She remained at the Department of Ophthalmology as an Assistant Professor, and began to lead the department when she was appointed temporary Head Professor in 1953.

Paulina retired in 1961, at the age of 65. She left many disciples, the most noteworthy being Moisés Brodsky, Mauricio Brodsky, Kurlat Rimisky and many others; most of them has passed away, except Mauricio Brodsky, who still remembers this severe but generous teacher. Not only did she contribute to the scientific education of her less experienced colleagues, she also helped financially some of them to start their office.

Essentially, Paulina was an extraordinary ophthalmologist, with great knowledge of basic science and more specifically of pathological ocular anatomy. She started a personal collection of ocular pathology at the time she worked with Prof. De María, together with her notebooks including the description, drawings, and diagnoses of the samples she prepared. None has remained.

Paulina lived a happy family life with her husband Mr. Neuman, with whom she shared a great number of activities outside the world of medicine, mostly related to fine arts and music. She formed an important collection of paintings of Argentinian artists.

Paulina and her family lived a tragic event when her brother Marcos, a famous lawyer, as told before, was murdered for political reasons.

Dr. Marcos Satanówsky was a professor in commercial law, the president of the Argentine Jewish Society, and founder of the newspaper “El Diario”.

He owned a flourishing law practice with his brother Isidro and was working as a lawyer on the “La Razón” case.

The newspaper “La Razón” belonged to the Cortejarena-Peralta Ramos family, but in 1946, during the presidency of Juan Domingo Perón, all shares were handed over to Miguel Miranda, President of the Central Bank of Argentina. When the Perón government was ousted after the Revolución Libertadora, headed by general Lonardi, the Peralta Ramos family demanded that their shares that had been taken from them under pressure in an illegal way. They demanded the shares to be restored to them and to that end, they asked for Marcos Satanówsky’s services.

On June 13, 1957, three men entered

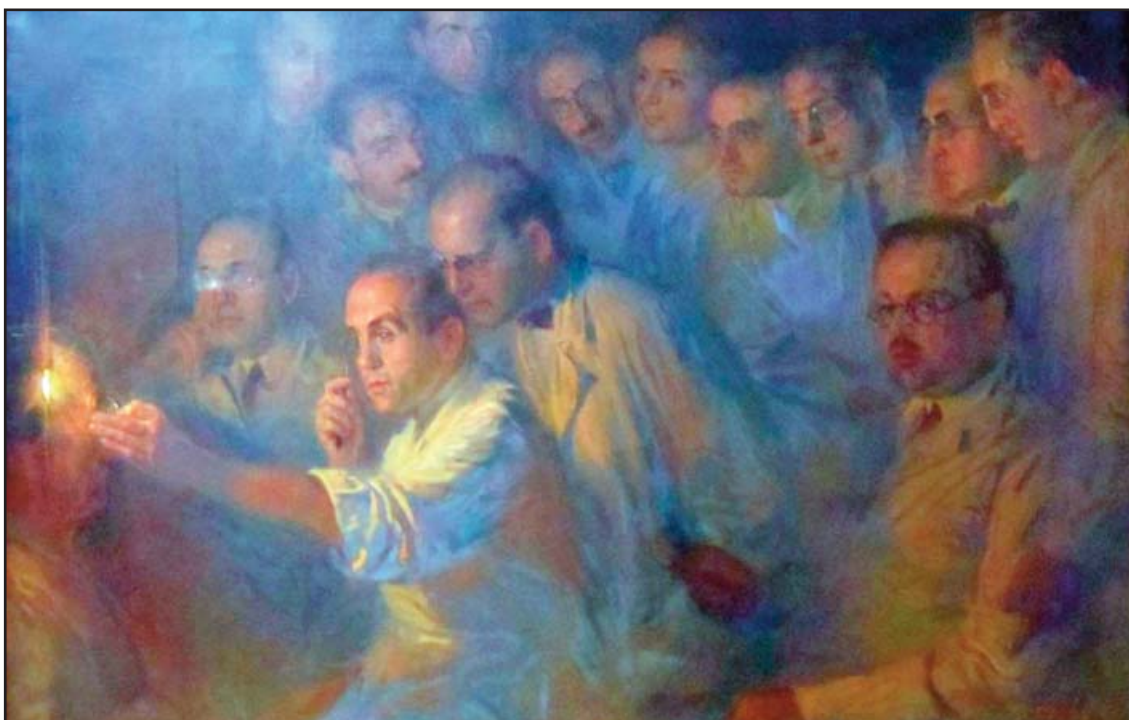
Satanówsky’s office and killed Marcos by shooting him in the chest. The men fled leaving no trace. A few days later, Paulina received a phone call asking for a large sum of money to “prevent any further misfortunes in the family.” Paulina pretended to agree to their demands, but instead she called the police. A man was captured while retiring the ransom money, but he claimed to know nothing about the murder. Thanks to the intervention of the National Intelligence Bureau,



The “Satanówsky case” in Mayoria magazine; Argentina (1958)

a man called Marcelino Castor Lorenzo was apprehended, whose features matched the description of Marcos’s killer. Another man, Pérez Griz, was captured with Lorenzo, but the contradictory evidence given by the witnesses prevented the connection of these men to the crime, and they were released.

The “Satanówsky case” was investigated by writer and journalist Rodolfo Walsh, who discovered a connection between these suspects and the National Intelligence Bureau. Despite the information provided by the journalist and the declarations of the witnesses called on by the family, none of the suspects were convicted. The Parliamentary Committee investigating the case at the request of President Frondizi was also unable to irrefutably prove said connections.



Painting by the artist Roberto Fantuzzi, with the portraits of the professors at the Hospital de Clínicas where Paulina (at the back) taught.



Rodolfo Walsh subsequently published a book about these events entitled “*The Satanówsky Case*”. Despite the evidence and declarations, the case was closed and Marcos’s murder remained unpunished.

The pressure on the family, the importance of the case, and the family’s desire for it to be solved, all had a negative influence on Paulina. She withdraw from social life, albeit not completely, and died peacefully, beloved and respected by her colleagues in 1985 at the advanced age of 91 years.

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