

Eugene Hirst

by Yvonne Robinson (nee Hirst)

Eugene Hirst, known to his friends as Gene, was born in Budapest. He was the youngest of four children of Edward Hirschberger and Franciska (née Stahler). Before the Second World War he lived in Czechoslovakia working as a dental technician in the University Hospital Clinic in Prague.

In 1939 he and his wife Jana (née Tanze) sought refuge in New Zealand. He found immediate employment in Wellington and after a short time shifted to Auckland as manager of, and later partner in, Prosthetic Processes Ltd. Although he volunteered for service during the War his occupation was considered to be essential and he was directed to continue in it. In 1940 he introduced to New Zealand dentistry specialised American techniques in crown and bridge work and the use of porcelain.

His experience in dental technology led to a second career as a manufacturer of optical lenses. Clear acrylic materials had been developed for use in dentistry and Gene believed the same materials could be used for contact lenses. In 1943 he accepted, with great success, a challenge made by an Auckland ophthalmologist to make the first contact lenses in New Zealand for a near-blind young woman. That led to him setting up Hirst Contact Lens Ltd. in Auckland. In 1950 he entered partnership with an optometrist, D. Mortimer. In 1946 contact lenses were accepted as a medical aid and the government agreed to subsidise their cost in appropriate cases. Many servicemen returning from overseas with eye disorders were helped by the provision of contact lenses. New Zealand was the first country in the world to introduce such a benefit. From those beginnings Gene Hirst was to initiate and develop improvements in a variety of technically complex contact lenses over the next 40 years. He entered into agreements with large contact lens laboratories overseas, trained many of their technicians and exported specialised, New Zealand manufactured, equipment made to his specifications. Under various licensing agreements contact lenses developed by him were manufactured in Japan, England, 14 European countries, seven Asian countries, South Africa, Canada as well as in Australia. He remained Managing Director of Hirst Contact Lens Ltd. until it was sold in 1978. He retired from partnership in Mortimer and Hirst in 1985.

He travelled globally, lecturing and teaching contact lens design and practice. Between 1946 and 1979 he was an honorary consultant to the Auckland Hospital Contact Lens Clinic. In 1950 he helped promote the publication of one of the first contact lens journals. He wrote many papers on his speciality. In 1980 he was acclaimed by the Optometric Honour Fraternity U.S.A., and was elected a member of the Beta Sigma Kappa. The American Optometric Association awarded him the honorary degree of Doctor in Ocular Science. The New Zealand Optometric Vision Research Foundation Appeal, of which he was Chairman, raised funds leading to the establishing of a Chair of Optics in Auckland in 1990. Gene was honorary instructor in dental prosthetics to the Royal New Zealand Navy for 15 years and a past President of the New Zealand Dental Laboratory Association.

An enthusiastic Zionist, he made his love and support for Israel known to his friends and contacts at every opportunity. Habonim, the Zionist Youth Group, have cause to be grateful to him. His foresight led to the purchase of an old house in Parnell. This building, known as the Moadon, is also used as headquarters for the Auckland Zionist Society.

His foresight also led to the purchase of an adjoining house which was converted into two apartments, one for the use of the shaliach, the other to bring in funds. He was an Honorary Life Vice-President of the New Zealand Zionist Society, and President of the Zionist Federation of New Zealand, 1960-64 and 1968-72, and President, Keren Hayesod, 1952-60. He was active in promoting a Jewish Kindergarten and a Jewish Day School at a time when many felt such institutions would lead to a new ghetto. Time has proved his judgement correct.

He was a life member and patron of the Ngatea Tennis Club, a member of the Remuera Bowling Club and the Auckland Bridge Club, as well as being a Rotarian.

He was awarded the O.B.E. in 1981 for services to the Jewish community and for his work in the development of contact lenses. He was also a Justice of the Peace.

The Jewish Chronicle, in 1989, described him as an active Zionist in every sense of the word. New Zealand Optics, in 1989, said "Gene Hirst will be remembered as a family man, inventor, sportsman, traveller and craftsman. Whatever he did he did with all his heart".

His name will undoubtedly survive in the history of Prosthetic Dentistry and Optometry as well as in the history of New Zealand Jewry.

About the Author

Yvonne Robinson (née Hirst) is the wife of Judge David Robinson. She is a Registered Nurse and has a B.A. in Anthropology and Sociology. Yvonne and David have two sons, Michael and Edward.