Laszlo Lorand, 95, Holocaust Survivor, Immigrant and Distinguished Scientist

Dr. Laszlo Lorand of Glencoe, IL and Woods Hole, MA, a biochemist and Holocaust survivor, died at his home in Glencoe on December 6. He was 95. His daughter, Michele Lorand, confirmed his death.

An internationally recognized biochemist, Dr. Lorand is known for his landmark discoveries of blood clotting mechanisms. His research in the area of thrombosis, protein associations and calcium ions is considered to have had a major impact in the field of blood coagulation. In particular, he was a co-discoverer of factor XIII (formerly referred to as Laki-Lorand factor and fibrin-stabilizing factor), a protein that plays a critical role in blood clotting. At the time of his death he was professor emeritus of Cell and Molecular Biology at Northwestern University and a distinguished scientist whose career spanned more than 60 years at Northwestern.

Dr. Lorand was born in Győr, Hungary in 1923. He obtained an Absolutorium in Medicine from the University of Budapest in 1948 and a PhD in biomolecular structure from the University of Leeds, England, in 1951. He taught Physiology and Pharmacology at Wayne State University School of Medicine prior to joining Northwestern in 1955.

At Northwestern, Lorand was instrumental in securing National Institutes of Health (NIH) support for an extension to the Tech building on the Evanston Campus, was the first director of a NIH-funded biochemistry training program and was a founding member of the Department of Cell and Molecular Biology. He spent nearly four decades with the Department of Chemistry and what is now the Department of Molecular Biosciences before transferring to the medical school (now called the Feinberg School of Medicine) in 1993 as a research professor of Cell and Molecular Biology. He later became a distinguished investigator at the Feinberg Cardiovascular Research Institute. He is credited with helping to strengthen biomedical collaboration across Northwestern’s Chicago and Evanston campuses, as well as recruiting many prominent scientists to the university.

Dr. Lorand was an elected Member of the National Academy of Sciences, a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a foreign member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He received numerous awards and honorary degrees throughout his career including an honorary Doctor of Science from the University of Illinois and Doctor of Medicine and Surgery from the University of Ferrara. His scientific publishing career spanned over 70 years, and he was the author of more than 200 scientific articles. His final article was accepted for publication shortly before his death. For his part as a teacher and mentor, Dr. Lorand is recalled by many for having played a vital role in their own career.

Dr. Lorand’s life was shaped by his experience as a Holocaust survivor and as an immigrant from Hungary. He survived the Nazi occupation of Hungary, narrowly escaping deportation to Auschwitz where the rest of his family was interred and where his father died. He spent the remainder of the war in hiding and in a labor camp. After the war, Dr. Lorand entered medical school at the University of Budapest.

In 1946 Dr. Lorand’s professional and personal life began to take shape. As a medical student, he was introduced to Nobel Prize winner, Dr. Albert Szent-Gyorgyi, who offered him a position at the Institute of Biochemistry at the University of Budapest, an intellectual haven in the postwar world. It was there that Dr. Lorand first encountered the phenomenon of blood coagulation and where he made his first discovery laying the foundation for the molecular understanding of the clotting of fibrinogen in blood. Dr. Szent-Gyorgyi wisely arranged for English instruction for Lorand, and held to the concept of mens sana in corpore sano (“a healthy mind in a healthy body”), encouraging Lorand and the rest of his assistants to play ping pong, volleyball, and providing lunch from a fully-staffed kitchen. Every day, Lorand would take an extra meal home to his widowed mother. Holding true to his mentor’s principal of physical fitness, Dr. Lorand rode his bicycle until age 92, and took long walks until age 94.
By 1947, the leaders of the Institute of Biochemistry, including Dr. Szent-Gyorgyi, had to leave Hungary, which was becoming a one-party socialist republic. Before doing so, Dr. Szent-Gyorgyi obtained a passport and an invitation for Lorand to continue his research in the laboratory of Dr. William T. Astbury at the University of Leeds in England. As the Iron Curtain fell, Lorand remained in Hungary to complete his medical education and obtained his Absolutorium in Medicine from the University of Budapest in 1948. He then planned to travel to Leeds to work with Dr. Astbury. The Hungarian authorities, however, had other ideas, and one Friday afternoon in December 1948, Lorand was summoned to the office of Bruno Straub, the head of the laboratory at the University of Budapest. Straub, who would later become the Chairman of the Hungarian Presidential Council, informed Lorand that his passport would be cancelled the following Monday. Lorand was unable to check the reliability of the information, so with one suitcase, he said goodbye to his mother and sister and left Hungary before the weekend was over. He arrived in Leeds at Dr. Astbury’s lab with only his letter of invitation. Over the years, Hungarian authorities reached out several times to Dr. Astbury to send Lorand back to Hungary but Dr. Astbury refused. Dr. Lorand earned his PhD in Biomolecular Structure with Dr. Astbury in 1952.

His PhD in hand, Dr. Lorand received an invitation to come to the United States to take a position teaching Physiology and Pharmacology at Wayne State University School of Medicine. Just as he had arrived in England four years earlier, he arrived in the United States with no passport and no papers, only his letter of invitation. In 1953, he spent the summer doing research with Dr. Szent-Gyorgyi at the Marine Biological Laboratory (MBL) in Woods Hole, MA, where they would swim almost daily from Buzzards Bay to the Vineyard Sound. It was in Woods Hole where Dr. Lorand met the love of his life, Dr. Joyce Bruner, whom he married later that year, and who predeceased him in 2010. Dr. Lorand served on the MBL’s Board of Trustees from 1987-1991, and was a faculty member in the MBL Physiology course. He returned to Woods Hole and the MBL with his family every summer until the end of his life.

Having benefitted from the open arms of two countries, England in 1948, and the United States in 1953, Dr. Lorand was an ardent believer that diversity and immigration strengthen communities. Over the years he vouched for many scientists, and provided positions in his laboratory for many escaping from behind the Iron Curtain as well as for scientists from all over the world. There were times when his laboratory was literally a United Nations of Science. He also was passionate about the precious nature of freedom and warned of the dangers lurking behind nationalistic and fascistic beliefs. He recorded several DVDs for Yad Vashem about his experiences in Hungary leading up to, through and after the war.

He is remembered as a highly respected educator and mentor, and a devoted husband, father and grandfather. He is survived by his daughter, two grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.