



FASTEN-ATING

Pitt's Mark Ravitch brought the Russian surgical stapler to America in 1958 (see p. 18). But the Russians weren't the first to use staples to suture human tissue. That honor goes to a Hungarian.

In 1907, Budapest-based Hümér Hüttl—one of the most famous surgeons of his time—enlisted Victor Fischer, an engineer and fifth-generation designer of surgical instruments, to create “a mechanical stitching device which would shorten the duration of an operation as much as possible ... in the simplest and most reliable way.” Fischer completed two models, a 17-centimeter one for suturing the stomach and an 11-centimeter one for the duodenum. Hüttl made a splash in the literature, but only 50 of the staplers (top photo) were ever sold. These crank-powered apparatuses could only be refilled by the manufacturer. Each one weighed nearly 8 pounds.

In 1920, Aladár von Petz made a lighter, simpler device—just seven moving parts, down from 12 (see bottom photo). The 32-year-old's namesake clamp placed two rows of staples made of “German silver,” a copper, zinc, and nickel alloy.

In 1921, Hüttl attended the Congress of the Hungarian Surgical Society. He'd heard that von Petz, 20 years his junior, would be demonstrating his stapler, and Hüttl came prepared to defend his own model. But after hearing the nervous young von Petz speak, he sat down beside him, picked up the prototype, and tested it on his leather spectacle case. Surveying the output, Hüttl said, simply, “This is better,” congratulated von Petz, and left the room.

Once in production, the von Petz clamp was an international success. The Germans made him a verb. To *petzen* is “to use the gastric stapler.” —*Elaine Vitone*



PHOTOS BY ESZTER BLAHÁK. COURTESY SEMMELWEIS MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE, BUDAPEST.