

Remembering Jewish Physicians

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“When I think about the Nazi doctors, the medical executioners, I lose hope. To find it again I think about the others, the victim-doctors”

Elie Wiesel (Night)

Medical journals, in addition to their scientific content, also incorporate topics in medical history. This includes recalling practitioners who left their knowledge, experience and at times their lives as a heritage to their profession. Israel medical journals are no exception, whether in Hebrew in *Harefuah*, or in English in *IMAJ* (Israel Medical Association Journal) and the *Rambam Maimonides Medical Journal*, or the bilingual *Korot*. After years of clinical practice and multiple publications, it is onto this path of Medical History that I venture, in remembrance of some of those Jewish “victim-doctors.”

It is appropriate that Israeli medical journals not only remember the contributions to Medicine, but also expose the millennia-old persecution of Jewish physicians as recounted in Ohry’s article “The tragic fate of physicians” [1]. Other examples include the description of vaccination, early preclinical diagnosis and renal involvement in typhus exanthematicus by Drs. Ludwig Fleck and Jakob Penson [2]; the study of survivors’ psychiatric syndrome by Dr. Leo Eitinger [3]; the story of Dr. Ephraim Bueno, who after his expulsion from Spain/Portugal sought refuge in Amsterdam where he befriended and treated the artist Rembrandt [4]; the case of Dr. Otto H. Warburg, who conducted cancer research during the Third Reich [5], or recounting the suffering and triumph of the Stabholz medical family [6]. It is especially fitting that we mark Holocaust Day by recalling the life and work of two of the Jewish physicians persecuted during World War II, physicians who represented a bright spot in the otherwise darkest page in the history of medicine.

ALBERT HAAS

Odyssey from Hungary to France, to Dachau-Auschwitz-Gusen, to Paris and New York

Albert Haas was born in Hungary in 1911 to a Hungarian Jewish father and French-Jewish mother. He studied Medicine

in Budapest where he contracted and later recovered from pulmonary tuberculosis (TB). He left Hungary at the start of World War II, relocated to Paris and soon joined the French Resistance. He was later arrested by the invading Germans and was severely tortured and deported, but his Jewish origin was never detected.

Haas was interned in Dachau, escaped, was caught and re-interned in the Dachau concentration camp. Eventually, as an Aryan prisoner doctor, named “Haftling-Arzt, no. 1762222,” Haas was transferred to the Auschwitz-Buna complex. At a later stage he was transferred to the Mauthausen-Gusen II camp, one of the most brutal camps in the concentrationary universe of the Third Reich.

Haas’ superior in the camp hospital was SS-Dr. Helmut Vetter. Vetter served in Auschwitz in early 1943, in Buchenwald in 1943 and in Mauthausen-Gusen II in 1944–45. Dr. Haas’ account is particularly interesting; he describes the “arrangement” he had with the Nazi physician whereby Haas agreed to perform certain tests on inmates (offering them a covert protection) and Vetter would use the results of the tests: “for the benefit of science.” Thus was Dr. Haas’ survival assured – by supplying Dr. Vetter with “scientific material” for publication after the war. Dr. Vetter lectured on his experiments in Gusen, intending them for later publication, similar to what he had done with the Nazi doctor Ding-Schuler in Buchenwald while “researching typhus treatment” [2,7-9].

In Gusen, Dr. Haas found that scabies could be treated with Peru balsam whose stringent odor obliterated the mite, a technique that was in fact a rediscovery of an ancient remedy. He also devised a way to manage local infections. The reaction of hunger-induced edema of limbs to beatings was infection and gangrene, a certain death sentence for a working prisoner. Haas lanced the phlegmon, debrided the gangrenous tissue and banded the limb with charcoal-powder that healed the wound within 2 days. He then washed the wounds with the scarcely available permanganate and hydrogen peroxide. This was in fact similar to Amboise Paré’s empiric treatment in the 16th century.

Haas’ most impressive contribution in Gusen was the study (under Dr. Vetter’s order) of the anti-bacterial agents Rutenol and Preparate 3582 (supplied by IG Farben, the German chemical industry conglomerate), as well as an early sulfa product for the treatment of TB [7,8]. Once Dr. Haas and the other prisoner physicians recognized the first signs of drug toxicity in TB patients, the medicine was replaced by a placebo and therapeutic pneumothorax was clandestinely performed.

The false positive results were given to Dr. Vetter for future publication. This never eventuated as Dr. Vetter was tried in Nuremberg, found guilty and hanged in 1949, aged 39.

Dr. Haas critically questioned his own ethical values and proclaimed his guilt. He accused himself of betraying end-stage patients, sacrificed for his own preservation and for the survival of those who could still be treated: “We lost our values in the camp, as we lost our weight and our clothing.” His moral despair was alleviated by the support of colleagues and the resistance group in the camp, and by later participating in an armed revolt against the SS once the order came for complete annihilation of the camp. Gusen was liberated by the American Army on 5 May 1945 but Haas remained in the camp as a physician for the refugees. After several months he returned to Paris to look for his family. Dr. Haas’ heroic work during the detention and after liberation was widely publicized and he was decorated. He became known for the establishment of two precedent-setting rehabilitation centers, one in France for patients who contracted TB and other respiratory diseases in concentration camps, and the other in Germany for handicapped or displaced former camp victims.

He was invited to New York to establish the first medical facility for the comprehensive care and rehabilitation – medical, psychological, social, vocational – of those with a pulmonary disability. These were people suffering from TB, asthma, emphysema and chronic bronchitis, and those who had undergone extensive thoracic surgery. He later retired, spending his last years writing articles and his autobiography [7]. In his autobiography, he described the brutality of the Nazi regime, the killing techniques, the beatings, the shootings and the freezing, as well as the infectious diseases that ravaged the camps. He recounted the starvation and the “hunger oedema,” the unsanitary conditions and the malnutrition, all of which led to the death of prisoners-of-war – Polish, Russians, communists and anti-Fascists – but mostly Jews. He described the homosexual orgies in the camp and the heterosexual brothels which employed only non-Jewish women, as well as the corruption of the SS and their lackeys. Albert Haas died in New York in 1997.

ARTHUR KASSEL

Odyssey of an ‘alien doctor’, from Breslau to Buchenwald, to Hamburg, to Cuba, to Antwerp, to England, to outback Australia

The professional lives of Jewish academics, scientists, medical practitioners and students in Germany were restricted by Nazi laws beginning in April 1933. The Nuremberg Race Laws of 1935 and the Austrian Anschluss in 1938 led to the dismissal of more than half of the Medical Faculty at the University of Vienna, and 65% of the non-academic Viennese physicians. Many Nobel laureates, scientists and other eminent scholars escaped from Germany to Britain or the United States, where

they were accepted by both colleagues and the authorities and enriched British and American academic life. However, the physicians and medical students who fled the Nazis were not so fortunate. Due to the fear of a flood of German medical practitioners and thousands of other refugees, the British Government refused to register them professionally. Indeed, the incarceration in the UK of refugees from Nazi persecution and their subsequent deportation to Australia was a morally and ethically egregious decision [10–14].

On 24 May 1940 Winston Churchill declared: “The British Cabinet was strongly in favour of removing all internees out of the United Kingdom.” The British Government eventually acknowledged their mistake and attempted to remedy the situation. In late 1940, the same Winston Churchill declared that the deportation was “a deplorable and regrettable mistake,” referring to the refugees who were deported to Australia and Canada [12]. However, by 1941–42, refugees could return to the UK. One of them was Dr. Emil Rauchman, originally from Prague, who survived the sinking of the *Arandora Star* on the way to Canada in 1940, but was soon deported to Australia. Two years later, on his way back to the UK, Rauchman was on the ship *Abosso*, which was hit by another U-boat.

Probably the most tragic story of physicians deported to Australia is that of Arthur Kassel [15]. Born in 1897 in Breslau, Germany (now Wrocław, Poland), Kassel served as a non-commissioned officer in German medical units during World War I. He studied at the University of Breslau and gained his medical licence in early 1923. He conducted a successful general practice in Breslau until 1933 when the Nazis came to power. Following the implementation of various Nazi laws limiting the rights of Jewish doctors, his general license was revoked in 1938 and he was permitted to treat Jewish patients only.

Arrested after Kristallnacht, he was sent to Buchenwald. He was later released on the condition that he emigrate, and left Hamburg for Cuba on 13 May 1939 on the S.S. *St. Louis*. His wife and two children remained in Breslau. On arrival in Cuba most passengers were refused permission to disembark. Negotiations with the Cuban President regarding a revised landing fee failed. Refused permission to dock in both Florida and Nova Scotia, the *St. Louis* returned to Europe. Eventually, the ship disembarked in Antwerp, and the majority of the refugees were arrested. It was then that the Fuehrer declared “No one wants the Jews.”

Dr. Arthur Kassel was one of the ‘lucky’ ones, being among the 288 passengers accepted by Britain, but he was not allowed to practise medicine. Kassel was living in London when he was interned on 16 May 1940 as an ‘alien’. He was arrested and put on the ship *Dunera* heading for Australia. On board were 2500 refugees, although the capacity of the vessel was for 1600 passengers, and the sanitary conditions were deplorable. Among them were survivors of a previous refugee transfer to

Canada, where 800 fell victim to German U-boats, but with 450 survivors.

The *Dunera* docked in Sydney on 6 September and Dr. Kassel was transferred to the refugee camp in Hay, near a country town in the outback of the state of New South Wales (NSW). The surroundings were arid, with an extremely hot summer accompanied by clouds of sand and mosquitoes, and a bitterly cold winter. The camp was surrounded by barbed wire. Dr. Kassel was later transferred to the Tatura Camp in the neighboring State of Victoria, where the climate was more agreeable for Europeans and the conditions were generally better. For physicians who graduated outside the Commonwealth, there were numerous obstacles to them being registered in Australia [10-14].

Nonetheless, Dr. Kassel applied for a wartime alien licence. He passed the compulsory examinations in July 1942 in Melbourne, and since he had the required English language skills received a recommendation for a licence. The licence allowed him to practise medicine in locations determined by medical coordination committees. He was sent to Hillston in the outback of NSW, where he was the only doctor servicing the small town and surrounding rural community. There, he practiced medicine and obstetrics and some minor surgery. He became involved in community medical issues and advised the Hospital Board [15]. Despite being befriended by the locals, he was lonely, plagued by memories of his wife and two children. He remained in Hillston when the war ended. It is highly likely that he was the one of the few 'foreigners' in the district and the only German Jew. On 10 May 1947, he took a train to Narrandera, a more distant country town, hundreds of miles from Sydney. Days later Dr. Kassel was found dead in the bush, with empty ampoules and a syringe containing drops of morphine. In his pocket were two letters of apology and gratitude to local friends, to the matron at the Hillston Hospital and the Hospital Board [15]. Another letter he carried was from a survivor, a nurse who had worked with his wife and had been on the same train to Auschwitz. It informed him of the death of his young son from dysentery in hospital, and of his sick and malnourished wife, also in hospital. She wrote: "But it should be a consolation for you to know that your wife was not gassed or slain, which was the fate of most of our friends from Breslau." There was no mention of his daughter who presumably died earlier, or of his mother, who also died at Auschwitz.

Dr. Kassel's death occurred 8 years to the day that he had left his family in Breslau. Initially buried in Narrandera, Arthur Kassel's odyssey ended in the Jewish Cemetery in Sydney, following a service at the Chevra Kadisha Funeral home. It is

possible that the Jewish community agreed with the coroner's view that what happened to his wife and child "preyed on the mind of the deceased so much so as to cause him to lose his reason" [16]. He may have been judged to be a victim of the Nazi persecution, making a Jewish burial possible, rather than one who committed self-harm. Similar reasoning was used later by Rabbi Artom, when allowing the burial of Holocaust survivor and author Primo Levi [17-19].

An extensive search was conducted and Kassel's grave was found in Sydney's Jewish cemetery. Since he had no surviving relatives, no one had visited his grave since 1947. It was cleaned of mould and was photographed, honoring the memory of one of the victim-doctors recalled by Elie Wiesel.

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"Never let your sense of morals get in the way of doing what's right"

Isaac Asimov (1920-1992), American author and professor of biochemistry at Boston University, best known for his works of science fiction and for his popular science books