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Editorial

Jewish Dermatologists in Nazi Germany

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With the development of medical specialties beginning in the 1860's, physicians could devote their time to the study of specific organ systems or surgical approaches. Although Jews had been given full rights in the new Germany by 1871, prejudice and other restrictions often precluded hospital and university appointments. Major specialties like internal medicine and surgery were

almost closed to Jews, as were obstetrics and gynecology. Dermatology with its heavy emphasis on sexually transmitted diseases evolved into a suitable domain for Jewish physicians almost by default. Even those Jews who converted to Christianity were not spared from discrimination. Paul Gerson Unna (1850-1929), a non-practicing Jew, established his own institute for these reasons to compensate for not achieving a university appointment. Numerous Jewish physicians served in the Kaiser's army during World War I; this was the first chance for Jews to become officers and many distinguished themselves on the battlefield.

Post World War I

After World War I, there was an increase in anti-Semitism in Germany, fanned by the radical political views of Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) and his National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazis) who managed to fan the already-present anti-Semitism and blame the Jews for the many economic and political woes of the country. When the Nazis took over power in January 1933 after doing well in the November 1932 elections and negotiating cleverly, it spelled difficult times for Jewish physicians and especially for the specialty of dermatology. At this time, Jews accounted for 1% of the general population, but 16% of all physicians and 25% of all dermatologists¹. The majority of the Jewish physicians were in the large Jewish centers of Berlin, Frankfurt am Main and Breslau. Other popular specialties for Jews were pediatrics and psychiatry.

The Nazi Regime

A series of administrative measures and laws gradually made life intolerable for Jews in Germany. Typical measures included removing them as civil servants, precluding university employment, and no longer allowing them access to publicly-funded insurance patients, drying up a major source of income. The Nuremberg Laws in 1935 defined who was a Jew; many who had converted and were well-assimilated were surprised to learn overnight that they were once again Jews and distinctly second-class citizens. Leaving Germany became increasingly more attractive. Of the 569 Jewish dermatologists registered in 1933, 276 (49%) successfully immigrated. The United States was the favorite site, receiving 107 new dermatologists; Palestine and the United Kingdom were other favored sites. There were 61 natural deaths, 13 suicides and

57 documented murders in concentration camps. The fate of 162 (28%) remains unknown, but many in this group also perished². In Austria, everything went more rapidly after the *Anschluss* (fusion of Austria with Germany) in 1938; Vienna had a majority of Jewish dermatologists; of 125 dermatologists in 1938, 45 are known to have successfully emigrated, while the fate of 32 is unknown³.

Two individuals survived the horrors without leaving their home towns; both had Aryan wives who greatly aided them. In Berlin, Erich Langer (1891-1957) emerged from hiding to become first Chairman of Dermatology at the newly-founded Free University⁴, while in Vienna, Robert Otto Stein (1880-1951) survived working at the Jewish hospital, and in 1951 was elected President of the Austrian Dermatological Society⁵.

Immigration to the United States

Two countercurrent trends in dermatology made it possible for this influx of just over 100 dermatologists to radically change the nature of the speciality in the USA. First, German dermatology was highly advanced with large university centers and active research programs. Probably the most prominent was Breslau with a long Jewish tradition. Both of the famous chairmen Albert Neisser (1855-1916) and Josef Jadassohn (1863-1936) were Jewish, as were many of their disciples. Frankfurt and Berlin also had strong traditions of excellence. At the same time, dermatology was struggling as a relatively new academic discipline in the USA; there were a few centers of excellence like the Mayo Clinic, University of Michigan, New York Skin and Cancer, and University of Pennsylvania, but most university programs were still based on the preceptorship model and there was little basic science research. There was room for improvement and several of the Jewish physicians provided a tremendous impetus.

One must distinguish between established physicians who made an immediate impact transferring German dermatologic expertise to the USA and younger ones who received their training in the USA and served more as an individual brain drain. The person who established the best-known program was Stephan Rothman (1894-1963)⁶ from an old Budapest Jewish family but himself a convert to Roman Catholicism. He had trained in photobiology in Giessen, Germany and then returned home. Rothman's scientific interests were broad, including the epidermal barrier, neurophysiology, and pharmacology. He found a job at the University of Chicago with the help of Samuel W. Becker (1894-1964) whom he had met at meetings and within 5 years had succeeded Becker as head of dermatology. He trained a long list of brilliant investigative dermatologists and in 1954 published his epic book *Physiology and Biochemistry of the Skin*⁷.

No other German dermatologist succeeded in establishing such a school, but many made individual contributions. Max Jessner (1887-1978) who had just succeeded Jadassohn as chairman in Breslau, moved to New York became a valued faculty member at Skin and Cancer. Hermann Pinkus (1905-1985), a practicing Lutheran, became chairman at Wayne State University in Detroit and a pioneer in dermatopathology. Of the bright young men who received their training in the USA, Rudolf Baer (1910-1997) at NYU made the biggest impact, succeeding Marion B. Sulzberger (1895-1983), training a huge cadre of national and international leaders and staying active in cutaneous immunological research. Many immigrants chose to go into private practice. Alfred Höllander (1899-1986), one of Unna's last pupils, practiced in Springfield, Massachusetts; Emil Meirowsky (1876-1960) wound up in Nashville, Tennessee and Stephan Epstein (1900-1973) in Marshfield Wisconsin. More complete lists are readily available⁸.

Despite the obvious benefits provided by these Jewish colleagues, little attention was paid to the circumstances surrounding their exit from Germany. One of us (WB) had Stephan Epstein for several dermatology lectures at the University of Wisconsin in 1968 and never once thought about how this brilliant man with the funny accent had wound up in Marshfield. In his memoirs in JAAD in 1981, Baer only gently alluded to the difficulties, writing ... "Heightening Nazi persecution in Germany and the deteriorating political situation in Europe... influenced my

decision at the age of 23 to leave Europe and emigrate (sic) to the United States."⁹ Holländer, writing two years later in *American Journal of Dermatopathology*, was the first to speak a bit more bluntly in "The tribulations of Jewish dermatologists under the Nazi regime."¹⁰ He discussed the repressive measures, and then recounted the fates of many of his friends and colleagues, writing primarily from memory and in a moving fashion. He also pointed out that Karl Herxheimer (1861-1942) and Abraham Buschke (1868-1943) were both murdered in the Theresienstadt concentration camp near Prague.

The Recording of History

Following Holländer's paper, the dam burst, and there was almost an over-abundance of reporting on the disastrous effects of Nazi medicine. The noted geneticist Benno Müller-Hill (1933-) paved the way in 1984 in Germany with *Tödliche Wissenschaft (Murderous Science)*^{11,12}. Dermatology was one of the first specialities to confront its Nazi past in detail. Four individuals were primarily responsible. Albrecht Scholz (1940-2013) from Dresden wrote a "Decline of German dermatovenereology under the Nazi regime" with Cathrin Schmidt in 1993 in *International Journal of Dermatology*¹ and followed this with numerous other valuable contributions^{2,13,14}. Karl Holubar (1936-2013) from Vienna wrote in the *Journal of Investigative Dermatology* in 1989 with Klaus Wolff (1935-) on the role European immigrants had on investigative dermatology in the USA¹⁵ and followed with many other contributions. A. Bernard Ackerman (1936-2008) provided an open forum in "his" journal, *American Journal of Dermatopathology* and then encouraged Wolfgang Weyers (1958-) to write the definitive text on the subject *Death of Medicine in Nazi Germany: Dermatology and Dermatopathology under the Swastika* in 1998¹⁶. The next year, Scholz and Sven Eppinger (1970-) published on the fate of German Jewish dermatologists in the *International Journal of Dermatology*²; two years later, Eppinger's doctoral thesis *Das Schicksal der jüdischen Dermatologen Deutschlands in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus* appeared¹⁷; herein, he tried to track down all the Jewish dermatologists registered in Germany in 1933. These pioneer efforts plus the wonders of the Internet today make it possible to learn an enormous amount about the fates of Jewish colleagues in Germany and Austria.

Conclusions

The risk is not lack of information but indifference. We all owe it to ourselves and our speciality to work diligently to insure that such a tragic chain events never repeats itself.

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