

The Fate of the Warsaw Ghetto Medical Faculty

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ABSTRACT: The Warsaw Ghetto, in existence from 1940 to 1943, was the largest ghetto in Nazi-occupied Europe. The 400,000–500,000 Jews incarcerated within its walls were deprived not only of food and medicine but also of education. Nonetheless, Jewish physicians served the community as befits their profession, and against all odds obtained permission to conduct a course on sanitary measures to combat epidemics, which they transformed into a veritable, clandestine medical school. This review follows the fate of the school faculty, with an emphasis on the achievements of the survivors.

IMAJ 2012; 14: 209–213

KEY WORDS: Warsaw Ghetto medical school, ghetto physicians, Holocaust survivors

“And you, Jewish physicians, you deserve some words of recognition”

Dr. Israel Milejkowski
(Chief Medical Officer, Warsaw Ghetto, 1942)

The Jewish presence in medicine on Polish land began in the tenth century. The Spanish-Jewish physician Ibrahim-Ibn-Jacob, who visited Poland in 963 AD, wrote the first history of the Polish Kingdom [1, pp. 3-5]. Over the next four hundred years several Jewish physicians are mentioned in Polish documents, but no exact records have been found. There is, however, evidence in the mid-15th century of four Jewish physicians in Warsaw, two in Lwow and two in Krakow. During the subsequent centuries, the number of Jewish physicians gradually increased, disproportionate to the number of Jews in the general population. Dr. A. Falstein, in his detailed history *The Martyrdom of Jewish Physicians in Poland*, stated: “Jews excelled in the practice of medicine, in research, in training, as translators, editors, as teachers and propagators of medical sciences” [1, p. 47]. After these initial successes, however, anti-Jewish regulations were enacted, so that although some Jewish physicians provided treatment to the Polish aristocracy and royalty, others were restricted exclusively to Jewish patients. Jewish medical education in the 19th and 20th centuries continued and the eventual contribution to Polish medicine was substantial, a collaboration that did not cease even after World War II.

One of the initial intentions of the invading Nazis in 1939 was to destroy the Polish intelligentsia and to use the Slavs as slave labor for the benefit of the Third Reich. Education of the “second class” Poles was considered counterproductive, and only elementary schools were permitted. Despite these harsh restrictions, an extensive underground education system developed in Poland, including a medical school that functioned from 1940 to 1945 [2]. It operated mainly in Warsaw, but also in Krakow, Vilnius, and later on, as the clandestine University of Western Territories, also in other cities.

For the “sub-human” Jews, the policy was more direct: extermination; hence, education was considered unnecessary and was not permitted. Jewish physicians in the conquered Polish lands had a slightly different fate compared to the general Jewish population. They were employed in the organization and provision of medical services in the ghettos and camps, until their own turn for extermination arrived. The listing in Falstein’s *The Martyrdom of Jewish Physicians in Poland* is probably incomplete, but it provides a biography of each of the 2800 Jewish physicians (out of 3500) known to have been murdered by the Nazis.

Eminent Jewish physicians were used by the occupying Germans in their heinous experimentation and in the preparation of vaccines [3]. Sometimes, in order to advance their own careers, Nazi physicians used the results of the Jewish physicians’ work in their publications [4].

THE UNDERGROUND MEDICAL SCHOOL

Despite the apparent futility of any schooling in the ghettos, education was secretly provided. Of particular importance was the permission granted by the authorities for ghetto physicians to conduct a “Sanitary Course for the Prevention of Infectious Diseases,” particularly for *Typhus exanthematicus*, which was highly feared by the Nazis. This course was clandestinely transformed into a medical school, with some 400 students at various levels. Teaching was mainly in basic sciences and clinical skills. The founders of the medical school were Emil Apfelbaum, Ludwik Stabholz and Juliusz Zweibaum, all of whom survived the war. They were strongly supported in this activity by the Chief Medical Officer of the *Judenrat**, Israel Milejkowski, who perished in 1943. Juliusz Zweibaum recalled:

* Jewish council, which functioned as the administrative body in the ghetto

“When the date of the opening of the courses was established, there was a strange mood in Leszno Street (hospital), both in the Collegium and on the streets” [5]. The specially adapted lecture hall was filled with students. A positive mood was clearly discerned. Whoever looked at those excited faces had to believe in life, and in the future. “I then understood that I had undertaken something that was simply essential for the lives of these young people” [5].

The establishment of this school (never discovered by the Nazis), its successes, and the students’ test results were all recorded. These records were smuggled out to sympathetic Polish colleagues or buried in metal containers, to be excavated after the war. Regrettably, this school was short-lived, lasting only from its founding in February 1941 until the liquidation of the ghetto in July 1942 [2,5,6].

Charles Roland published information on this heroic enterprise in 1989, which he obtained from interviews with survivors, and then provided more details in 1992 [7,8]. It would be difficult to add much to these descriptions; but now, some 20 years later, a follow-up on the fate of the faculty of the medical school seems desirable.

“Why did faculty and students undertake this hazardous and apparently futile exercise?” asks Roland [8, p. 251]. For students, it was the need for intellectual activity and the continuation of their studies, and the determination to defy Nazi barbarities, such as shooting children in hospital beds. For teachers, it was the desire to escape from reality, to replenish the medical staff of the ghetto, and to stand up against the cruelty of beatings and overwork. Conducted in cold and camouflaged rooms or hospital halls, mostly at night-time, using limited laboratory resources (microscopic, histological and serological), sadly with abundant opportunities for anatomic dissection, and with limited medical supplies (surgical, radiological, pharmaceutical) on the wards, the school lasted for 15 months. Very few students survived, but those who did graduated after the war and went on to practice their profession.

Due to the circumstances, the ghetto, a self-contained city, offered a unique opportunity for research on the results of hunger and the effects of nutritional deprivation. Between February and July 1942, several medical teams studied a syndrome that came to be known as the ‘hunger disease’. The research was carried out by 28 academics, previously teachers at various medical schools. The results were compiled and smuggled out to two Polish colleagues, Professors Witold and Tadeusz Orłowski, then buried in a metal container outside the ghetto. The documents were published in 1946 under the title *Choroba głodowa* (hunger disease), translated first into French and, in 1979, into English [9]. Each chapter in the English edition was analyzed by researchers from the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University, New York [9].

What was the fate of the faculty of the school? Roland listed a faculty of 25 teachers [7,8], to which we add two others who

were actively involved as lecturers or administrators. Our follow-up was difficult because of various spelling variations, different middle names, Jewish or non-Jewish first names (Jan or Jonas), or different spellings of last names (Borenstein, Borenstejn, Borenstajn). Nonetheless, we are confident of maximal correctness in our tracing of individuals. The few data still missing are indicated. Tremendous satisfaction came with the discovery of additional survivors among those who were thought to have perished.

FACULTY MEMBERS WHO PERISHED DURING THE WAR

The faculty members who perished are listed alphabetically in Table 1. The achievements of these valiant physicians need to be remembered.

FACULTY MEMBERS WHO SURVIVED THE WAR

The survivors from the ghetto medical school faculty were scattered around the world: some remained in Poland, some emigrated to North America (USA or Canada) or Israel. These survivors are listed alphabetically [10-12]:

- **Emil Apfelbaum**, b. 1890, a graduate of Warsaw University Medical School, was appointed physician at the university hospital in charge of infectious diseases. He was well known for his studies on liver diseases and anemia. In the ghetto medical school, he taught about cardiac diseases and he was also involved in the study of the “Pathophysiology of the Circulatory System,” a chapter in the book on the hunger disease [9]. He escaped from the ghetto and survived on the Aryan side of Warsaw, changing his German-sounding name to Kowalski. His post-war life was short, as he died, probably from a heart attack, in 1946 [11].
- **Henryk Brokman**, b. 1886, a graduate of the medical schools in Warsaw and Berlin, was a well-known pediatrician before the war. His numerous studies were on tuberculosis and children’s intestinal infections, which were also his main teaching topics in the ghetto. He survived the war and became a prominent academic in Poland, focusing on serology and immunology, first in the universities at Lodz and Gdansk and finally at Warsaw University. His legacy is his work as a teacher, training a large group of young pediatricians, a role he fulfilled until the end of his life in 1976 [13,14].
- **Henryk Fenigstein**, b. 1913, attended the Warsaw University Medical School. After a stint in the Polish Army, he worked at the Czyste Jewish Hospital in Warsaw as assistant pathologist. During his internment in the ghetto, he taught anatomy and pathology and was a member of the team studying the pathological anatomy of the hunger disease [9]. He was captured in 1943 and transferred to six concentration camps, including Auschwitz. Liberated from Dachau at the end of the war,

Table 1. Members of the Medical School Faculty who perished

Name, year of birth	Field of interest	Year and place of death	Reference
Amzel, Rosa (Roza), 1904	Bacteriology, serology	1943, Aryan Warsaw	Ghetto data [10] [1] p. 306, [12] vol. 2, p. 227
Borenstajn (Borenstein), Pawel B, date unknown	Biology, parasitology	1942, Treblinka	Ghetto data [10]
Beiles (Bejles), Isaj, 1901	Infectious diseases	1942, Treblinka	Ghetto data [10] [1] p. 312
Centnerszner, Myeczyslaw, 1874	Histology of nervous system	1944, Aryan Warsaw	[1] p. 326, [6] p. 190, [5] p. 818
Cunge, Jakub Myeczyslaw, 1908	Histology of the nervous system	1942, Treblinka	Ghetto data [10] [12] vol. 2, p. 93-4
Fejgin, Bronislawa, 1893	Infectious diseases, serology	1943, Warsaw Ghetto	[1] p. 339, [5] p. 182
Grosblat (Grojsblat), Mojzesz, 1894	Infectious diseases	1942, Warsaw Ghetto	[1] p. 362
Grynberg, Maria, 1903	Physiology, chemistry	1942, Treblinka	Ghetto data [10] [1] p. 364, [5] p. 250
Jenkiewicz, Lucjan (Ian), 1897	Hormones, vitamins	1942, Warsaw Ghetto	[1] p. 377
Karbowski, Mieczyslaw, 1896	Histology of the eye	1942, Treblinka	[1] p. 363
Kon (Kohn), Mieczyslaw (Moritz), 1884	Epidemics, social welfare	1942, Treblinka	[5] p. 236, [6] p. 236
Lachs (Laks), Hilary, 1881	Physics	1942, Treblinka?	Ghetto data [10]
Milejkowski, Israel, 1887	Dean of Faculty	1943, Treblinka (or suicide on the way)	Ghetto data [10] [1] p. 419
Przedborski, Jan (Jonas) Samuel, 1885	Pediatrics	1942, Auschwitz	Ghetto data [10] [1] p. 437, [5] p. 598
Stein, Jozeph, 1904	Pathology, tumors, TB	1943, Treblinka	[1] p. 63, [5] p. 791
Sterling, Stanislaw (Wladislaw), 1877	Neuropsychiatry	1943, Aryan Warsaw	[1] p. 462
Swieca, Solomon, 1914	Surgery, first aid	1943, on the way to Majdanek	Ghetto data [10] [1] p. 364, [12] vol. 3, p. 367
Senicer, Stanislaw, 1905	Surgery	1944, Aryan Warsaw	Ghetto data [10] [1] p. 467

he found work in Munich. He later immigrated to Toronto (Canada) where he practiced as a psychiatrist, a position he held until the end of his life in 1993 [7, p. 189] [15].

- **Ari Leo Heller**, b.1917, graduated from the Warsaw University Medical School. He worked together with his mother, Dr. Anna Braude-Heller (who headed the Bersohn and Bauman Children’s Hospital, where she perished). During the ghetto period he was involved in research on metabolic changes in the hunger disease [9]. He and his family survived on the Aryan side of Warsaw, contrary to the notification of his death [1, p. 368]. In the post-war period he initially worked in Lublin. *A Karta Informacyjna* nr. 3530, issued on 12.7.1946, placed him at the University of Wroclaw [Figure 1]. Dr. Heller immigrated to Sweden in 1948, where he became associate professor at the National Bacteriology (Karolinska) Laboratory in Stockholm, a position he held until his death in 2008 [7, p. 818] [16, pp. 19, 180].
- **Ludwik Hirszfeld**, b.1884, was perhaps the most renowned scientist before the war. Together with his wife Hanna, also a bacteriologist (who survived), and Drs. Amzel and Fejgin

(both of whom perished during the Holocaust), their studies on immunology were published in various European journals. Hirszfeld studied the anthropological characteristics of populations with the ABO blood type [17], he worked on the diagnosis of diphtheria [18], and he discovered an additional paratyphoid C (the bacterium *Hirszfeldi*) [19]. Despite having been baptized, he was interned in the ghetto and became one of the leaders of the underground medical school. His teaching was on infectious diseases. He escaped the ghetto just before it was liquidated, and with his wife hid in a country village on the Aryan side of Warsaw. After the war, he was soon reinstated to his academic posts. He taught in Lublin and later in Wroclaw until the end of his life in 1954 [20].

- **Henryk Lewenfisz (Wojnarowski)**, b.1889, studied medicine in France but graduated in Warsaw. He became an otolaryngologist and, in the ghetto, taught the anatomy and function of the ear. He escaped before liquidation and hid on the Aryan side of Warsaw. After the war he became head of the Department of Ear, Nose and Throat Surgery in Lodz. He developed several instruments (such as the pan-

Figure 1. Identity card of Ari Heller, 1946

KARTA INFORMACYJNA Nr. 3830
o osobach ocalałych

1. Nazwisko Heller ew. przybrane
2. Imiona deo
3. Wiek (lat około) 42 (daty wano podkreślić) urodzony(a) w Warszawie
4. Rodzice deceased; Anna Braude
5. Adres a) I.IX.39
b) późniejsze
c) ostatni znany Wrocław, Uniwersytet
6. Zawód Reżys. Wydz. dals.
7. Osoby o tym samym nazwisku, które przebywały w Polsce I.IX.1939 i ocalały

IMIĘ	NAZWISKO	Ew. przybrane	Stopień pokrewizstwa	Wiek	Zawód	Adres	Uwagi
KOMITET w <u>Warszawie</u> Data <u>12.12.46</u>							

Podpis urzędnika _____ Podpis informatora _____
L. M./M. S. Druk. St. Winiarski, Torzowa 2h

Figure 2. Lecturer certificate of Ludwik Stabholz, Warsaw Ghetto, 1941

3. X. 1941 12:56
Wydział Sanitarny
do walki z epidemiami
Nr. 1775 7. 2

Wierownictwo Kursu Przystosowania Sanitarnego do Walki z Epidemiami
ni świadczą, że
p. dr. L. Stabholz
jest wykładowcą Kursu.

Es wird hiermit bescheinigt, dass
dr. L. STABHOLZ
in Kurs der Sanitären-Ausbildung
in der Bekämpfung der Seuchekrankheiten als Vortragender tätig ist.

Kierownik Kursu _____ Das Leitung
Warszawa, dn. 10. XI. 1941 r.

Department of Health
Course for Sanitarian Training in Infectious Diseases
Warsaw

This is to confirm that
Dr L. Stabholz
Is active as a lecturer in the course for Sanitarian Training in the fight Against Infectious Diseases
The management

endoscope), a new approach to otitis in infancy, and a new surgical technique of fenestration and mastoidectomy. His clinical description of “foreign bodies in the bronchial tree” established this condition as the “Lewenfisz syndrome.” He became the editor of the *Polish Journal of Otolaryngology*, a position he held until his death in 1956 [21,22].

- **Henryk Makower**, b.1904, graduated from Jaggielonian University, Krakow, and practiced internal medicine in Lodz. During the ghetto period, he was head of Infectious Diseases in the children’s hospital. In the underground medical school he taught the effects of hormones and vitamins to students in their clinical years. He escaped and survived on the Aryan side of Warsaw and in the countryside. After the war he was an academic at the University of Wrocław and Director of Virology at the Academy of Sciences, holding both positions until he died in 1964 [23].
- **Ludwik Stabholz**, b.1911, graduated from the Warsaw University Medical School. He served briefly in the Polish Army, but soon after worked in the Czyste Jewish Hospital as a surgeon. Once interned in the ghetto, he introduced the idea of underground teaching, suggested by his Polish teacher Dr. Eduard Loth, and soon transformed it into a veritable medical school [Figure 2]. He taught anatomy until he was rescued by Loth and hidden on the Aryan side of Warsaw. After the war he served as an army surgeon, and while in Gdansk worked in the rehabilitation of war victims. He immigrated to Israel in 1950. There, he practiced as a surgeon and soon became Chairman of the Clinic for the Treatment of Spinal Disorders in Tel Aviv. Gradually, he began to concentrate on the development of non-surgical treatments for back problems. An Institute bearing his name was established in Tel Aviv in 1985 and later on also in Netanya. His main achievement was his invention of a brace, Vertetrac™, serving also as a portable traction device (manufactured by Meditrac), applied in the management of spinal disorders (disks, scoliosis, etc.). His textbook *Low Back Disorders* was first published in the United States in 1992. The brace/traction device became the topic of exhibitions and conferences [24,25]. He remained a clinician until an advanced age, and continued his work as a writer and teacher until his death in 2007.
- **Juliusz Zweibaum**, b. 1887, studied medicine in Bologna, Modena and Warsaw. He taught anatomy and embryology and was the author of numerous publications before the war. In 1925 he obtained a higher postgraduate medical degree, and in 1926 he introduced the first cell cultures in Poland. Once in the ghetto, he was one of the promoters of the medical school, teaching his specialty as well as histology. He survived by crossing to the Aryan side of Warsaw.

After the war he became one of the most prominent Polish histologists and the author of the textbook *Histologia* (1955), as well as Editor-in-Chief of *Folia Morphologica*. He was the Head of the Department of Histology at the Warsaw University Medical School for many years and a Member of the Academy of Sciences until his death in 1959 [26].

SUMMARY

The high achievements of most of the survivors of the underground medical school faculty lead one to speculate on the loss to Medicine due to the deaths of the many other physicians who perished. Compared to Nazi medicine, the medical school in the Warsaw Ghetto should be considered a bright spot on the darkest page in the history of medicine [27]. Winick paid tribute to these ghetto physicians [9, p. 43]:

These were not investigators who came in, did their tests and went home. These were physicians, dealing with the easiest disease to cure [starvation], and helpless to effect that cure. They cared for their patients in whatever manner they had available, and at the same time carefully noted their deterioration. Afflicted with the same disease, knowing that their time was limited, they persevered.

Their memory ought to be preserved: their motivation was survival, not only for themselves but for their fellow inmates in the ghetto. Milejkowski ended the statement with which we began this study thus, “You gave the murderers a bold answer with your work,” also incorporating a defiant quotation from the Latin poet Horace:...”I shall not wholly die” (“*Non omnis moriar*”) [9, p. 5].

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“You can’t do anything about the length of your life, but you can do something about its width and depth”

H.L. Mencken (1880-1956), American journalist, essayist, magazine editor, satirist, and acerbic critic of American life and culture

“To give pleasure to a single heart by a single kind act is better than a thousand head-bowings in prayer”

Saadi (c. 1200 AD), Persian poet of the Medieval period, recognized for the quality of his writings and for the depth of his social and moral thoughts