

Albert Uffenheimer: Pediatrician and Public Health Advocate before Nazi Rule

Andrea Autenrieth MD¹, Wilhelm Thal MD² and Joseph Rosenecker MD¹

¹Department of Pediatrics, Ludwig-Maximilians University, and ²Department of Pediatrics, University of Magdeburg, Magdeburg, Germany

ABSTRACT: Before World War II the number of Jewish physicians practicing pediatric medicine in Germany was very high, but soon after the National Socialists came to power the discrimination against Jewish physicians began. One of them, Dr. Albert Uffenheimer, serves as a moving example of this persecution. Dr. Uffenheimer was engaged in the fight against the high infant mortality and was instrumental in the creation of public health facilities for counselling parents. In 1925 he became Director of the Children's Hospital in Magdeburg and within a short time had improved the medical care of both infants and mothers. In April 1933, two months after the Nazi takeover, he was dismissed from his post at the Children's Hospital in Magdeburg and immigrated to the United States. Dr. Uffenheimer was a pioneer in the field of public health before such new concepts were recognized as important. As such he should be remembered as a founding father of social pediatrics in Germany.

IMAJ 2011; 13: 270–272

KEY WORDS: pediatrician, Germany, persecution, National Socialists

Before the Second World War, pediatric medicine in Germany had a high percentage of Jewish physicians. According to current research data, of the 1418 pediatricians registered in Germany in 1933, 54.5% were considered to be Jewish [1] and therefore subject to the racial laws as outlined in the Nuremberg Laws [2]. The First Supplementary Decree to the Nuremberg Laws [2] defined “Jewish” as having at least three Jewish grandparents. In no other medical discipline was there such a high percentage of Jewish physicians. In the early 1900s the Dr. von Haunersche Kinderspital in Munich was one of the most renowned children's hospitals in the German-speaking countries. It was here that Dr. Albert Uffenheimer began his academic career. In addition to his academic work, Dr. Uffenheimer was actively involved in developing and implementing concepts of preventive medicine (for example, nutritional counseling, preventive

checkups, and maternal and infant care) which at the time was called “Sozialhygiene” and today is known as public health. He was a strong advocate of breastfeeding; many mothers at the time could not breastfeed because of the financial necessity for them to return to work immediately after giving birth [3].

DR. UFFENHEIMER'S PEDIATRIC CAREER

Albert Uffenheimer was born in 1876 in Fürth, Germany. After graduating from high school in Nuremberg he studied medicine in Würzburg, Munich and Berlin. He received his medical license in Munich in 1899; the title of his thesis was “Histology of benign papillary ovary tumors.” He served his medical internship at the Pathologic Institute of the Urban Hospital in Berlin [4]. In addition to his clinical work, Dr. Uffenheimer was interested in scientific research, particularly the causes of enteritis in infants. In 1900 he was the first to successfully cultivate *Bacillus aerophilus agilis*, a pathogen causing “Puerperalfieber” [5]. From October 1903 to May 1905, Dr. Uffenheimer worked as a resident in the pediatrics department at the Dr. von Haunersche Kinderspital where he studied diseases of the gastrointestinal tract, which were suspected of causing failure to thrive in infants. In 1910 he became the first head of the clinical laboratories at the Dr. von Haunersche Kinderspital.

In addition to his academic career, Dr. Uffenheimer was committed to what today would be called social pediatrics or public health. A main focus of his work in this field involved combating the high infant mortality in Germany. In his book *Soziale Säuglings- und Jugendfürsorge* published in 1910, Dr. Uffenheimer analyzed the reasons for the high infant mortality rate in Germany and rejected the argument espoused by followers of social Darwinism that a high infant mortality rate would strengthen the state through the concept of survival of the fittest. He concluded that the high infant mortality in Germany was primarily due to mothers not breastfeeding their infants because they had to return to work soon after giving birth.

This resulted in infants being fed modified cow's milk, which did not meet their nutritional needs.



Albert Uffenheimer,
about 1930

After serving as a doctor in the army during World War I, Dr. Uffenheimer opened his own medical practice in Munich. In 1925 he was appointed to the position of Director of the Children's Hospital in Magdeburg. Here again he was active in public health counseling and modernized the hospital within a short time. In furtherance of his continuing efforts to reduce high infant mortality rates, as well as improve the overall well-being of infants, he introduced the official registration of newborns at the city's social welfare office [12]. Registered mothers would receive credit vouchers for food. Dr. Uffenheimer concurrently advocated a program to support breastfeeding by providing six months financial support to those mothers who showed up for regular checkups and who breastfed their infants.

DR. UFFENHEIMER, VICTIM OF NAZI PERSECUTION

In April 1933, two months after the Nazi takeover, Dr. Uffenheimer was dismissed from his post at the Children's Hospital in Magdeburg under the new racial laws governing Jews that had been enacted by the Nazis. Dr. Uffenheimer moved with his family to Kattenhorn am Bodensee, a small town in southern Germany close to the Swiss border where, as recounted by his daughter after the war, the family hoped to wait out the Nazi terror. Here he experienced all the humiliating regulations that the National Socialistic government had enacted against its Jewish citizens. Dr. Uffenheimer remained with his family in Kattenhorn until August 1938 when he fled to London, England [11] leaving his family behind in Germany. While attempting to arrange for the emigration of his family to England, Dr. Uffenheimer was informed by the Nazi authorities that to get approval for their emigration he would have to transfer all of his assets in his Swiss bank to a Nazi-controlled bank in Germany. A Certified Award of the Claims Resolution Tribunal [16], based upon the claim of Uffenheimer's granddaughter, shows that Dr. Uffenheimer had possessed a bank account at the Zurich branch of Credit Suisse. Credit Suisse records show that in December 1938 Dr. Uffenheimer contacted the bank from London and instructed it to transfer all the assets in his account to a branch of the Deutsche Bank in Constanze, Germany. Credit Suisse complied with the request, thus transferring ownership of Dr. Uffenheimer's life savings to the Nazi government. In February 1940 the family moved to Albany, New York, where Dr. Uffenheimer gave lectures at Siena Catholic College on various health issues as well as on psychosocial problems of adolescents. Dr. Uffenheimer died in April 1941 of a heart attack at the age of 64 [11].

AFTER THE WAR

The Certified Award of the Claims Resolution Tribunal shows that in May 1949 Dr. Uffenheimer's widow wrote a letter to Credit Suisse explaining that her husband had been forced by the German authorities to transfer his assets deposited at Credit Suisse to the Deutsche Bank. An internal memorandum of Credit

Suisse at that time concluded that "from this correspondence it follows that Professor Uffenheimer was forced by the German authorities to hand over his assets deposited with us to the Deutsche Bank." The memorandum further states that "for these reasons, we are careful about providing information and withhold information. If necessary, we should rely on the fact that, since then, more than ten years have passed, so that we no longer today are obligated to preserve this correspondence" [16]. The letter that was then sent to the widow states: "In response to your query of 11 May 1949, we must unfortunately inform you that, pursuant to Swiss legal requirements regarding banking secrecy, we cannot provide information about activities that pertain to the business dealings of our customers during their lifetime, not even to their heirs. In addition, we draw your attention to the fact that the activities referred to in your letter happened more than ten years ago, while we are only obligated to preserve our correspondence for ten years" [16]. Due to this withholding of information Dr. Uffenheimer's widow could not make demands against the postwar German government and therefore received no restitution. It took another 54 years until the Claims Resolution Tribunal took over the claim on behalf of the family and ruled that "if the Swiss banks had jointly agreed to refuse to cooperate with the Nazis in the case of such coerced transfers, the Nazis would have had no motivation for torturing victims of Nazi persecution to obtain their consent to the confiscation of their financial resources in Switzerland to use against the Allies." Therefore, the Tribunal concluded that in 1949 Credit Suisse intentionally misled the account owner's widow who was seeking information about the asset transfer to the Nazi authorities in order to make a compensation claim against Germany. Credit Suisse was held accountable to the account owner's widow for the loss of her husband's deposits. Finally in 2003, the heirs of Dr. Albert Uffenheimer did receive some compensation for the lost financial assets [16]. In the 1990s the city of Magdeburg named a public square the "Dr. Uffenheimer Platz" in honor of his contributions to the medical care of the children of Magdeburg.

EPILOGUE

This tragic story of a dedicated pediatrician is but one of many examples of Jews during the Nazi regime. Their fates must not be forgotten.

Corresponding author:

Dr. J. Rosenecker

Dept. of Pediatrics, University of Munich, Lindwurmstr. 4, D-80337 Munich, Germany

Phone: (49-89) 5160-7711

Fax: (49-89) 5160-7846

email: Joseph.Rosenecker@med.uni-muenchen.de

References

1. Seidler E. *Jüdische Kinderärzte 1933-1945*. Freiburg: Karger Publishers, 2007. Published in German with a partial English translation.
2. Reichsgesetzblatt 1935 I, S. 1146.

3. Uffenheimer A. Soziale Säuglings- und Jugendfürsorge. Munich: Quelle & Meyer, 1910.
4. Personalakte Albert Uffenheimer E-II-3387. Universitätsarchiv München.
5. Uffenheimer A. Ein neuer gaserregender Bacillus. 1907.
6. Thal W. Albert Uffenheimer 1876-1941. *Ärzteblatt Sachsen-Anhalt* 1994; 12: 72-6.
7. Uffenheimer A. Ueber das Verhalten der Tuberkelbacillen an der Eingangspforte der Infektion. *Berliner klinische Wochenschrift* 1906: 14.
8. Uffenheimer A. Ein neues Symptom bei latenter (und manifester) Tetanie des Kindesalters -das Tetaniegesicht. Verhandlungen der 22. Versammlung der Gesellschaft für Kinderheilkunde in Meran, Wiesbaden: Verlag von Bergmann JF, 1906.
9. Uffenheimer A. Der Nachweis des Toxins in dem Blute des Diphtheriekranken. *Münchener medizinische Wochenschrift* 1906: 33.
10. Uffenheimer A. Neue Versuche über den Nachweis des Toxins in dem Blute des Diphtheriekranken. *Münchener medizinische Wochenschrift* 1907: 52.
11. Thal W. Uffenheimer, Albert, Prof. Dr. med. habil. In: Heinrich G, Schandera G (ed) Magdeburger Biographisches Lexikon. Magdeburg: Scriptorum, 2002.
12. Thal W. Zur Entwicklung der Kinderheilkunde in Magdeburg. In: Magdeburger Blätter. Jahresschrift für Heimat- und Kulturgeschichte in Sachsen-Anhalt. Magdeburg: Pädagogische Hochschule, 1991: 77-90.
13. Wittkowski R. Prof. Dr. Uffenheimer, Direktor der Kinderklinik Magdeburg, 1925.1933. Ein Lebensbild: Diplomarbeit, Universität Magdeburg, 1980.
14. Uffenheimer A. Warum kommen die Kinder in der Schule nicht vorwärts? Munich: Gmelin, 1907.
15. Uffenheimer A. Die Bettnässer-Krankheit im Kindes- und Jugendalter. Olten: Walter, 1937.
16. Claims Resolution Tribunal (approved 19 November 2003). Accounts of Prof. Dr. Albert Uffenheimer, Case No. CV96-4849.