

WHEN THE TEST TUBE WAS MIGHTIER THAN THE GUN: A POLISH DOCTOR OUT-FRIGHTENS THE NAZIS

To the Editor:

In German-occupied Poland in 1942, Dr. Eugene (Eugeniusz Sławomir) Lazowski was a 29 year old doctor. After being incarcerated for 3 years in a POW camp he was released, and with a former co-student, Dr. Stanislaw Matulewicz, started working for the Polish Red Cross in Rozwadow, a small village in southeastern Poland. As a patriot, Lazowski wanted to fight and joined the underground; as a doctor, he was reluctant to use firearms and found a way to use medical science to help his fellow villagers [1,2].

One of the most feared diseases of the war (and most wars in the past) was typhus. This disease is caused by *Rickettsia prowazekii* and is spread by lice. Since its prevalence increases in the setting of unsanitary conditions, as occurs in wartime, typhus is capable of rapidly decimating populations – including occupying troops. The German army was terrified of the disease, especially since its rarity in Germany meant that the troops lacked natural immunity.

The Weil-Felix test is a serological agglutination test for the diagnosis of rickettsial infections. First described in 1916, it is based on the cross-reactivity of *Rickettsia* with an antigen derived from *Proteus vulgaris* – OX 19 Ag. Although the tests in use today are more sensitive, the Weil-Felix test is still used in some developing countries because of its low cost [3]. A healthy person injected with a “vaccine” of the killed bacteria would test positive for epidemic typhus.

The doctors decided to inject patients who presented with any febrile illness with *Proteus vulgaris* and sent samples of the patients’ blood to German-controlled laboratories. As expected, every single one was diagnosed with typhus. To avoid drawing attention to themselves they referred some of the patients they injected to other doctors in the area; and as more cases

were diagnosed the Germans declared a quarantine on the area and kept away for fear of the disease spreading to their troops. Eventually, 8000 people in 12 towns were quarantined and saved from deportation to labor camps.

By late 1943 the Germans were beginning to be suspicious because the mortality rate from the supposedly dreaded disease was low. The local gestapo chief notified the health authorities and an investigative commission (with two carloads of soldiers) was dispatched. Lazowski gathered the eldest and sickest-looking people in the village who had been injected with the bacterium and had them wait in filthy huts; he then invited members of the commission to come and examine them, adding that they should be careful because Poles are dirty and bug-ridden. At the same time he had the town throw a lavish party for the committee. The senior members of the commission were enjoying the party too much to leave; they were also afraid of the disease. So they sent two younger members who conducted a cursory examination, took samples from two patients and left in a hurry. The tests returned with a positive result. Lazowski did not hear from the Germans again.

Lazowski’s fake epidemic came too late for the Jews of Rozwadow, the town in which he practiced. The Jews there were rounded up and deported to labor and death camps before the quarantine was declared. However, he did manage to help them before they were deported. He lived next to the Jewish ghetto in Rozwadow, his back fence bordering the neighborhood. He knew that the Jews needed medical

attention and he organized a system with them. Since helping any Jewish person was punishable by death, he had to be secretive and careful. If a Jew needed his help, he or she was to hang a white piece of cloth on Lazowski’s back fence and he would come there and attend to them in the safety of the night. Every night a white

cloth would fly and lines would form. The Jews trusted him. He helped anyone who needed help, creating a system of faking his medicinal inventory to conceal this clandestine activity.

The German authorities demanded a careful accounting of all the drugs and supplies that Lazowski used, but here again he managed to fool them. Since his office was close to the town’s railroad station, he was often called upon to treat patients who were simply traveling through. In his official reports, Lazowski would overstate the amount of drugs and supplies he used to treat these traveling patients, knowing the Germans would have a difficult time finding him out.

Dr. Lazowski followed in his parents’ footsteps. Later named “Righteous Gentiles,” his parents had hidden two Jewish families in their home.

Lazowski moved to the United States in 1958 and settled in Chicago. He practiced as a pediatrician and was a professor at the University of Illinois Chicago Medical Center. In the 1970s, he published the medical details of his hoax in a journal, but did not divulge the full story until the 1990s when he and his old friend and colleague Dr. Stanislaw Matulewicz published a book entitled *The Private War*, which became a bestseller in Poland. Lazowski returned to his hometown in Poland for the first time in 2000 to participate in a wartime reunion. He received a hero’s welcome. “I felt very uncomfortable,” he said. “I was just trying to do something for my people. My profession is to save lives and prevent death. I was fighting for life.”

Yoav Goor MD

Macabi Health Care Services, Tel Aviv, Israel
[goorfam@netvision.net.il]

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Dr. Eugene Lazowski

