

Leo Eitinger MD: Tribute to a Holocaust Survivor, Humane Physician and Friend of Mankind

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ABSTRACT: Born in Czechoslovakia, psychiatrist Leo Eitinger (1912-1996) became internationally recognized for research on his fellow concentration camp inmates. He graduated as an MD in 1937, but being Jewish was prohibited from practicing as a doctor. When the Nazis occupied the area he was forced to flee to Norway, where in 1940 he was again deprived of his right to practice medicine. In 1942 he was arrested and deported to Auschwitz. There, as a physician inmate, he was able to help and in many cases save his fellow prisoners, not only with his medical skills but by falsifying prisoners' documents and hiding them from their Nazi captors. One of his patients was Elie Wiesel. Eitinger survived the camps but was forced to join a "death march." After the war he resumed medical practice in Norway, specializing in psychiatry. With his personal experience and knowledge of the suffering of camp survivors, he dedicated his life to studying the psychological effects of traumatic stress in different groups. Eitinger's academic contributions were crucial in the development of this area of research – namely, the effects of excessive stress, laying the foundations for the definition of post-traumatic stress disorder and the post-concentration camp syndrome, thus facilitating recognition of the medical and psychological post-war conditions of the survivors and their resultant disability pensions.

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In January 1945 Elie Wiesel was 16 years old and imprisoned in the Buna Concentration Camp when his right foot began to swell due to frostbite. His life depended on his leg being treated since inability to work in a Nazi labor camp could mean imminent death. Dr. Leo Eitinger, a Jewish prisoner assigned to one of the camp medical blocks, examined Elie's leg and knew that surgery was critical. While he could not operate himself, he promised the young patient that he would be present at the procedure [1]. More than a decade later, in his book *Night*, Elie Wiesel described the life-saving treatment [2]:

The doctor, a great Jewish doctor, a prisoner like ourselves, was quite definite: I must have an operation. If we waited, the toes – and perhaps the whole leg – would have to be amputated. This was the last straw! But I had no choice... The doctor came to tell me that the operation would be the next day. "Don't be afraid," he added. "Everything will be alright." At ten o'clock in the morning they took me into the operating room. My "doctor" was there. I took comfort from this. I felt that nothing serious could happen to me while he was there. There was balm in every word he spoke and every glance he gave me held a message of hope...

Throughout the operation, Dr. Eitinger assisted his colleague and held the young patient's hand – at the time the only "anesthetic" available in Auschwitz [3]. Professor Eitinger did not remember this incident or the patient. Decades later he was invited to Elie Wiesel's home after Wiesel had recognized him when he visited Oslo. This was the start of a lifelong friendship [4].

Leo Eitinger was born in 1912 in Brno, Moravia, in what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was the youngest of six children of a religious Jewish family. He studied philosophy and medicine, graduating from Masaryk University in the Moravian capital of Brno in 1937. While still a student, he was active in the League for Human Rights, an organization that became a relief agency for persecuted Jews throughout Western Europe. On completing his medical studies in 1937, Eitinger was conscripted into the Czechoslovakian army. As a young army doctor he participated in the humanitarian relief efforts of *Nansenhjelpn* (Nansen Relief, an international humanitarian organization established by Odd Nansen, a Norwegian architect and the son of Nobel Prize laureate and humanist Fridtjof Nansen [5]) to ensure that groups of Jewish children travel safely to Norway. On the day of the Slovakian secession to the Nazi government in 1939, Eitinger was ordered out of Slovakia and discharged from the army because he was Jewish. When war broke out he fled Prague and returned to his hometown Brno. In the summer of 1939 he received his long-awaited Norwegian visa and with his young nephew traveled by train to Norway. Upon arrival in Oslo they were assisted by members of the Nansen Relief. Initially, Dr. Eitinger worked to aid refu-

gee children who were still awaiting placement in Norwegian homes. While learning the new language the young doctor worked as an unpaid volunteer at an Oslo hospital, and later in April 1940 after receiving a work permit was appointed to a position at Ronvik Hospital in Bodo, Norway's northernmost psychiatric hospital. Just prior to his departure for Bodo, the Nazis invaded Oslo. The small Jewish Norwegian community was at risk. Eitinger had to flee Oslo, and after several fraught weeks of constantly having to hide from the Nazis he eventually boarded a steamer set for Bodo. For the first time since graduating from medical school he was able to practice his profession openly. With his interest in human behavior and having already studied philosophy and psychology, he was well suited to this appointment. He had learned Norwegian and was fluent in English, French and German, which would prove to be life-saving.

In Bodo he worked hard, treated many patients and even published research on the surgical treatment of hyperparathyroidism. But once again, after a few months, he was relieved of his position as Jews were now forbidden to practice medicine. He joined friends in a small Norwegian village, Nesjestranda, where there were no doctors and he provided the villagers with medical and public health care. He later revealed that this period in his professional life was immensely gratifying.

By early 1942, the Nazi pressure in Norway had escalated and the fate of the "Nansen children," who Dr. Eitinger had helped, was in jeopardy. While traveling to another town to help one of these young refugees, he was recognized as "looking different" and was arrested, interrogated and imprisoned in several Gestapo prisons in Norway. Because he was a physician, he was singled out for harsh treatment and was often beaten. He fell ill with scarlet fever but survived. Despite his bad health and the horrendous conditions in the prisons, Eitinger continued to care for his fellow prisoners and to teach them about health and hygiene. In February 1943, together with 158 Norwegian Jews, he was transported by ship and then by train, in unspeakable conditions, to the Buna-Monowitz section of Auschwitz. On arrival, he was among those who were selected to survive and was sent to work in the *Revier*, the hospital ward. However, his assignment there bore no relation to his medical qualifications. Rather, the Nazis required prisoners who knew German and could type. The young doctor, who possessed these skills, got the job which he later called his "life's darkest work." Assigned to type index cards that recorded the cause of death of every prisoner in the camp, he was ordered to keep the wording according to the Nazi standard and to falsify the actual cause of death. For example, there were to be no notations of external violence; every patient who died was reported to have been well nourished and to have received good care [1]. Patients admitted to the *Revier* were expected to be "fit" and "cured" within fourteen days in order to return to work.

Those who were examined and found to be "not fit" were sent to the gas chambers or given lethal intracardiac injections [6]. Eitinger was horrified but was cautioned by his fellow prisoners never to reveal his feelings.

The *Revier* was located close to the infamous Block 10, the site of heinous experiments performed by the Nazi doctors. Block 10 was shielded from prying eyes: the windows were covered with whitewash and entry was forbidden to those without official duties. But Eitinger learned of the inhuman experiments from a fellow Czech, an artist, who had been summoned to paint the prisoners being experimented on. Eitinger asked to be transferred and his request was granted. He was sent to another small "hospital" in another sub-camp at Auschwitz where conditions were slightly better [1]. Here his task was to keep prisoners healthy enough for labor in the German war factories. Under extremely dire conditions, Dr. Eitinger and his colleague Dr. Sperber, a Czech surgeon, dealt with the illnesses and injuries of hundreds of prisoners every day. They had only a sparse supply of equipment, medicine and bandages – but were supplied with a typewriter: for the Nazis, records were always of paramount importance. These two prisoner doctors were left to care for their patients as best they could in those dismal circumstances and they took many risks in order to do so. In Auschwitz, German industrial companies, such as IG Farben, paid the SS three marks a day for each slave laborer, but not if the prisoner was hospitalized for more than fourteen days. Aware of this, Dr. Eitinger and the other prisoner doctors bypassed the rule by signing a patient out and then readmitting him for an additional fourteen days, often repeating the process. They also falsified data cards and at times hid patients. In this way they saved the lives of many. It was in this hospital that Dr. Eitinger and his colleague treated Elie Wiesel.

In the winter of 1944, with the Russian Army approaching, the camp was evacuated and the ten thousand prisoners were forced out on foot through the snow-covered countryside on the infamous Death March. These marches led to the deaths of thousands, from Auschwitz as well as from other concentration camps across Europe. In January 1945, Eitinger was in the last group to follow the marching prisoners out of the camp. Although weak himself, he, together with fellow doctors, attempted to treat the cuts, bruises and frostbite that afflicted virtually all the prisoners as best they could without any medication or bandages.

Eitinger was then sent by train to Buchenwald concentration camp. After it was declared that all the Jewish prisoners in Buchenwald were to be killed, he forged a death certificate for himself and took the name and number of a Czech prisoner who had died the previous night. The prisoner Leo Eitinger was listed as having died on the night of 6 April 1945. A few days later the Americans liberated the camp. Of the 762 Norwegian Jews deported to German concentration camps, only 23 survived. Leo Eitinger was one of them.

After liberation, Eitinger continued to work in a camp hospital with equipment and medications provided by the Americans. Once again he could practice as a physician, this time with the resources to adequately treat his fellow survivors. Soon after the war, he returned to his former position in Bodo, Norway where he worked for three years. His true identity had been obliterated in Buchenwald: the issuance of a false death certificate had led the remains of his family, friends and close contacts from his earlier years in Czechoslovakia who had survived to believe that he was dead. One of his friends from his youth movement days, Lisl Kohn, discovered that he had survived and wrote to him. He thus regained his former identity and in 1946 they were married. In 1950 he took a position at the University Psychiatry Clinic in Oslo, where he became a Professor and head of the department in 1966. He remained in this position until his retirement in 1983 [1].

Throughout his life, Dr. Eitinger dedicated his time and efforts to the study of human suffering, in particular victimology and disaster psychiatry. His firsthand experience and knowledge of the tragic events in the camps formed the basis for his profession as a psychiatrist. He wrote that working with the refugee-survivors and trying to understand them was effective personal therapy for him, also a survivor.

Prof. Eitinger was among the first researchers to focus on the victim and not the aggressor. His 1958 doctoral thesis was a study of the mental disorders in refugees from Norway, displaced persons from Germany, and the Russian, Polish and Yugoslav prisoners of war [1]. It was his publication on the "Concentration Camp Syndrome" in 1964 that earned him wide international renown [7]. Dr. Eitinger and his colleagues examined former camp inmates from Norway and Israel and found that the concentration camp syndrome correlated with the severity and duration of the concentration camp experiences and was not related to the patient's premorbid personality [8]. His scientific objectivity, despite his own grueling experience, contributed to the credibility of his results at a time when it was nearly axiomatic that in order to develop a chronic psychiatric disorder some form of personal premorbid vulnerability had to be present. This was a major breakthrough in the understanding of post-disaster morbidity and contributed greatly to defining post-traumatic stress syndromes. These diagnoses helped war victims to gain recognition for their war-related illnesses and simplified the procedures for awarding war disability pensions [9]. When the World Health Organization published its new classification of mental disorders in 1992 (ICD-10), they included a category called "Enduring personality change after catastrophic experience," a diagnostic concept based on the work of Eitinger [10]. In 1980 together with Lars Weisaeth, he documented the "Stockholm syndrome" [11].

Dr. Eitinger's work went far beyond medical science. He also engaged in public debate on a variety of subjects including human rights, racism and the fate of minorities. In 1986 the Lisl and Leo Eitinger Human Rights Prize, funded by the University of Oslo, was established in their honor and is awarded for accomplishments in humanitarian endeavors or psychiatric research. The first award went to Eli Wiesel. In 2001, the prize was jointly awarded to the Israeli Magen David Adom (MDA) and the Palestinian Red Crescent (PRCS) [12]. As professor emeritus, Dr. Leo Eitinger continued researching, writing and actively fighting racism and anti-Semitism [7]. In 1992, at a conference in Florida for mental health professionals on Care of the Aging Holocaust Survivors, Dr. Eitinger said [4]:

Survivors of Nazi concentration camps have their share of problems which are difficult to bear and difficult to solve. With the passage of time health deteriorates, strength is reduced, capacities dwindle. The traumatic experiences return therefore in reinforced strength. Survivors are of course in need of help for their feeling of having lost their anchorage in the world and in humanity, their feeling that nobody cares if they live or not. If we manage to reverse this tragic evolution by establishing at least traces of real inter-human relationship and reduce the deep existential isolation, then we have made an important step – perhaps not bigger than the first step on the moon, but surely more important for a fellow human being, more important because it reduces the total sum of suffering in this world – and this is – so I believe – the most important task and activity for all of us.

In 1979 he spent a sabbatical year at the Ray D. Wolfe Centre for the Study of Psychological Stress at the University of Haifa where, together with Israeli colleague Miriam Riecke, he compiled an extensive bibliography on the works that had been written on psychological effects on the survivors of concentration camps. In the foreword to the updated version of this book in 1997 Elie Wiesel wrote [4]:

I know that as far as Eitinger is concerned, I am not objective. That is true. Nor do I wish to be...Dare I recall our common past? We were together in Auschwitz and in Buchenwald where the despair of the living was equaled by the solitude of the dying. A quarter of a century we met again in Oslo. Since then, the contact between us has never been interrupted... Professor Leo Eitinger is an example for his medical colleagues and an inspiration for his students and readers. But he is far more: he represents a conscience that remains eternally awake, attempting to know and understand all about the life and the survival of men and women who saw death and evil at work, enduring their cruelty without

succumbing to it. Was it an accident that he was among the very first to involve himself with the psychology, with the psychopathology of survivors? And to defend and treat all victims of torture anywhere? In all matters of human suffering, he remains a discoverer and a guide.

Dr. Leo Eitinger died in 1996.

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Capsule

Dlk1 promotes a fast motor neuron biophysical signature required for peak force execution

Motor neurons, which relay neural commands to drive skeletal muscle movements, encompass types ranging from “slow” to “fast,” whose biophysical properties govern the timing, gradation, and amplitude of muscle force. Muller et al. identify the non-canonical *Notch* ligand Delta-like homolog 1 (Dlk1) as a determinant of motor neuron functional diversification. Dlk1, expressed by ~30% of motor neurons, is necessary and sufficient to promote a fast biophysical signature in the mouse and chick. Dlk1 suppresses Notch signaling and activates

expression of the K⁺ channel subunit Kcng4 to modulate delayed-rectifier currents. Dlk1 inactivation comprehensively shifts motor neurons toward slow biophysical and transcriptome signatures, while abolishing peak force outputs. Our findings provide insights into the development of motor neuron functional diversity and its contribution to the execution of movements.

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Eitan Israeli

Capsule

Complement Is activated by IgG hexamers assembled at the cell surface

Complement activation by antibodies bound to pathogens, tumors, and self-antigens is a critical feature of natural immune defense, a number of disease processes, and immunotherapies. How antibodies activate the complement cascade, however, is poorly understood. Diebolder et al. found that specific non-covalent interactions between Fc segments of immunoglobulin G (IgG) antibodies resulted in the formation of ordered antibody hexamers after antigen binding on cells. These hexamers recruited and activated C1, the first

component of complement, thereby triggering the complement cascade. The interactions between neighboring Fc segments could be manipulated to block, reconstitute, and enhance complement activation and killing of target cells, using all four human IgG subclasses. The authors offer a general model for understanding antibody-mediated complement activation and the design of antibody therapeutics with enhanced efficacy.

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Eitan Israeli

“Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot nothing is going to get better, it’s not”

Dr. Seuss (1904-1991), American writer and cartoonist, most widely known for his children’s books. His books, characterized by imaginative characters, rhyme and meter, include *One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish*, *Green Eggs and Ham*, *The Cat in the Hat*, *The Lorax*, *Hop on Pop*, *Horton Hatches the Egg*, *Horton Hears a Who*, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, and many more