

MEDICINE IN THE WARSAW AND TEREZIN GHETTOS

Lecture by M. Nevins in Jewish Roots series, The Learning Collaborative, 10/20/18

INTRODUCTION

Although by 1995, I'd written a fair amount about Jewish medical history, the Holocaust was a subject I found to be too daunting. It was so vast and so much already has been written and said. But that year, during my first visit to Dabrowa, I finally found an entry to this subject when on the drive back to Warsaw we stopped at Treblinka, the infamous death camp where nearly 800,000 Jews were incinerated upon arrival. Both on that visit, and again on two later ones, I was struck by the incongruity of the place - very different from Auschwitz which struck me as more like a museum of death.

There were hardly any other visitors in sight, the setting was serene, nature resplendent, sun filtered through the pine trees and song birds chirped. We trekked along a forest path that was marked by stone simulated railroad tracks until the trail opened onto a meadow. As we walked across the grass we didn't appreciate that we were stepping on human ash, nor were we aware that after the war ended, villagers had scavenged this same ground digging for gold teeth - some cynics called Treblinka "the Polish Colorado" because of the "gold rush" there for buried teeth.

As we entered the meadow, well off in the distance a stone tower came into view. It was surrounded by large jagged rocks - I later learned that there were some 17,000 in all! They resembled broken gravestones and when we finally reached them, we saw that engraved on each was the name of a destroyed Jewish *community*. Only one stone memorialized an individual. It read: *Janusz Korczak* (followed in smaller letters) *Henryk Goldszmit and the Children*. I'm ashamed to admit that before then I'd never heard of this man who was a famous pediatrician. (Have you?)

But, as I've said, that experience turned out to be my entry into studying the medical history of the Holocaust. Today I'll be discussing Dr. Korczak and other physicians in the Warsaw and Terezin Ghettos but first I should review several events that led to Treblinka and other camps.

WORLD WAR II

After coming to power in 1933, Nazi Germany was determined to be *judenrein* - free of Jews. About a quarter of German Jews managed to leave but restrictive immigration laws in the United States and elsewhere prevented the majority from finding safe haven. In July 1938 FDR had arranged a conference of thirty-two countries in Evian - a French resort. The purpose was to discuss what to do about the so-called "Jewish Question." It was hoped that each nation would accept some refugees but although all expressed sympathy only one volunteered - the Dominican Republic in exchange for huge amounts of money.

On September 1, 1939, just one week after Germany signed a non-aggression alliance with Russia (the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact), they invaded Poland and World War II began. At the time Poland's nearly 3.5 million Jews constituted about 10% of the population; by the end of the war 90% of them were dead. After a quick victory over the Polish army, the Nazis relinquished control to their new partners but nearly two years later Hitler turned on Stalin (Operation Barbarossa, June 21, 1941) and for the remainder of the war Poland was under brutal Nazi control.

The Nazis craved more "living space" (*Lebensraum*) and lusted for Russian wheat and oil. Not only did they want to eliminate Jews, they wanted to reduce the population of *all* conquered territories by 30 million people through a deliberate "Hunger Plan" - and it's estimated that more than 4

million Russians were allowed to starve to death while food supplies were diverted to German soldiers and civilians.

THE WARSAW GHETTO

Fourteen months after the Nazis invaded Poland, Warsaw's 400,000 Jews were segregated and herded into an enclosed space (Nov. 1940). Using money extorted from the Jews brick walls topped with broken glass were built but at first it wasn't called a "ghetto" - the Nazis referred to it as "The Jewish Quarter." They justified the separation as a public health measure to prevent typhus epidemics that they said Jews carried and when the walls finally were completed, one third of the city's total population were locked into less than 3% of the land - an area of 1.3 square miles.

In the first two years 200 soup kitchens provided more than 100,000 meals a day - mainly watery potato soup. Lunch was provided for free and a little more could be bought for a few zlotes, but there was little produce to feed them. People were housed an average of nine in a room and, naturally, with the crowding came typhus, typhoid, tuberculosis - and starvation. The Nazi's extinction plans were partially frustrated by an unexpected development. Here's how it was described by one of the few survivors (Marek Edelman):

A new unpredicted power arose in Warsaw: smuggling. Smuggling, a rather shameful occupation, was our salvation. Night and day the smugglers fought the diabolic forces that built the walls. Smuggling food from the Aryan part of Warsaw curtailed the prevalence of hunger, its pace, its spread, its irreversibility. No changes in the structure of the walls - no bricks, no maiming broken glass - could prevent some supplies from trickling into the ghetto.

The enemy therefore had to find another more efficient means of extermination. After eighteen months of struggle our conqueror, seeking our possessions, our blood and our lives, discovered a better way...

Death by starvation and disease had been too slow - "only" about 20% had died, about 92,000 in all. The process had to be speeded up. So in June 1942 the Nazis held a conference in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee to consider "The Jewish Question" (like what FDR had done at Evian.) Their new strategy was called "The Final Solution" and within a month a so-called *aktion* was implemented. Jews were told that they would be "resettled to the East" where they would be put to work - and many actually believed that fable - but as we know they were crammed into cattle cars and sent directly to the camps. Evacuation to the East was a euphemism for death. Of six death camps located in Poland, the largest was Auschwitz-Birkenau where more than one million people died. Treblinka was next largest with about 800,000 victims - about half of them came from Warsaw - but unlike at Auschwitz, upon arrival almost all prisoners were gassed and their bodies cremated. As the Nazis grew more efficient, up to a thousand at a time could be squeezed into Treblinka's "showers", 10 to 15,000 a day!

When the Warsaw Ghetto was first established the Jewish population was divided about how to respond. Many naively believed the propaganda and complied with orders. Bundists, Zionists and Communists all had different agendas and resisted collaborating with each other, but by 1943 they all recognized that their fate was sealed so they might as well go down fighting with honor together. About 750 young members of these groups united to form the Jewish Fighting Organization (ZOB) that triggered a revolt and armed only with pistols and home-made grenades they held out for 27 days (April 19 - May 16, 1943) against enormous odds.

About a year later (August 1 - October 2, 1944) the so-called “Warsaw Uprising” by the underground Home Army (known as the A.K.) lasted 63 days. The Poles expected that the Russian army that had reached the opposite side of the Vistula River would cross over, but Stalin ordered his troops to remain outside. Churchill and Roosevelt appealed to “Uncle Joe” to intervene or at least to allow them to launch airstrikes from Russian soil, but he refused. So the Soviets waited as the Nazis destroyed the Old City and caused more than 150,000 deaths - mostly civilians - and then they crossed the river and mopped up.

With all that as general background, now I’d like to describe several heroic physicians. It’s been estimated that some 3,500 Jewish doctors were murdered by the Nazis during the war, but I’ll discuss just a few whose stories were particularly remarkable. I’ll start with Janusz Korczak whom I’ve already mentioned.

KORCZAK

His real name was Henryk Goldszmit and he was born in Warsaw in 1878 into a wealthy assimilated family that advocated the *Haskala* which encouraged Jews to join the secular world so he was brought up almost ignorant of religion. At age eleven his father developed mental illness and the family fortunes declined but even as a young man Henryk was sensitive to the plight of the underdog, particularly children. He wanted to become a writer but his family prevailed upon him to follow a more practical career - medicine.

Henryk was one of the few Jews to be accepted at the University of Warsaw’s medical school. He considered most of his professors to be pompous, insensitive men who seemed detached from the suffering of their

patients and as a student he gave free medical aid to the indigent. He graduated in 1905 and later when in practice, like a medical Robin Hood, he took fees from the rich and charged only a token amount to the poor. He continued his training in pediatrics in Berlin and Paris where he studied with famous physicians (Virchow, Marfan, Charcot) and during the Russo-Japanese War he served in field hospitals in the Ukraine and Manchuria.

Simultaneous with his medical work, Dr. Goldszmit began to write poetry and fiction, always with strong moral and idealistic themes. As a second year student, he entered a play he'd written about mental illness in a literary competition using the pseudonym Janusz Korczak (pronounced Kor-chock.) It only won honorable mention but the name stuck and for the next four decades he led a double life - Dr. Henryk Goldszmit, the pediatrician and child psychologist, and Janusz Korczak, the author of popular children's books and champion of the rights of children. When asked whether the two careers were compatible, he replied, "Being a doctor didn't interfere with Chekhov becoming a great writer. It deepened his creative work. To write anything of value one has to be a diagnostician."

Korczak was a prolific writer and described his methods in a book called *How to Love a Child* in which he noted that because children are relatively uncorrupted they should demonstrate more responsibility than adults. His most famous book, *King Matt the First* (1928), was a parable that was adored by generations of European children and translated into twenty languages. In it little prince Matthew inherits the crown of a mythical country and is determined to right all the world's wrongs. The land is governed by children while adults are sent back to school. The project succeeds for awhile before scheming adults prevail and banish Matt to permanent exile. (Good try Matt.)

In 1910, at age 31, Korczak decided to give up both his successful pediatric practice and his literary career to become the director of an orphanage for Jewish children in Warsaw. He justified his decision to leave medicine since, in effect, the orphanage would serve as a laboratory where he could develop his own educational system based on objective observations —as he said, “What a fever, a cough or nausea is for the physician, so a smile, a tear or a blush should be for the educator.” Because he believed in the basic decency of all children, he treated them with absolute respect and in what he called these “children’s republics” he allowed the orphans to govern themselves with as much independence as possible. Here are some of the things he demanded for the orphanage:

Children are not people of tomorrow; they are people of today; We renounce the deceptive longing for perfect children; Respect their secrets but they do not have the right to lie, deceive or steal; Let us demand respect for shining eyes, smooth foreheads, youthful effort and confidence. Why should dulled eyes, a wrinkled brow, untidy gray hair or tired resignation command greater respect? We demand to do away with hunger, cold, dampness, stench, overcrowding, overpopulation; Love the child [meaning all children], not just your own.

From 1926 to 1939, Korczak edited a weekend supplement to a popular newspaper that was entirely written by children. It provided them a national voice and about 10,000 letters, articles, essays, news and poetry were received each year. During this same period, Korczak was offered his own radio program. The officials insisted that he adopt another pseudonym since they didn’t want to be accused of allowing a well-known Jewish educator a chance to shape the minds of Polish children.

He believed that it was better to seize the opportunity anonymously than not at all, so he agreed to be called “The Old Doctor” and it was said that on his program he spoke to children as if they were adults and to adults as if they were children.

Always disinterested in personal affairs, Korczak lived a monastic existence. He performed the most menial tasks such as mopping the floor, making beds, ironing handkerchiefs or cobbling shoes. Every morning at 6 o'clock he emptied the chamber pots while wearing a green smock and more than once he was mistaken for a janitor. His devoted chief assistant for three decades was Stefa Wilczynska who joined him when he opened his first orphanage and shared his fate at Treblinka. Although the doctor was the public face, she ran the day to day operations and was Korczak's colleague and confidante. A recent Polish book about her suggested that their's was a form of platonic love.

As political conditions deteriorated, Korczak and Stefa visited Palestine where they were intrigued with kibbutz life (at Ein Harod.) They were tempted to emigrate with the children but circumstances wouldn't permit and with the German takeover of Poland, the tragedy of Polish Jewry began to play out. In 1939 all orphanages were closed and Korczak and two hundred of his charges were forced into the ghetto. For nearly two years Korczak and Stefa did their best to provide food and to create an environment of normalcy but as conditions deteriorated and all were limited to 184 calories a day, everyone began to starve. Friends from the outside arranged a plan for him to escape, but Korczak chose to remain with his children —as he said, “You do not leave a sick child in the night, and you do not leave children at a time like this.”

On his 64th birthday, the *Judenrat* (Jewish administrative council) was told that mass deportations of people would be sent daily to Treblinka. They continued for six weeks (July 22 - August 8, 1942) and two days before the end, it was the time for the orphanages. Dr. Korczak felt there was no need to tell the children what was happening so he had the staff say they were going for a treat in the country and to take a few toys along. They all marched out of the building, heads held high and carrying the flag that Korczak had designed for them — green with white blossoms and the Star of David. Here are some eye-witness accounts:

Slowly they go down the steps, line up in rows, in perfect order and discipline, as usual. Their little eyes are turned toward their doctor, they are strangely calm, they feel almost well. Their doctor is going with them so what do they have to be afraid of? They are not alone, they are not abandoned...

The children are calm but inwardly they must feel it, they must sense it intuitively, otherwise how could you explain the deadly seriousness in their pale little faces? But they are marching quietly in orderly rows, calm and earnest, and at the head of them is Janusz Korczak...

When I met the procession...all the children were singing together. Korczak marched with two of the youngest children in his arms. Their faces were also smiling for apparently he had been telling them funny stories...

Singing to the accompaniment of a little fiddler, they walked in double file in the hot sun the two miles to the collection site, their wooden shoes clattering and thousands of faces silently watching.

When they had to climb 70 steps over the ghetto bridge to get to the Umschlagplatz, some of the smallest children stumbled or needed to be pushed. Many jeering Poles yelled “Good-bye Jews.”

According to one account, at the assembly point the children were counted and then their yellow armbands were snipped off and thrown in a heap into the center of the courtyard. A policeman remarked that “it looked like a field of buttercups.” (Well although that’s an emotional image, I recently learned that it was a fiction because in the Warsaw ghetto Jews wore white armbands with blue stars; only those Jews in western Poland wore yellow stars. I’ll say more about that shortly.)

The last recorded sight at the Umschlagplatz was that of a solitary man comforting the children and today in Warsaw’s Jewish cemetery there’s a large statue of the doctor carrying two little ones to the cattle cars. Korczak, the martyr, became a legend and a new rallying cry in the ghetto was “Remember Korczak’s orphans,” as if only now every Jew realized that they were next. Soon after the orphanage was evacuated, the Warsaw resistance movement began and about a year and a half later it was followed by the so-called Warsaw Uprising by the Polish underground. But now let’s focus on the medical situation within the ghetto.

ISRAEL MILEJKOWSKI was a Warsaw dermatologist and Zionist activist before the war and in the ghetto he was made a member of the *Judennat* and put in charge of public health. Consider the irony of fending off disease while the patients already were slated for execution. It’s astonishing that in 1941 Dr. Milejowski organized a clandestine medical school that operated for about a year and a half until mass deportations began.

Allegedly the project was a sanitary course to prevent infectious diseases which terrified the German's - particularly typhus. However the true purpose was medical education. Why they did this obviously futile exercise is unclear. For students, perhaps it was the need for intellectual activity and a symbolic way of defying Nazi barbarities. For teachers it may have been a desire to escape from reality, to replenish the ever more depleted medical staff of the ghetto and to stand up against the cruelty of beatings and overwork. Classes were held in cold rooms late at night. Lectures began with a description of sanitation and epidemic diseases, but then would shift to that day's real subject - e.g. anatomy, pathology. The school was run by a distinguished faculty and, tragically, there was rapid turnover of both students and teachers.

Then, starting in February 1942, 28 members of the faculty began a remarkable research project to study the physiologic, metabolic and clinical effects of what was called "hunger disease." Both the doctors and 140 adults and children whom they studied, had been on an 800 calorie, low-protein, low-fat diet for many months. Although the researchers were afflicted with the same hunger disease that they were studying and knew that their own time was limited, they persevered. To the extent possible patients were selected who represented pure hunger without other debilitating conditions. They recorded vital signs, performed electrocardiograms and basic blood tests, sometimes even did autopsies.

The Hunger Project was never completed. Milejkowski called it "an unfinished symphony." It was interrupted after five months when deportations began. A core group began to write down their findings of and portions were smuggled out, buried in a metal container for safe keeping

and retrieved after the war. The report was published in 1946 (in English not until 1979.) Here are a few excerpts:

The work was originated and pursued under unbelievable conditions. I hold my pen in my hand and death stares into my room. It looks through the black windows of sad empty houses on deserted streets littered with vandalized and burglarized possessions. It is difficult under such conditions to collect one's wits and even more difficult to express one's feelings. My tongue is too paid to present the magnitude of the defeat. I am looking for suitable words - it is torture.

The closing of the ghetto walls resulted in 43,000 deaths; in two months deportation [to Treblinka] resulted in 250,000 deaths....A last few words to honor you, the Jewish doctors. What can I tell you, my beloved colleagues and companions in misery....Slavery, hunger, deportation, those death figures in our ghetto were also your legacy. And you by your work could give the henchman the answer....I shall not wholly die.

Of the doctors who participated in the Hunger Project, a few committed suicide, some escaped to the forest, others died in bunkers or death camps and only seven survived the war. Of some 400 medical students only five lived to freedom. Since the classes were modeled on standard European curricula and lasted long enough for two academic years' credit, after the war Warsaw University granted degrees to a few survivors.

The Nazis treated the ghetto's more than 800 doctors like disease carrying lice, but they tried to maintain decency and dignity - especially in the hospital. Several who escaped had posterity in mind and one of them, **MORDECHAI LENSKY**, described in his memoir, *A Physician Inside the*

Warsaw Ghetto, the tension between his moral obligations as a physician and his human desire to provide for his family. Nevertheless, the daily struggle sometimes was unbearable.

ADINA SZWAJGER (SHVY-gher) was a 22 year old medical student when the war began. As the Germans marched into Warsaw, she stood among the crowds and years later this is how she remembered the scene: “The crowds were so quiet you could hear the buzzing of a fly. Pale drawn faces. Silent tears.” Seven months later she began work in the Jewish Children’s Hospital (Bersohn and Bauman Hospital run by Dr. Anna Braude-Heller) that was sealed off from the rest of the city.

Naked orphans stood in the frost outside crying to be admitted. Bodies of babies lay in the gutter, wrapped in newspaper. Every morning the doctors and nurses would drink a glass of raw alcohol to keep their calorie intake above the fatal minimum. Somehow they kept the discipline and routine of a normal hospital going and, as Adina recalled, “We tried to save the children with scraps of food, medicines and injections. Some revived enough to smile - except that this was the kind of smile that made your hair stand on end and your flesh crawl.” She described famished skeletons fighting over the soup pot, spilling it and lapping the slop off the floor. Although Adina often felt helpless, she thought “we had our duty as human beings and we were there to help.” In effect, the hospital became a hospice for dying children.

One day soldiers entered the hospital and began killing some children in their beds and ordering others to the death camps. One of the doctors asked Adina to give a lethal injection of morphine to her barely conscious mother. The doctor couldn’t perform euthanasia on her own mother so

Adina did it for her - and then she took the last container of morphine to the infants' ward and one by one spooned the liquid to each of them to assure that they would never wake up. She told older children to get into bed saying that "this medicine will make their pain disappear."

Later, when Adina escaped from the ghetto she had to perform abortions on Jewish girls in hiding because the cries of babies would have given them away. One day she had to put to death a girl who had gone mad and wanted to run in the street endangering the lives of others hiding in the same house. During the 1944 Warsaw Uprising Adina served as a nurse and survived the ordeal by escaping through the sewers. After the war she worked as a pediatrician and learned to live in silence with her secrets, but as she wrote, "The memory never left. That's why I was always different from everybody....[But] I felt that I had the right to remain silent."

It took 45 years before Adina Szwajga felt able to tell her story but then she was in a hurry - because she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. This is how she explained her decision to write her memoirs: *I had grown old. Sick. I lay in the hospital...I was constantly in the presence of the past. And I started to hurry. There, on a hospital bed, I started to write. Quickly. To win the race against time. To make it in time. Even if incompletely, fragmentarily, through the prism of my own incomplete memories....in this incomplete but truthful way, I will try to recount something.*

And in the epilogue of her book *I Remember Nothing More* (1988) Adina explained: *Over the last forty-five years, the world has changed, new generations have grown up and everything that happened has faded in the mists of history, or even prehistory...One by one we are leaving. The young are left behind and it would be a good thing if something of those years*

remained with them. So we need to explain, not just to reminisce, I don't know whether I am able to. I am not a professional writer or a chronicler but I must try...

Dr. Adina Szwaiger died of cancer in 1993 at the age of 75.

MAREK EDELMAN was a youth leader of the Bund before the war and afterward became a prominent cardiologist. In the Warsaw Ghetto he headed the five-person command team that led the Jewish resistance and in 1944 he participated in the Warsaw Uprising by the Home Army. In his account of the revolt (*The Ghetto Fights*, published in Polish in 1945) he described how the ghetto fighters fought in the name of human dignity. In a lengthy interview that is available on You Tube, Edelman was outspoken and personally critical of others. For example, he described Janusz Korczak as a difficult, neurotic individual who didn't get along with the medical director of the Children's Hospital. He personally disagreed with Korczak's philosophy of children's courts meting out punishments and complained that only the most intelligent children were accepted into the orphanage. However, Edelman acknowledged that these were minor faults that were far outweighed by Korczak's courage and fortitude.

Since 1989, on the anniversary of the Ghetto Uprising, a public celebration of the event has been held and for many years every April 19, exactly at noon, Marek Edelman, the last survivor, would silently lay yellow daffodils at the base of the large "Monument to the Ghetto Heroes" (sculpted by Israeli artist Nathan Rapoport and unveiled in 1948) that's on the site of the ghetto. You may recall that I described the fictitious metaphor of a field of yellow buttercups suggested by an observer who saw Korczak's children's

arm bands heaped on the ground, but Edelman's yellow daffodils came to symbolize the tragedy of the Warsaw ghetto.

It was clear that Marek Edelman had more right than anyone else to be there and great deference was given to him. These annual events became known as "Edelman Ceremonies" and inspired both the reviving Jewish community and Polish society at large. Although Dr. Edelman became a hero he was prickly and could be difficult. Many Jews didn't appreciate his militant atheism and his sharp criticism of Israel. Many Poles were unhappy with his attacks on the country's nationalism and authoritarian tendencies. Yet his popularity grew and when Marek Edelman died in 2009 at age 90, there was national mourning.

Both Jewish and non-Jewish volunteers pledged to continue the annual tradition and this year on the 75th anniversary of the ghetto uprising, more than 1,500 volunteers distributed 70,000 paper daffodils and brochures to passersby throughout Warsaw and elsewhere. President Duda spoke at the event and, not surprisingly, emphasized that the fighters were Polish citizens who flew both the blue and white Jewish flag and the red and black Polish flag. But that evening when an orchestra and chorus performed the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the final words "All men are brothers" were sung in Hebrew.

Perhaps you've read Leon Uris' novel *Mila 18* (1961) that took place in the Warsaw Ghetto. Of course all of the characters were fictional, but according to Marek Edelman the actual Mila 18 was a den of "crooks, pimps, prostitutes and thieves" who lived in a relatively luxurious bunker - hardly what Leon Uris described in his novel.

(In 2017 Harvey Weinstein announced that he would make and direct a movie based on the novel but it seems that his plans have changed.)

You also may have seen the movie *The Pianist* (2001) that was directed by Roman Polanski and starred Adrien Brody that was a harrowing depiction of life and death in the Warsaw ghetto. Another movie *The Zookeeper's Wife* was the true story of Jan and Antonina Zabinski who ran a private zoo in Warsaw before the war. When the Nazis slaughtered their animals, the Zabinskis hid in their zoo nearly three hundred human animals - described as their "guests." They survived the war and later both were named Righteous Gentiles by Yad Vashem.

In 1940 a historian in the Warsaw Ghetto by the name of Emanuel Ringelblum founded a secret organization called *Oneg Shabbat*. The goal of its several dozen members was to collect materials documenting the horror of daily life and to preserve the story for posterity. Two years later when the Great Deportation to Treblinka began, part of the archive was buried in ten tin boxes in the basement of a school - and about six months later a second portion was placed in two milk cans and buried in the same site. During the Ghetto Uprising almost all of *Oneg Shabbat's* members were killed - only three survived. Ringelblum and his wife and son who had gone into hiding on the Aryan Side were discovered and executed. After the war some 37 volumes consisting of more than 35,000 pages were discovered in good condition and now are stored in the the former Central Jewish Library where the group used to meet. (now it is Warsaw's Jewish Historical Institute.)

This year a permanent exhibition of the Ringelblum Archive opened and it is a heart-breaking display of digitized, translated documents and

testimonies. One of the contributors, a 19 year old, wrote “What we were unable to shout out to the world, we buried in the ground - in boxes and cans.” In Emanuel Ringelblum’s final letter he wrote, “If none of us survives, at least let that remain.” (A documentary *Who Will Write Our History?* opened at the Jewish Film Festival in San Francisco, June, 2018.)

BIALYSTOK

There were ghettos in other major cities as well. Unlike Warsaw which remained in German hands, Bialystok, which is so close to Dabrowa, during the first two years was in Soviet control and Jews fared relatively well - in fact, thousands had travelled to Bialystok to escape the clutches of the Nazis so that by 1940 its Jewish population had doubled in size to more than 250,000.

But on June 27, 1941 the Nazis invaded and set fire to Bialystok’s largest synagogue with 2,000 Jews inside. The flames spread to surrounding wooden homes that were incinerated and over the next few days, another 5,000 Jews were rounded up, taken to the forest and shot. A ghetto was established in August that contained about 15,000 people until two years later it was liquidated and 30,000 inhabitants were shipped to Treblinka and other camps.

Aware of their fates and inspired by events in Warsaw, about three hundred Jews - armed with only one machine gun and a few dozen pistols - held out for five days and managed to kill or wound more than one hundred Nazi soldiers. When the Russian army liberated Bialystok in July, 1944, only 114 Jews who had hidden during the war remained alive.

Today, there is only a single woman living in Bialystok who is openly Jewish and when Lucy Lukowska showed us around her city, we were able to find a restaurant that served bialys. I brought two dozen home for friends and family and they were tiny but tasty. This past August the 75th anniversary of the Bialystok ghetto revolt was celebrated with large photographic displays in the main square and a military honor guard.

TEREZIN

In 2005 when I led a medical history study trip to Israel, I arranged a stop at the Ghetto Fighters Museum in Nahariya which memorializes the Warsaw Ghetto. I spoke there about Janusz Korczak's visit to kibbutz Ein Harod in Palestine before the war and I'd also arranged for a local family doctor by the name of Tomi Spenser to discuss various ethical challenges faced by doctors in concentration camps during the War. When we met I learned that Dr. Spenser had escaped Prague as a child on a *kindertransport*, had grown up in England where he became a doctor, married and later made *aliya* with his family to a kibbutz (Sasa) in the Galilee.

In the rear of the room where we met, Dr. Spenser had left some literature for us to take. I grabbed a few but didn't get a chance to read them until I was on the plane flying home. To my surprise, one was a catalogue of an art exhibition that Spenser had curated in 2000 of more than thirty paintings and drawings made in the Terezin concentration camp near Prague, many of them by imprisoned doctors who had artistic talent. As I've said, the Nazis referred to the Warsaw Ghetto as the city's "Jewish Quarter" but Terezin (which the Germans called Theresienstadt) was a concentration camp that they euphemistically described as a "model ghetto" or a "city of refuge." Although it was not a death camp like Treblinka, many thousands died there of starvation and disease.

The catalogue of Dr. Spenser's exhibition of digitized copies of the original art turned out to be a revelation and when I got home I e-mailed him and asked whether he still had the pictures and, if so, could I borrow them to exhibit in the United States? He agreed but then there was a long hiatus before I could follow up.

That was because when I returned home my wife was entering a terminal phase of lymphoma and it was more than a year before I got through her loss and remembered my conversation with Tomi Spenser. However, then I couldn't reconnect with him. I tried unsuccessfully for many months until I learned that in the interim he had died, in fact shortly after my wife had - and of the same disease! After several more months, I located one of the doctor's sons who found the art collection stored in a carton in his own garage and shipped it to me. So about a dozen years ago, I exhibited the art both in Rockland and Manhattan which I'll describe for you shortly.

Terezin was a walled village where Jews were concentrated for varying periods before deportation to "the East" for the final solution. It's located about 40 km from Prague and at any time there were more than 50,000 people enclosed in a space built to accommodate about 5,000. Some were wealthy or prominent people who came voluntarily because they'd been lured by promises of privileged treatment. But they were deceived. Of nearly 160,000 people sent there between 1941 and 1945, some 36,000 died of old age, illness or starvation. Most of the rest were deported to work camps or killing camps and only a few thousand lived to tell the tale - of more than 12,000 children, only 325 survived the war.

In fact, Terezin was a Potemkin's Village used as a demonstration project for visiting Red Cross inspectors to show how well the Jews were being treated. It was famous for cultural activities permitted for the purpose of propaganda – a cabaret, a jazz band, soccer games, a chorus, lectures by famous scholars - and, in addition, much visual art was produced there – both permitted and subterfuge. Many paintings survived, more than 4,000 that were done by children, others by professional artists and you may have seen traveling exhibits of some of them - now they're permanently displayed at Terezin and in Prague.

Also, there was the art on medical themes that were collected and exhibited in Israel by Dr. Spencer. I'll describe just one of those Terezin doctor/artists **KAREL FLEISCHMANN** who before the war was a dermatologist and also a gifted artist and writer. Here's how he described what it felt like when he was still awaiting deportation from home to Terezin:

All of us felt a sense of sliding helplessness, again and again, day after day, night after night, you descended toward the abyss whose bottom was unfathomable...you felt only the downward movement, the fear, what next?

It reads like something written by an earlier Prague Jew Franz Kafka - and when the dreaded day finally arrived, here's how he described it:

The morning of our deportation was pitilessly cold. The clouds as black as ink, the rising sun blood red in the background...darkness on earth, darkness in our souls...a nightmare. We arrived in Terezin in the evening. Really you did not arrive, you were consigned. Someone managed for us for we no longer were we – we had become an object, a

number, a ground substance, a kneaded mix of humans...Tired to the bones, sick, longing for quiet and sleep, we came into the cellars and dark holes of the barrack...still the mass was mixed, kicked and reduced to nothing, dirtied, put on the floor, kneaded and rolled till we became a formless porridge, a heap of rubbish...poisoned with the taste of the stable...Your helplessness became more and more pronounced as you lay denuded among the hundreds of strangers on the concrete floors or on bunks in the huge barracks...We live like rats in a cellar and become shy of the light and shy of people.

You wouldn't expect such eloquence from a mere physician, but Karel Fleischmann was no ordinary doctor and thousands of his literary and art works made in Terezin were hidden and survived the war. Dr. Fleischmann headed Terezin's geriatric ward and worked directly under the ghetto's medical director Dr. Erich Munk and I've sometimes written about their close relationship until in October, 1944 both were among the last group shipped to Auschwitz where they were gassed upon arrival. In one of Karel Fleischmann's poems he wrote, "Nobody will hear my song. The world of my time ends behind these walls." But another time he predicted, "One of us will teach the children how to sing again, to write on paper with a pencil, to do sums and multiply; one of us will get there."

Before I felt competent to lecture about the medical art produced at Terezin, I felt the need to see the place for myself so several years ago I made a brief visit to Prague to look around. The same optimistic spirit expressed by Karel Fleischmann - the idea that "one of us will get there" - was evident when one day I interviewed an elderly survivor who worked as a docent at Prague's Jewish museum. I asked how she could constantly relive her ordeal for visitors and she explained that she felt an obligation to bear

witness. When I asked, how she kept her spirit up through those dark days, she replied: “Hope dies last.”

Well one of the places where I displayed the Terezin art was the Holocaust Museum which then was in Spring Valley. After I spoke at the opening, a woman by the name of Ela Stein Weissberger came up and introduced herself. She told me that as a child she was sent with her family to Terezin where she stayed for several years - and - she owned a painting done by this same Dr. Karel Fleischmann about whom I’d spoken. She asked whether I’d like to see it? And how!

So I visited Ela at her home in Tappan to see Fleischmann’s painting. In fact, it was small and rather nondescript and I asked how it was that her mother obtained it? Her answer was startling. She told me that her mother was “the best thief in Terezin.” It seems that she used to work in the prison garden and because she was so emaciated she could easily hide lots of tomatoes and vegetables under her clothes and smuggle them out. What her family didn’t eat she’d barter - in this case for a painting!

When Ela was about eleven years old she played one of the leading roles as the cat in the children’s opera called *Brundibar*. This opera was performed 55 times at the camp although rarely by the same cast because children were constantly being deported to Auschwitz. Although the show was staged for the amusement of the Nazis. it contained subtle mocking of them. In later years *Brundibar* has been performed throughout the world and sometimes Ela Weissberger - by then in her 80s - would attend and tell her own story. In fact, the title of her memoir is *The Cat with the Yellow Star*. At the end of the opera, she sometimes would go up on stage to join the chorus as they sang the final victory song.

Ela told me that when survivors sometimes gather at kibbutz Beit Terezin in Israel, before they finish, they all join hands and sing a lilting song that used to close every show in the ghetto's cabaret. It was called *The Terezin March* and here's how the refrain went:

*Hey! Tomorrow life starts over,
And with it the time is approaching
When we'll fold our knapsacks
And return home again.
Where there is a will, there is a way,
Let us join hands
And one day on the ruins of the ghetto
We shall laugh.*

When I asked Ela why she continues to publicly speak out, she explained that she felt an obligation to teach younger generations about the horrors of war. Another medical survivor who couldn't keep silent was a Hungarian gynecologist by the name of **GISELLA PERL**. Hungarians were among the last Jews deported to the camps until in 1944 most were sent to Auschwitz. When she arrived Gisella was assigned, along with five doctors and four nurses, to run a hospital for 32,000 Hungarian women, many of them Gypsies (Roma). It was a hospital without beds, bandages or drugs and she performed surgery without anesthesia. Dr. Perl said that sometimes she treated patients with her voice – as she wrote, “I told them beautiful stories, telling them that one day we would have birthdays again, that one day we would sing again, that a better time would come.” She performed hundreds, perhaps thousands, of abortions on dirty floors to spare pregnant women from instant execution if they were discovered or tortured in Dr. Mengele's experiments. Sometimes Gisella was called “the angel of

Auschwitz” but some asked was she an angel of life or of death? At the end of the war when she learned that her whole family had been killed, she swallowed poison, but was nursed back to health in a French convent.

When Gisella Perl arrived in New York in 1947, immigration officers accused her of having collaborated with Mengele and profiting from doing abortions. They threatened to deport her but thanks to direct intervention by President Truman, she was let in and for the next four years, sponsored by the UJA, she lectured as a so-called “ambassador of the six million.” One day Eleanor Roosevelt heard her speak and told her to stop torturing herself – to become a doctor again. So Gisella Perl opened an office (92nd & Madison) in Manhattan where some of her patients were former camp inmates. She also worked in Alan Gutmacher’s Family Planning clinic at Mount Sinai, became an authority on infertility and over the course of her career, the former abortionist delivered around 3,000 babies – before every delivery she’d say a quiet prayer – “God you owe me a life -- a living baby.”

Still another medical survivor of the camps who attributed his good fortune to *hope*. **VIKTOR FRANKL** was a Viennese psychiatrist who spent two years at Terezin where he worked under Karrel Fleischmann in the geriatric ward. He also led a special clinic where he counseled depressed, sometimes suicidal patients by engaging their minds in constructive ways. He survived three camps after Terezin, jotted down ideas on pieces of stolen paper which he hid in the lining of his clothes. After the war ended he published a book called *Man’s Search For Meaning* which sold over nine million copies in nineteen languages. In 1991 a survey by the Library of Congress listed it as one of the ten most influential books in America.

The core of Viktor Frankl's philosophy was that there must be a purpose to suffering and dying. Everyone can rise above their fate but first must discover the meaning in their life, either by creating a work or doing a deed – by experiencing something or encountering someone. He observed that in the camps those without hope were the ones who died the quickest. Conversely, those who held on to a vision of the future were more likely to survive. Here's how Viktor Frankl explained this in his book:

In the concentration camp, we witnessed some of our comrades behave like swine while others behaved like saints. Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized depends on decisions, not on conditions. Our generation is realistic because we have come to know man as he really is. After all, man is that being who invented the gas chambers and he is also that being who entered the gas chambers upright with the Lord's Prayer or the S'hma Israel on his lips.

Viktor Frankl once wrote that, "the salvation of man is through love and in love" and the way that he hung on was to constantly think of his wife. But when he returned to Vienna after the war, he learned that she and his entire family had been killed. Broken and alone, he accepted a teaching position at the medical school, remarried and in time became a world famous psychotherapist. He received 29 honorary degrees, was a Nobel Peace Prize nominee and died in London in 1997 at age 92.

SHUA

Leo Eitinger was a Czech doctor known to his friends as "Shua." After graduating medical school in 1937 he was conscripted into the Czech army, but as the country began to disintegrate he found himself to be a man without a country and fled to Norway. He learned the language and

eventually was able to resume his career in a mental hospital north of the Arctic Circle. But under the Quisling regime, his work permit was revoked, he was discovered by the Gestapo, imprisoned and in 1943 was transported to Auschwitz. He was assigned hospital duty where he was in a position to help fellow prisoners if only by providing emotional support.

One day a 16 year old boy was admitted because of a severely infected foot. Life or death depended on successful surgery because if you couldn't walk, you couldn't work and would be killed. Shua himself didn't operate but he assured the frightened boy that he'd be present at the procedure. Many years later, this is how the patient - whose name was **Elie Wiesel** - recalled the ordeal:

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. At 10 o'clock in the morning, they took me to the operating room. "My" doctor was there. I took comfort from that. I felt that nothing serious would happen while he was there. There was a balm in every word he spoke and every glance he gave me held a message of hope.

Dr. Eitinger survived the war and afterward returned to Norway where he became head of a psychiatry department. He published important research about mental disorders in refugees and concentration camp survivors and became a human rights activist and received many awards recognizing his humanitarian work. In 1986 when Elie Wiesel received the Nobel Prize he was reunited with Shua Eitinger and told him that he owed him a debt of gratitude "for showing me that even over there, it was possible to have faith in mankind."

DR. EVIL

But not all Jewish doctors were heroes. In one of my books I described Dr. **Edwin Katzen-Ellenbogen** whom I dubbed “Dr. Evil.” He was a German psychiatrist who emigrated to this country in 1905. He had married an American woman, the daughter of a Massachusetts Supreme Court justice, became a naturalized citizen and converted from Judaism to her Christian religion. He worked for several years in mental hospitals in Massachusetts and New Jersey, lectured on abnormal psychology at Harvard and was mentioned in *American Men of Science*. He seemed to be a man on the rise in academia and was active in eugenics circles.

Without recounting all the details, in 1914 he abandoned wife and child, returned to Europe and dropped out of sight. As I learned only after much research, for two decades he wandered around Europe and developed an unsavory reputation as a swindler, forger, extortionist, bigamist and drug peddler. He preyed upon gullible foreigners and wealthy widows and his character was so bad that the University of Leipzig revoked his doctoral degree. During the 1930s he fled both the law and the Nazis but as a former Jew he was a marked man.

In 1943 the Gestapo caught up with Katzen-Ellenbogen and sent him to Buchenwald. While there he was hated and feared by fellow prisoners because it was clear that he was collaborating with the SS in order to gain special privileges. As a doctor he had some control over who would be sent to the hospital or to death and it became evident that the psychopathologist was a psychopath who had no compassion for others.

After the war, at a war crimes trial conducted at Dachau by the U.S. Army, the former Harvard professor was asked to testify about Nazi crimes, but it soon became clear that he was fabricating and instead of serving as a witness, he became one of the accused. Army lawyers didn't know what to make of this suave American citizen who spoke perfect English and had a self-serving answer for everything. But former prisoners testified that he'd accepted bribes, sometimes struck and perhaps even murdered other prisoners. So Dr. Evil was sentenced to life imprisonment and despite unsuccessful appeals for clemency, he died in a US Army prison in 1950.

I close with this terrible story in order to emphasize that everyone in the camps weren't heroes – and all doctors, weren't saints or martyrs. They were merely human beings – flawed, capable of acts of great kindness and also sometimes of selfishness. Although it's tempting to glorify them all, that wouldn't be giving a totally accurate account. Nevertheless, the stories of the doctors whom I've described (with this last exception) are inspirational and certainly worth remembering.

