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Reflections on My Father's Experience with Doctors during the Shoah (1939-1945)

Harold J. Bursztajn

Harold J. Bursztajn, MD, is the Co-Director of the Program in Psychiatry and Law and is an Associate Clinical Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, Boston.

INTRODUCTION

What follows are some thoughts, occasioned by a recent three-hour filmed interview with my father, Abraham Bursztajn, conducted by Dr. Mark Weisstuch on behalf of the Steven Spielberg Foundation. The foundation, created by the film director Steven Spielberg after the making of the film "Schindler's List," is dedicated to chronicling the memories of Jewish survivors of the Nazi attempt at systematic destruction of European Jewry during World War II (1939-1945), the *Shoah*. Here I will focus on how two physicians, working under the shadow of death with limited resources, were able to comfort and even promote hope and healing.

My father's interview had some special urgency: an exhibition on the Lodz, Poland ghetto at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum in Israel's Jerusalem, was scheduled to end by September. My father is one of the few surviving members of a lost chapter of that ghetto's history: the Jewish Resistance. He is now 80; he had a quadruple bypass one and one-half years ago, three years after the death of my mother, Miriam Briks Feigala Bursztajn, who was his comrade in the underground and then his partner in life for 49 years.

1941

My father encountered the first physician in 1941. Soon after the German invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939, my father Abraham, the youngest and only unmarried sibling of seven Bursztajns, had been left in charge of the family's lumber yards in Lodz, while most of the remainder of the family had left for Warsaw. During World War I Warsaw had been a relatively safe haven, and my father, not having other family responsibilities, volunteered for the dangerous job of overseeing the family's holdings in what was considered to be an area far more likely to be involved in the fighting. He was eventually captured by the Nazis, thrown into jail, and tortured. The Nazis had established a list of prominent Jewish families who had assets. My father's family was on this list, and he was tortured to reveal their whereabouts. He did not.

In the midst of being tortured, after a particularly severe whipping with a cat o' nine tails, Abraham fainted. He was surprised to awaken in the jail infirmary. His torturers had not given up hope of making him reveal his family's whereabouts, and they wanted to keep him alive to continue the torture. Before him stood a doctor,

himself a Jewish prisoner, who ministered to the other prisoners. "I will die here," my father said to the older man. "One of us will, but it will be me," said the physician. "I do not have any way to treat you, but you are young. If you don't give up hope, you will survive."

This physician inspired my father by acknowledging the hopelessness they shared, but then apportioning the darkest part to himself. My father did his part and survived, and eventually returned to what was by then the Lodz Ghetto. Upon his return, he was offered a choice job--to be a Jewish policeman. However, he refused to collaborate. This enraged Rumkowski, known as the King of the Jews, who was the Nazi-installed figurehead of the ghetto. He slapped my father. The first instinct of Abraham, who as a teenager had been an accomplished amateur boxer, was to strike back. Somehow he found the quickness of mind to act with restraint. Still enraged, Rumkowski sought to humiliate him. My father's punishment was to work on sewage disposal.

1942 - 1944

Abraham transformed the job into a way to create hope. His first priority was to create a home for a Jewish Resistance cell. He found willing members among some of the sewerage coworkers and recruited others by pulling people he knew off the train platforms as they were waiting to embark for Auschwitz. One of these people he recognized as Miriam, the daughter of Hersz Jonah Briks, a furniture craftsman he knew from his family's lumber trade.

Miriam had already given up hope after her father's death from starvation. But my father recognized her at the train station. She remembered how generously her father had been treated by Abraham at his family lumberyard. She agreed to disembark, and my father coolly approached the Nazi officer supervising the deportation and said: "She is one of the sanitation co-workers who has been ordered to stay in the ghetto until the last. She needs to come with me." When the officer looked skeptical, my father played his final card and showed him the photograph he also carried around with him as a passport. It was a family photograph given to him by a high-ranking German officer who had anti-Nazi sympathies. The Nazi officer in charge let my mother go.

1944

By 1944 Abraham and the other members of the resistance cell were convinced that the Nazis were planning to liquidate the remnants of the Lodz Ghetto. They had no arms with which to mount a revolt. And by that time, they knew of the doom of the earlier Warsaw Ghetto uprising. After much debate, it was decided that the only remaining way to resist was to go into hiding. But where? The sewer system itself, if waterproof areas could be created, offered a natural hiding place. The stench of the sewers was sure to confuse the dogs that the Nazis had already employed to sniff out other resistance hiding places.

The problem was obtaining the cement necessary to create what would be, essentially, an underwater, underground bunker in the sewer system. The only available cement was in a Nazi warehouse, well secured and outside the ghetto walls. My father and one of his comrades decided to take the risk of a night raid outside of the ghetto. The raid met initial success, in part due to a pair of wire cutters my father had surreptitiously secured that morning while visiting a Nazi maintenance storehouse to empty sewage. However, on the way back to the ghetto, carrying 100-pound bags of cement, my father and his colleague encountered enemy fire. A Nazi patrol, located below the bridge they had to cross to re-enter the ghetto, gave chase. Running in a zigzag fashion, he evaded the automatic weapons' fire until a bullet struck him. Wounded in the shin and bleeding profusely, he could no longer run. With the enemy rapidly closing in, Abraham looked for a refuge. He found one in a nearby dumpster. Still clutching his bag of life-saving cement, he jumped in and pulled the cover over him. The Nazi patrol rushed by.

When the area cleared, he somehow staggered with the cement back to the resistance's rendezvous point. Now that the cement had been saved, he needed to save himself. Surely the Nazis would investigate, notice the blood on the bridge, and look for absentees from the morning's work detail to interrogate as suspects in

the raid. Before daybreak, my father's comrades contacted a doctor still left in the shrinking Jewish ghetto. The doctor said he would help as he could, even though he no longer had instruments with which to remove the bullet.

My father remembers that, in the hours before dawn, the doctor came. The physician first straightened a coat hanger to fashion a crude probe. Sterilizing it as best he could, the doctor used the makeshift probe to pull out the bullet lodged in my father's leg. The only anesthesia was the knowledge that the cement had been obtained. The next morning my father was able to appear for roll call, a crude bandage hidden by a baggy pair of pants.

With nightly labor, a sewer system bunker was constructed with the raid's precious cement. Covered by water for concealment, it had pipes bringing in air, water, and even electricity. Even as the remnants of the ghetto were being liquidated, these life lines were surreptitiously connected by members of the resistance. For the final six months of the Nazi reign of terror, 14 people were able to survive by hiding.

My father was not able to save his family of origin. The two physicians who saved his life were, as many others, most likely murdered by the Nazis. But he and his comrades in the resistance cell, including my mother, did save the lives of others. By now the memories of his family, his comrades in the resistance who had been murdered by the Nazis, and those physicians who saved his life had become assets that neither the Nazi terror nor the passage of time could obliterate. Each night as they would emerge from the bunker to forage for food in what was an increasingly empty ghetto, it felt as if the dead were keeping watch. Finally the living, the Russian Army, came to the rescue.

REFLECTIONS

Beyond their personal meaning for me, my father's memories have more general significance. Physicians' integrity can be maintained irrespective of pressure by third parties. If those physicians my father encountered during the Holocaust could preserve the decency of authentic doctoring, then so can we all, whatever the circumstances. Supporting hope and patients' autonomy, even in conditions of the most limited resources, is a fundamental duty, even as we face the most hopeless of realities with our patients.

I hope that a more systematic study of doctoring during the Holocaust will be undertaken. The only work I know of, Robert Jay Lifton's *Nazi Doctors*, focuses on those physicians who were Nazis themselves.¹ There is much more to learn about those who had the courage and wisdom to resist, as did the Jewish doctors of my father's memories. One source for such study is the all-too-neglected four-volume *Anthology of the Armed Jewish Resistance: 1939-1945*, edited by Isaac Kowalski.² In the future, an additional resource will be the film archives of the Spielberg Foundation, which occasioned this note. As the last survivors age and die, this invaluable entrée into the psychology of doctoring under extraordinary life-threatening conditions may soon be lost. Exploring the meaning of these acts can also further help us to understand the psychology of that extraordinary handful of Jews and their Christian friends who had the "Conscience and Courage" to actively resist the Nazi reign of genocide.³ The latter is itself a useful reminder that the scope of psychological understanding of extraordinary behavior goes beyond psychopathology to encompass acts of wisdom.

NOTES

1. R.J. Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

2. I. Kowalski, *Anthology of the Armed Jewish Resistance. 1939-1945*, 4 vols. (New York: Jewish Combatants Publishing House, 1986-1992).

3. E. Fogelman, *Conscience and Courage* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1994).