

THE USES OF ADVERSITY

by Leonard Tushnet

Studies of Starvation
in the Warsaw Ghetto

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Leonard Tushnet was born in Newark, N.J., in 1908. He received his B.S. in 1927 and his M.D. in 1931. He has been a general practitioner in Irvington, N.J. ("in a way," he says, "which is currently going out of fashion"), since 1932.

During the long waiting periods in confinement cases, he began to write short stories for his own amusement, based on incidents in his practice. Since then, he has published many short stories as well as numerous medical articles. Dr. Tushnet has written a full-length book on the Jewish Resistance Movement in Warsaw and is currently at work on a novel. He is married and the father of three.

South Brunswick and New York • Thomas Yoseloff • London

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The spectral times of the Warsaw Ghetto have not gone unrecorded. The people impersonally placed in a vise and squeezed to death by slow turns has sent its long death wail into the nerve of the times. *The Uses of Adversity* casts an eye on a single macabre aspect of the Jews' prolonged struggle in their walled-in and doomed section of Warsaw—starvation—and on the strange and heroic action of the Ghetto doctors in the face of it.

In the worst times of the Ghetto, hundreds of men, women, and children dropped off daily from starvation. The hospitals were storehouses for the puffed and wasted bodies of the starved; in the streets moved wandering skeletons. The doctors had no food to give (they were themselves starving), and nothing but food would help. But if they were unable to cure, they were still doctors; if they had no medicine, their knowledge remained. They made use of the unexampled availability of starvation specimens to make an exhaustive and precise study of the effects of starvation on the human organism.

The doctors worked in the atmosphere of a charnel house; their instruments

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had to be smuggled across the Ghetto walls at the risk of life, and even then their equipment was extremely limited. Difficulties were made yet greater by the continual shifts in location enforced by the Nazis, and by the loss of the doctors as one by one they were sent off to the death camp at Treblinka or died of the condition they were studying. Those that continued, for the most part certain they would soon die, could not even be assured that their manuscript would survive. But they did not succumb to despair, and their work was a valuable and enduring contribution to medical science; adversity itself was made a steppingstone to scientific advance.

The inhumanity of the Nazis created a historical freak: the juxtaposition of mass starvation and scientific sophistication of the highest degree. *The Uses of Adversity* tells the story of one of the noblest responses to that inhumanity.

Acknowledgments

For permission to reproduce the photographs and sketches used in this book, thanks are given to the Jewish Historical Institute of Warsaw, Mr. Moses Leavitt, of the American Joint Distribution Committee, and Mr. Jonas Turkow.

For many valuable suggestions and encouragement, I wish especially to thank Miss Dina Abramowicz, of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

I am grateful also for technical and other help given by Miss Reesa Serwatka, Mrs. Catherine Coleman, Mrs. Tessie Podesfinski, Mr. Emil Wujciak, the Jewish Historical Institute of Warsaw, the *Centre du Documentation Juive Contemporaine* of Paris, the staff of the Maplewood (N. J.) Public Library, and Mr. Leon Summit.

And finally, to those seven doctors, the only surviving participants of the research on starvation in the Ghetto, my deep appreciation for their patience in answering my questions.

LEONARD TUSHNET

Introduction

Non omnis moriar! In these words Horace expressed the poet's dream that his work would live on after his death. In a larger sense they speak of man's hope that some part of his life will be remembered, will remain behind after he has left this world. To the physicians confined in the Warsaw Ghetto they had still another meaning—the wish that the research conducted in the shadow of death should become part of the immortal body of knowledge, a permanent memorial to the brave medical men and women who perished as a result of the pseudo-science of the Nazis.

Physicians and other scientific workers are not aware, unless they are interested in problems of nutrition and have an historical outlook, that during the years of the German occupation of Poland medical research of high calibre was being carried on by doctors proscribed by the conquerors. This lack of awareness is understandable. Who could expect anything good to come out of countries subjugated by the Third Reich? Interest in the political aspects of the period has created indifference to the scientific work done

in that time and in those places. And there is yet another reason, based in human psychology. We want to forget "atrocious stories." Consequently, research that was done in unbelievable circumstances with the most meticulous detail, basic studies and clinical observation, controlled and crucial experiments, all are almost forgotten. Even doctors who do not believe it beneath their dignity to examine sputum and urines and feces turn away from the examination of the foul depths of the Nazi era. Alas! Their turning away leads them to lose sight of the fact that at the same time that there were Sauerbruchs¹ there were also spirits of lesser fame but greater humanity struggling unselfishly in the interests of science.

The tale of the work done in the Warsaw Ghetto from 1940 to 1943 should be retold so that those of us who "little note nor long remember" may take pride in the fact that the group of men—physicians—so praised by Robert Louis Stevenson and so often denigrated as mere technicians contains men and women trained to rise above man's inhumanity to man.

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Starvation disease: Flexor contracture and muscle atrophy.
Starvation disease: Edema of the legs.
Starvation disease: "Nephrotic type" edema of the face and neck.
Starvation disease: "Dry" cachexia.
Starvation disease: Atrophy.

We are part of the divine power against evil—widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower.

—George Eliot, *Middlemarch*