

4. The Czysa Hospital

THE HOSPITAL

Against starvation physicians had no remedy other than food, and that was not to be had. All they could do was study the famine-stricken. Dr. Ringelblum dryly notes on June 26, 1942, "Jewish physicians and professors are conducting scientific investigations. One of the most interesting subjects is hunger. Interesting because it is the most widespread disease in the Ghetto. . . ."¹

The doctors had been treated no better than the rest of the Jewish inhabitants of Warsaw. Neither had their hospital. At the beginning of 1940, the Jewish Hospital (called the Czysa Hospital, after its location on Czysa Street) consisted of eight modern buildings, well-equipped, with 1490 beds and a hospital personnel of 147 physicians, 59 internes, 119 nurses plus student nurses, 13 bacteriologists and six pharmacists. The Children's Hospital on Sliska Street had 220 beds with 64 doctors and nurses.² A Polish superintendent, placed in charge of the Czysa Hospital by the Germans, a drunkard, totally unin-

terested in the operation of the hospital, did not object when the Germans confiscated all the drugs, sera and canned provisions.³ From the Children's Hospital they took soap, ether and all prepared medications; seven doctors who protested against the removal of all the condensed milk were arrested for impudence.⁴

The Ghetto was established in November 1940, but the Czysa Hospital, despite its being on the "Aryan" side, was still allowed to function, to take care of Jewish patients.⁵ There were constant rumors about its removal until in December 1940, there came an order that it must be closed and all the patients moved into the Ghetto. The *Judenrat* tried to have the order put off until the spring, when the weather would be more favorable, but were unsuccessful. No suitable place for a centralized hospital could be found. It was necessary to split it up into various units. All the fixed equipment had to be left behind, as well as much of the movable apparatus.

The surgical and roentgenological sections were set up at 1 Leszno Street, in the building formerly occupied by the Polish State Tobacco and Liquor Monopoly. The gynecologic and obstetric sections were transferred to the clinic building of Dr. Frishman at 5 Tlomackie Street. Respiratory diseases were treated at the former quarantine station on Żelazna Street. The school buildings at 6-8 Stawki Street and 80 Żelazna Street were used for infectious diseases, internal medicine, and miscellaneous specialties. The pharmacy, sterilization and disinfection units were located at 12 Elektoralna Street in the only remaining wing of the bombed-out, burned Hospital of the Holy Ghost. During the typhus epidemic of 1941, 109 Leszno Street was requisitioned for use as a branch of the hospital. Later, after much alteration and reconstruction, 21 Stawki Street was taken over for internal medicine and infectious

disease; biochemistry and bacteriology laboratories were organized there, and an institute of pathology.⁶

The hospital had to start from scratch when it came to supplies. The *Judenrat* levied a special hospital tax of 10 groszy per day on every Jew and collected linens, clothing and instruments.⁷ Medical equipment was later permitted to be sent in from Switzerland.⁸ Drugs were procured at a high price through the firm of Kohn and Heller, Jewish collaborators who had a monopoly on the importation of medicines.⁹ In the middle of 1941, the hospital was enlarged by the addition of 200 beds; funds for this purpose were collected by 3000 volunteers who raised the entire sum in one week. In addition the mattress-makers, through their guild, gave 200 mattresses worth 20,000 zlotys. At the beginning of 1942, 400 more beds were added, and still there was no room for all the sick.¹⁰

Patients lay on mattresses and cots in the corridors. The hospital became a pest-house, not a place of healing. The water pipes froze; there was no heat. The typhus epidemic caused further crowding so that the contagious cases could not be properly isolated. The shortage of bed linens, indeed of everything, aggravated the situation. Unsanitary conditions increased to such an extent that one doctor put out a mimeographed leaflet attacking the Ghetto administration for its neglect of the hospital.¹¹ Even after the epidemic had subsided and the most obvious evils had been corrected, the hospital mortality was high—because of hunger. Food was provided only by the official ration card; without any other source of supply, the hospital had to rely on the allotment sanctioned by the number of ration cards it had at any one time. Dr. Stein, the director of the hospital, complained bitterly in 1941, “The hospital has ceased to be a hospital; it is not even a poor-house. All the patient finds there is medical assistance which, in most cases, oper-

ates with very inadequate means. The food supply . . . is strictly a fiction. The daily ration of about 700 calories cannot sustain the organism. . . . The patient who has no means of providing his own food becomes swollen with hunger and soon dies—unusual progress in the history of medical treatment!”¹²

The doctors and hospital administrators did the best they could, gradually bringing the hospital back to a semblance of its former glory, but a murky semblance. They believed that the ruthless attitude of the Germans would change; they hoped that once more life would be orderly and safe. Everyone was totally unprepared for the events of July 1942. On July 20, almost all the doctors of the Czysa Hospital were locked up in the Pawiak prison,¹³ held as hostages to ensure the carrying out of the deportation order. The pertinent sections of the order of July 22 follow:

Order of Deportation Notice

1. All Jewish inhabitants of Warsaw, regardless of age or sex, will be resettled in the East.
2. The following categories are exempt from resettlement:
 - (f) all Jews belonging to the personnel of the Jewish hospitals as well as all those enrolled in the Jewish Sanitary Columns;
 - (g) all Jews, members of the immediate families of persons enumerated under (a) to (f); only wives and children are considered members of families;
 - (h) all Jews who on the first day of resettlement are in one of the Jewish hospitals and are not fit to be discharged; *the unfitness for discharge must be attested by a doctor appointed by the Judenrat. . . .*

The following instructions for the duration of the resettlement are given to the *Judenrat*; for their carrying out the members of the *Judenrat* are responsible with their lives:

3. On July 23, 1942, the *Judenrat* is to evacuate the Jewish Hospital on Stawki Street and is to transfer the patients and staff to another suitable building inside the Ghetto so that by the evening of July 23, 1942, the hospital may be ready to receive daily the Jews to be resettled. . . .¹⁴

The infectious patients were sent to 80 Żelazna Street. The remaining patients and the laboratories were moved to 1 Leszno Street. Patients were carted by wagons and rickshaws or walked in their slippers to the new locations.¹⁵ The Germans lived up to their promise not to disturb the hospital staffs or the patients—for a little while at least. The hospital became a place of refuge for various notables, brought on a variety of pretexts from the *Umschlagsplatz*; among them was the world famous religious leader, Rabbi Hillel Zeitlin. Their hiding place did not last long, only until the great “kettle” of September, the mass round-up of Jews just before the cessation of deportations.¹⁶

At that time the doctors were ordered to turn over the hospital patients for deportation. Many parents and close relatives of the hospital personnel were registered as patients to save them from Treblinka. Rather than see them go off to be gassed, a group of doctors gave morphine injections to their old parents to give them an easy and quiet death and a decent burial; the mothers of fifteen doctors died in this manner.¹⁷ The hospital administration did not cooperate with the Germans in supplying deportees; they felt it was the duty of the medical profession to keep people alive, not select them for execution. Towards the end of the September “action,” therefore, the Germans used a bitter stratagem. The hospital was told to move back to Stawki Street. “This was taken as a sign by certain people that the deportation was finished. But after only a few days, all the 800 patients and 50 of the hospital personnel were loaded on the freight cars for Treblinka.”¹⁸

After that, the hospital was cut down still further. 109 Leszno Street became a *DuLag* (*Durchgangslager*), a shaping-up hall for brush-workers. From Stawki Street the rest of the hospital was moved to 6-8 Gensia Street, a former warehouse, where a total of 200 physicians and other personnel were given *Lebensrechtsmitteln* (right-to-live cards) as people necessary for the Germans. 400 beds were set up for all the remaining Jews in the Ghetto and the workers in the shops. Some doctors were ordered by the S.S. to work on the “Aryan” side; others became plant physicians; others were deported as unneeded.¹⁹ The hospital tottered along until January 1943. Its functioning was fitful and disorganized. Hospital workers came irregularly because they feared to go out on the streets where capture for forced labor or capricious shooting was common.²⁰

The penultimate liquidation occurred on January 18, 1943. Bunkers, underground hiding places, had been constructed all over the Ghetto in anticipation of further deportations. The hospital’s bunkers had been fitted out in the sub-cellars. On that day, warned in advance, the nurses took down as many patients as the bunkers could hold. Those unable to be moved and the children were left upstairs; the hospital administration, optimists to the last or else firm believers that all men had human feelings, felt that the sick children would be safe from the Germans. They were mistaken. The Germans shot in their beds all those unable to walk, including the children, and all the patients in the infectious disease section. The others, despite the bitter cold, were loaded into open trucks and taken away to the *Umschlagsplatz*. Some doctors committed suicide. The rest of the hospital personnel, those not hidden in the bunkers, were either also taken away or else killed on the spot.²¹

A hospital was again set up on the same site, in the last

stages of the Ghetto. It was no longer a general communal institution. It was maintained by volunteer workers trying to give what little comfort they could to the sick. After their rout on Nalewski Street on April 18, 1943, the beginning of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, the Germans looked for an easy victory. The next day they occupied the hospital, killed all the patients and transported the medical personnel. The building was then blown up.²²

THE DOCTORS

The daily life of the doctors was beset with the same horrors as the rest of the Ghetto population. The Germans treated all the Jews alike with no regard for education or degrees or honors. The doctors had no special privileges, other than temporary exemption from deportation.

There were about 600 Jewish doctors in Warsaw at the beginning of the war. As the Germans approached the city, some fled with their families to the East to find refuge in what was later to become the Soviet Zone. Some went with their army units to battle and were killed; others were taken prisoner and used by the Germans in the prisoner of war camps while they existed. About 200 were left in Warsaw when the city finally fell to the Germans.²³ The number stayed about the same for a time: Christians of Jewish ancestry were added and the Germans impressed others to treat their wounded after the war with the Soviet Union started in June 1941. Then, as with the rest of the population, typhus, tuberculosis, hunger and casual shooting took their toll and the number of doctors steadily decreased.

The same indignities inflicted on other Jews were borne by the doctors, and a few special ones added. On December 10, 1939, mass arrests of the Jewish intelligentsia began;²⁴ release was effected by the payment of ransom, in the form

of fines, but the lawyers and physicians were kept in prison longer than the others. When the General-Government (German-occupied Poland, other than those areas incorporated into the Reich) was established, the title of "physician" was not allowed to be used by Jews; they were to be known as "Krankenbehändler"—tenders of the sick. It followed that they lost all their pension rights and positions in the Civil Service and official hospital posts. On March 6, 1940, Jewish doctors were forbidden to treat "Aryans" because, as the *Krakower Zeitung* explained on March 12,²⁵ "Jewish doctors spread typhoid and typhus fevers" because Jews are by nature dirty and because they want to infect the Gentile population. The doctors wore Red Cross bands to serve as notice to the guards that they had permission to be out on the streets after the curfew to visit patients. Guards occasionally pretended not to see the bands and shot them for sport. There were other less mortal punishments. A doctor who allowed the Red Cross band to slip down over the yellow Shield of David was beaten and fined.²⁶ Doctors who rode the street-car to the hospital on Czysta Street, before its removal into the Ghetto, were taken off and forced to do calisthenics for an hour for the amusement of the Germans.²⁷

Amidst danger and debasement the physicians in the Ghetto carried on their work. As noted above, they reorganized the hospitals and set up a public health administration under the *Judenrat*. They too, like everyone else in the Ghetto, tried to bring normality into the insanity of their existence. Private practice was carried on to some extent and with great limitations. Prescriptions could not be written for the most indispensable drugs because it was precisely these drugs whose importation into the Ghetto was forbidden. Indeed even those pharmaceutical preparations permitted to be brought in were limited in amount

by order of the German authorities.²⁸ Professional protocol was strictly observed, as evidenced by the style of the acknowledgments given in the articles written for the research project on starvation and the careful maintenance of the hospital hierarchy. Mindful of the Hippocratic Oath, of their duty to teach and hand on their learning to a younger generation, the physicians of the Ghetto organized illegal medical courses. The professors were all noted Polish scientists, including Dr. Samuel Goldflam, the world renowned neurologist, Dr. M. Kocen, the famous hematologist, Dr. Michael Szejnman, and Dr. Bronislawa Fejginowna, the authority on bacteriophages. Among them also was Dr. Ludwik Hirszfeld, the bacteriologist, an intensely religious Catholic of Jewish origin, who escaped to the "Aryan" side during the mass deportations and was fortunate enough to survive the war. He later became Director of the University of Wroclaw. In his autobiography he has given a vivid description of the life in the Ghetto and in the hospital.

5. The Hunger Project

IN THE MIDST OF THE MASS STARVATION A GROUP OF DOCTORS, on the initiative of Dr. Israel Milejkowski, the head of the Health Department of the *Judenrat*, decided to use the horrors of their daily existence to advance medical science, a touching demonstration of faith that humane studies would survive the war. At that time, when to the best of their knowledge, it appeared that Hitlerism was triumphing, they refused to believe that the victory of evil would be permanent. "Men without a future, with a final effort of will, decided to make a modest contribution to the future. When death struck some of them, those who remained continued their task, awaiting their own deaths," in a feverish attempt to complete their investigations.¹

An Organizing Commission was set up in November 1941, to develop a plan of work, to find resources and to make assignments. Dr. Julian Fliederbaum made a tentative outline of the investigations to be pursued. He enlisted the help of the physicians in the Bauman-Berson Children's Hospital so that simultaneous studies could be carried on in both hospitals.