

# The Unrecognized Academic Role of the Jewish Hospitals and Their Staff during the Nazi Era

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** After the Nazi regime seized power, the only place where Jewish medical students were allowed to conduct their practicum in Germany were the Jewish hospitals.

**Objectives:** To identify the Jewish students who, during summer 1933 and later, conducted their practicum and wrote their medical dissertations in the Jewish hospitals, and to identify their tutors.

**Methods:** We examined the dissertations at the medical faculty of Berlin that were conducted from the summer of 1933 until the autumn 1937, identifying the students who did their practicum at Jewish hospitals and stood for the MD examination.

**Results:** In total, 29 Jewish students finished their medical practicum and wrote their dissertations either in the Jewish hospitals of Berlin or in other Jewish hospitals outside the capital city after April 1933. Only five of those studies were presented to the MD examination signed by their Jewish tutors. The remaining 24 works were submitted and signed by an Aryan professor. In 10 of those last studies, the names of the Jewish tutors could be uncovered.

**Conclusions:** The Jewish hospitals of Berlin continued their academic activity even after being ejected from Berlin hospital's medical faculty body in April 1933. At that time most of the studies dealt with surgery and gynecology. In most cases the studies were submitted for the MD examination by proxy and signed by an Aryan professor.

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**KEY WORDS:** Berlin, Jewish hospitals, Jewish medical staff, medical students, medical dissertations

In any large settlement of Germany, Jews employed their own doctors and hospitals. Some of the hospitals were established already in the 18th century but most of them in the 19th century. The last Jewish hospital was opened in Leipzig in 1928 during the Weimar Republic. Most of those hospitals had high quality service and modern equipment. Jewish and non-Jewish patients were treated in their facilities. Some were affiliated with the local faculty of medicine.

In Berlin, the first Jewish Hospital was built in 1756 on Oranienburger Street. About 100 years later (in 1861) the new Jewish Hospital on August Street was opened. The third and final location of the Jewish Hospital was moved to Wedding district (Exercierstrasse) in 1914.

In 1908, Paul Ferdinand Strassmann's private obstetrics/gynecology institute was opened in Berlin (Schumannstrasse 18).

By virtue of the high quality staff and modern equipment [1–3], those institutes gained an academic affiliation with the Medical Faculty of the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in Berlin.

The National Socialists took over Germany at the end of January 1933. The law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service, promulgated on 7 April 1933, caused the immediate revocation of the academic teaching licenses and the dismissal of most of the Jewish staff members. The law also revoked the affiliation of the Jewish hospitals to the university. Some of those doctors then joined the Jewish hospitals [3]. For example, Professor Hirschfeld and Professor Schiff who were dismissed from the Charité Hospital established the pediatric department at the Jewish Hospital and ran it until 1938 [4].

Aryan staff and students as well as Aryan patients were forbidden to work, to study, or to be treated at these medical institutes. Publication of the Nuremberg racial Reich Citizenship Law in 1935 (revocation of German citizenship) expelled the last few remaining Jewish staff at the universities in Berlin.

The law against flooding the university with non-Aryan students, which was promulgated 23 April 1933, caused the immediate dismissal of many Jewish students and abruptly forbade the senior students to continue the practicums in non-Jewish hospitals.

Only those Jewish students who received a temporarily medical license after successfully completing the state's examinations (the *Staatsexamen*) during the Weimar Republic era or during the first few months of the Nazi re-

gime were allowed to continue the year of the practicum (in a Jewish hospital only) [5]. From 1934, only those few Jewish students whose background fitted very strict terms [5] were able to take the state's examinations, but this too ended on 13 December 1935, as a consequence of the Nuremberg racial laws [6].

Even though until 15 April 1937 there were no restrictions on Jewish students preparing dissertations in any of Berlin's hospitals under any tutor. Submitting the studies for the MD examination needed a signature of a staff member at the medical faculty of Berlin [5,6].

### OBJECTIVES

Previous studies have described the glorious days of the Jewish Hospital of Berlin and its fate during the grave period of the Nazi regime [2,3]. Other publications described Strassmann's outstanding career and its shameful end during the closure of his hospital. The mission to provide medical care to the Jewish community of Berlin and clinic space to some distinguished Jewish professors was also discussed. However, the academic mission these Jewish hospitals had as the only place in Berlin where Jewish students could continue their final academic obligation and complete the year of practicum, have not been published. In this study, we describe who these Jewish students and Jewish tutors were.

### PATIENTS AND METHODS

#### IDENTIFYING JEWISH STUDENTS

Students were considered Jewish if they had one or more of the following qualifications: they declared so on their resume, their family name (father's as well as mother's) were Cohen or Levi, their father was a rabbi, they studied in a Yeshiva or a Jewish school, or they worked in a Jewish hospital after April 1933.

We reviewed the yearbooks published from 1933 to 1937 [7] presenting all the names of the students who wrote their MD dissertations at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in Berlin and created a list of likely Jewish names [8]. Extra attention was given to those names that also appear in the descriptive book by Levy and Levy [9], which provides a short synopsis of MD doctors who immigrated to Palestine, and in the records of the Yad Vashem library.

As we started to look for their dissertations, which were stored in the university archive, we realized that many of the names did not fit the criteria. We also found

the names of other Jewish students who were missing from the list. Finally, we carefully reviewed all the resume sections of all the theses (years 1933–1937) stored in the Humboldt University of Berlin archives.

We included students in this study only if they were mentioned as completing the practicum in a Jewish hospital or if the Jewish hospital was mentioned on the application forms submitted for the MD examination.

Personal and demographic data on each student was collected from the resume. From the dissertation cover pages we collected the following information: the name of the hospital, the department and the head of the department where the study was performed, and the name of the professor who signed the application forms for the MD examination. In some cases, we noted words of gratitude that were expressed by students to their Jewish tutors who supervised them but could not sign the submission papers.

The ethnic background of the professors (Jewish or Aryan) was ascertained based on former studies and publications [10-12].

### RESULTS

In total, 752 dissertations were approved by the medical faculty of Berlin between summer semester of 1933 to autumn 1937. Screening those studies revealed 91 studies written by Jewish students. Of these dissertations, only 49 studies were prepared during the Nazi regime. The rest were prepared during the Weimar Republic era but stood for the examination during the Nazi regime.

Of the 49, almost 60% (29 students) declared completing their practicum in a Jewish hospital during the Nazi regime. The others either completed the practicum before the Nazi era or submitted their dissertations before starting a practicum. In November 1936, the last Jewish student finished the practicum in Berlin's Jewish hospital.

At least seven students started their practicum in a different hospital around Berlin before being dismissed in April 1933. They continued their practicum at a Jewish hospital. Three students continued the practicum immediately, two after a year and another one after two years of interruption.

Most of the 29 students continued writing their dissertations in the same Jewish hospital where they completed their practicum. Two students completed their practicum and their doctoral studies at Strassmann's private obstetrics/gynecology institute. Four students complete with work at different Jewish hospitals outside Berlin (Köln, Hamburg, Leipzig, and Jerusalem).

These four students studied at least a few semesters in Berlin before moving to another city for a practicum but returned to Berlin to sit for the MD examination.

A study by Maria Zuckerman was signed by Professor von Bergmann, an internal medicine doctor at the Faculty of Berlin. Zuckerman had to interrupt her practicum in Berlin in April 1933 after completing only 4 months. She immigrated to Palestine to complete the practicum at the Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem and prepared her dissertation supervised by Dr. Julius Kleeberg at that hospital. She returned to Berlin for the MD examination and then returned to Palestine to receive her British Mandate medical license.

Nine of the 29 students were females. Five were foreign Jewish students (two Polish, one Hungarian, one Russian, and one Swiss).

Twenty-four dissertations (including those that were completed outside Berlin) were submitted to the examination signed by an Aryan professor from Berlin's faculty. But careful revision of the data presented in the dissertation forms enabled us to uncover the names of eight Jewish tutors: K. Goldstein, G. Klemperer, F. Albert, M. Jacobi, J. Jacob, D. Wolfsohn, and E. Levy. They were all members of the Jewish Hospital of Berlin who supervised nine dissertations.

We found only five studies supervised and signed by four different Jewish tutors. Professor Strauss, the head of the Jewish Hospital, submitted a study for the examination as early as the summer semester of 1933. Professor Strassmann supervised and accepted two students. Another two students who finished the practicum at the Jewish Hospital of Berlin conducted their medical research at the Charité Hospital under the supervision of two Jewish professors who were, at that time, still members of the medical faculty: Professor Ludwig F. Meyer (pediatrician) and Professor Franz Kramer (neurology and psychiatry).

Of the 17 studies conducted by Jewish tutors before 1936, nine dealt with gynecology and surgery, five with internal medicine (including neurology and psychiatry), two with pediatrics, and another with a study in the biochemical Laboratory of the Jewish hospital.

## DISCUSSION

This study shows that the Jewish hospitals of Berlin and those in other major cities in Germany played an important academic role in enabling senior Jewish medical students to complete their medical study obligations during the Nazi regime.

The Jewish hospitals of Berlin and their Jewish medical staff continued the academic activity and the medical research even after being ejected from Berlin's faculty after April 1933.

Before the Nazi regime period, an average of 30 Jewish students completed the practicum every year at the various Berlin hospitals and sat for the MD examination. We described 29 Jewish students who were able to do both academic tasks during the first 4 years of the Nazi regime.

Our list is probably incomplete. Our study design was based on dissertations written by Jewish students who performed their practicum in Jewish hospitals. However, we were unable to identify those students who completed the practicum but did not prepare a dissertation or those students who after the practicum were ready to sit for the MD examination but due to procedural obstacles failed to submit their work [13].

Seven students completed their practicum in a Jewish hospital after they were forced to resign from non-Jewish hospitals in Berlin during April 1933. There are no data on how many Jewish students were in the same situation and did not manage to continue their work.

Probably due to the antisemitic atmosphere in other hospitals of Berlin, the Jewish students preferred completing their dissertation studies in the Jewish hospital or under a Jewish professor in the Charité Hospital. Although there were no administrative restrictions to prepare the studies with a non-Jewish tutor, most of the 29 Jewish students did so even though in most cases a signature of a non-Jewish professor was required to submit the dissertation for the MD examination.

Only five studies of the 29 were signed by four Jewish tutors but in another 10 studies we were able to uncover the name of the Jewish tutor. Most of those studies were in the field of surgery and gynecology. This situation contrasts with the findings of dissertations written by German Jewish students who prepared their dissertations in a non-Jewish hospital with Aryan professors. It was finished later, after the dismissal of all the Jewish professors [5]. Those Jewish students tried to avoid dealing with surgery and gynecology staff members since it was well-known that some of the Aryan medical staff were fanatic Nazi supporters.

Professor Paul Ferdinand Strassmann (1866–1938) was a converted Jew. In 1925, Strassmann was elected to the University Senate and in 1926 he was nominated the chairman of the Obstetric-Gynecologic Society. In October 1935 Professor Strassmann's license to teach was revoked and his hospital was closed by the Nazi authority. In 1938 Strassmann went to

Switzerland (Zermatt) on vacation. He died there [14].

Professor Herman Strauss (1868-1944) was an internist and the director of the Jewish hospital. He was forced to resign as chairman of the Society for Digestive and Metabolic Diseases in April 1933 and on 14 September 1933 his teaching license was revoked [15]. In 1939 Strauss was invited to the United States but he chose not to emigrate and not to leave the Hospital and his patients behind. He was deported to the Theresienstadt Ghetto in July 1942. There he became the head of the science committee in the health care service. He died in the ghetto in 1944 [16].

During the Nazi regime the Jewish Hospital of Berlin was the only Jewish hospital that continued to function until the end of the Third Reich [1,2]. In May 1945, of the last 5000 Jews still living in Berlin, approximately 1000 were hiding in this building [2,3].

## CONCLUSIONS

During the Nazi regime the Jewish Hospitals of Berlin, despite no longer being affiliated with the Faculty of Medicine, continued to teach senior Jewish students who were finishing their practicum and to supervise them while preparing their dissertations. Most of the studies submitted to examinations signed by Aryan staff members of the university, thus enabling at least 29 Jewish medical students to complete all their academic obligations and be eligible to apply for the MD title (but not in Germany).

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**Don't ask me who's influenced me. A lion is made up of the lambs he's digested, and I've been reading all my life.**

Giorgos Seferis (1900-1971), Greek poet, writer, diplomat, Nobel laureate