



War Surgeon of the Twentieth Century

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Four years my father fought their wars in vain . . .
And in his eyes he gathered nameless dead
He gathered many dead for me, to know
Them in his eyes, and not to share their dread,
And not to die like them.
He filled his eyes with them . . .
And he is wrong:
To all my wars it's I who have to go [1]

In this historical note, written 50 years after the Allied Forces were victorious over the powers of darkness in Europe, we pay tribute to the war surgeons who cared for the wounded on the battle fields of the Eastern Front during World War II. This generation of surgeons has almost disappeared from history without a trace. Their pictures do not decorate departmental lecture halls, and the burial place of many of them remains unknown. As no book chapters or journal articles are readily available to describe their deeds, we tell the story of one, Karl Schein. His portrait as a war surgeon reflects the life of many like him who were killed, perished, or vanished in the chaos of the wars of this century without a reference to remind us of their legacy.

Early Years

Karl Schein was born in 1911 in Turka, the region of Galizia that was then Austria. After World War I this area was returned to Poland, but in 1939 it was handed to Russia (by the Hitler-Stalin pact). In 1941 it was conquered by the advancing German forces, and in 1945 it again became part of the Soviet Union. At present it is part of Ukraine.

When Karl was 5 years old his father, a poor wood-coal producer, died and left the family exposed to the starvation and hardships that struck the region during World War I. It was at this point that the young boy started to attend the traditional Hebrew "Cheder," his only source of education until the age of 12.

During the 1920s the financial situation of the family improved owing to the success in business of his elder brother in Prague. This change in fortune allowed the teenager to enter a secular Polish high school from which he matriculated at the age of 17. In later years Karl often reflected back on the humiliating poverty of these years: "one pair of shoes and chicken-soup served only on Sabbath." The first automobile was seen in Turka in 1925 and

made a great impression on the boy, perhaps explaining why in his later years he would buy a new car almost every year.

In those days, because of anti-Semitic trends in academic Polish institutions, the gates of medical schools were virtually closed to young Jews, and those who aspired to become physicians were forced west, to the universities of central Europe and Italy. Young Karl chose Prague and in 1929 entered the German language Karls University. In Prague, like many young Eastern Jews, he became attracted to the ideology of communism, perceiving it to be an antidote to the miseries of anti-Semitism and poverty. He became active in the Communist Party and was arrested by the police after addressing a large student gathering. In 1935 he received the M.D. degree and was immediately expelled from Czechoslovakia, then under the anti-Communist rule of Massarik. Karl returned to Poland and until 1939 served as a house surgeon in the Jewish Hospital in Lwow (Lemberg).

World War II

In 1939, when Hitler invaded Poland and Lwow was occupied by the Russians, Karl advanced to the position of an Assistant Surgeon in Lwow's University Hospital. In 1941 when Hitler suddenly broke the treaty with Stalin and invaded Russia, Karl decided to join the Red Army. Before doing so he visited his home town Turka and spent a few days with his mother, brothers, and sisters. It was their last family reunion. Soon, under German occupation they, together with all Turka's Jews, were deported to one of the concentration camps and gassed.

During 1941 to 1943 Karl, chief surgeon of a field hospital, with the badly beaten Red Army retreated deep into Russia. We know little about this period; only a few pictures of female-nurse comrades and anecdotes told years later remain. The hospital, poorly equipped and "starved" (as was the rest of the Russian Army), was overwhelmed with wounded combatants. Maggots swarmed in traumatic and operative wounds and were considered beneficial, effectively débriding pus and necrotic tissues. The operating room tent was the only one to be well heated; between operations surgeons collapsed and slept on and under the operating tables.

In the absence of adequate food, "recreational" activity among surgeons and supporting staff centered on vodka and smoking. Genuine vodka was, however, scarce. One morning, only 3 miles ahead of the advancing German tanks, Karl found his entire team

of drivers "cold-dead" after having consumed a large quantity of an antifreeze fluid, falsely identified as medical alcohol. Under enemy fire the hospital retreated in a few vehicles, leaving most of their equipment behind.

As real cigarettes were not available, the surgeons in those days smoked "machorkas." Years later Karl enjoyed demonstrating how a "machorka" is produced: A large piece of newspaper (or political pamphlet) is rolled into a cone which is then filled with cheap, coarse tobacco. Heavy "machorka" smoking probably initiated the severe chronic obstructive pulmonary disease from which Schein later suffered. During these years of lost battles and hopeless retreats Karl developed a compassion for the tragic fate of the Russian people. On occasion, years later when whiskey replaced vodka Karl would sing old Russian folk songs to the pleasure of his friends.

An immense amount of surgery on the front made Karl a dextrous and swift war surgeon. He developed a technique to rapidly arrest torrential hemorrhage from gunshot-wounded subclavian vessels. After extending the entry wound, he inserted the jaws of a large plaster of Paris "cutter" around the head of the clavicle, instantly avulsing the sternoclavicular joint and the attached musculature. The exposed artery was then ligated.

The practice of self-inflicted gunshot wounds to the extremities (mainly the hands) was not uncommon among the front troops during these harsh years. Such attempts at self-mutilation (to escape battle) were punished with death by the Russian Army authorities. Each day Communist Party military commissars ("politruks") inspected the wounded, searching for near-range gunshot injuries to the hands and feet. Offenders were summarily executed. Karl learned to identify such wounds at the receiving station and immediately amputated the injured part, saving the self-mutilator from a firing squad but risking his own life. Thirty years later he met one of these amputees in Israel.

In 1943 the winds of war changed direction; Schein was transferred to the newly created communist Polish army and became Chief Surgeon of its First Army (Fig. 1). He moved with the now victorious troops and in 1945 entered Berlin with the occupying forces.

Other Wars

In 1948 Karl was the first postwar Polish surgeon to be sent to the West by the World Health Organization for further study. Before leaving for the United States he was requested by the army to change his name (of Jewish-German sound) to "a more proper" Polish one. Schein became Szaniewicz. He returned to his original name 9 years later in Israel. During the American tour his wife and baby daughter were left behind as "hostages," ensuring his eventual return from the "corrupting West." Szaniewicz spent 1 year in the United States practicing orthopedics under Leo Meyer in New York followed by a stint at the Mayo Clinic. He was impressed with America and its medicine. He learned English rapidly, and it became another of his mastered languages (after Polish, German, Russian, Czech, Ukraine, Latin, Hebrew, and Yiddish). He also became familiar with American culture and brought with him to Poland a collection of Paul Robeson records (Robeson was considered "politically correct" by the communist authorities).

On his return to Poland in 1949, Karl was posted to the Island of Wolin on the Baltic sea. There he directed a 3500-bed secret



Fig. 1. In the Polish "Red" army toward the end of World War II (1945).

military hospital assembled to receive the communist casualties of the Greek Civil War being fought at that time. The emphasis was on delayed reconstructive surgery.

The encounter with American medicine was a turning point in the career of the now 37-year-old surgeon. He ceased being the classic "I do it all" surgeon of the prewar and war eras and devoted himself to orthopedics. The knowledge gained during World War II and in Wolin formed the basis of a stream of publications. His first paper entitled, "The surgical work in the first-line war hospitals of the First Army" (*Military Surgeon* 5-6, 1945) was published in Warsaw in 1945. Fifty publications followed, including textbooks such as: *The Principles of Surgical Treatment in War Conditions* (Ministry of National Defense, Warsaw, 1949/1951), *The Treatment of Non-unioned Fractures and Defects of Long Bones—A Monograph* (Institute for Medical Publications, Warsaw, 1951), *Reconstructive Surgery of Bullet Injuries of the Foot—A Monograph* (Ministry of National Defense, Warsaw, 1952), *Anatomic Surgery in Divisions and Army Surgical Units* (Ministry of National Defense, Warsaw, 1952), and *Medical Expertise in Disability Evaluation and Employment* (Institute for Medical Publications, Warsaw, 1955).

In 1951 Karl was nominated to head the Department of Orthopedics and Traumatology in Lodz University Hospital and became a Professor of Military Surgery at the local medical school (Fig. 2). His authority regarding war surgery increased in the eastern bloc, and he was called on to advise the North Koreans, now fighting the Korean War, on how to organize their front-line medical services. In 1953 he became the Chief Surgeon of the



Fig. 2. Chief of Orthopedics, standing in the center with assistants, at Lodz's University Hospital, 1952.

Polish army, around the time that Stalinistic era came to an end. Information about the crimes of that regime started to leak, and old friends (who had disappeared) began returning from the Siberian camps with tales about the fate of common friends who did not return. For Karl this period represented the end of the process of "political awaking" that had begun in the United States. In 1954 he resigned from the army and took leadership of the orthopedic department in Warsaw's Municipal Hospital.

In 1957 party secretary Gomulka, who a year previously had come to power to replace the hitherto Stalinistic regime, opened the gates of Poland so the tiny percentage of the Jewish Poles who survived the Holocaust could emigrate. Karl and family left for Israel. He never expressed a desire to see Poland or Russia again.

Karl settled in Haifa, the main port town of Israel. The first job he could find was as an outpatient clinic surgeon, treating minor injuries. This man, who for years was driven in a chauffeured car, began commuting to work on a public bus. He was frustrated by the lack of operative activity. However, after 1 year in Israel he became the head of orthopedics in Haifa's hospital. Karl rapidly upgraded his almost forgotten Hebrew; and in 1961 as his charismatic qualities began shining through he was appointed Executive Director of his hospital (Fig. 3). In that position the old traits of war surgeon came through: Karl conducted a constant battle for cost-effectiveness and against wastage and extravagance. His hospital was the last to introduce disposable needles and suture material; he himself continued to use resterilized needles, never understanding why others did not enjoy threading the silk through the eye of the needle.

Karl was not an "easy" director and head of department. He did not lose the volatile surgeon-like temper of World War II. Twenty-one years after his death an operating room (OR) nurse recalled: "Initially we were awfully scared of him; when things went wrong he was yelling and cursing at us. He shouted at his doctors too. But when the storm was over he shared with us jokes over tea. He knew even the floor sweepers by name. We grew to love and respect him." Another retired OR nurse recalled: "He established his own OR rules, which would not be acceptable today. During long operations he would periodically stick his head through the OR doors to puff on a lighted cigarette held by his favorite nurse . . . only *he* was allowed to do so."



Fig. 3. Director of Hospital, Haifa, Israel, 1966.

In 1964 Karl suffered his first myocardial infarction. His high blood pressure was diagnosed as "essential hypertension." Only after his death 9 years later would the real cause for the hypertension be established. In 1967 during the long waiting period prior to the Six Day War Karl prepared his hospital for war: The stress of these days took its toll, and during the war he was hospitalized for severe exhaustion. It is perhaps a coincidence that at the same time the late Prime Minister Rabin, then General and Chief of Staff of the Israeli army, was also treated for severe exhaustion and nicotine poisoning.

In the next war, the War of Attrition fought between 1968 and 1970 on Israel's four borders, Karl was involved this time through the eyes of his son who had joined an infantry brigade. When his son was evacuated to the rear after suffering mortar shrapnel injuries Karl was not satisfied with the initial care of the wound and demanded more radical reexcision of devitalized tissues.

Aftermath

Ironically for Schein, who was involved in a long succession of wars, he developed his final illness on the first day of the Yom Kippur War in 1973. At daybreak on this atonement day, Egyptian and Syrian forces attacked a surprised Israel. A few hours later Schein had ruptured an emphysematous bulla, developing a spontaneous pneumothorax. He was frustrated to spend the war undergoing prolonged tube thoracostomy drainage in a ward congested with combat casualties from the Golan Heights. A

persistent pleural leak failed to seal even after installation of a pleural irritant, and eventually empyema ensued. The now chronically ill Schein agreed to undergo a thoracotomy recommended by a former South African thoracic surgeon. On the morning of the operation he shaved carefully and applied aftershave lotion to his face; he then hugged and kissed on both cheeks (Russian manner) all his friends, including the surgeon who was going to perform the operation. He bid farewell to his family and underwent the operation from which he would never awake. Postoperatively, he developed persistent hypotension and died the following day. An autopsy was performed. Twenty years later the thoracic surgeon, now over 80 years old, met Schein's son: "Didn't you know," he asked, "that the autopsy of your father disclosed a large pheochromocytoma which was probably the cause of his

hypertension, the accelerated atherosclerosis, and finally the unexplained irreversible postoperative shock."

A new clinic building in his hospital in Haifa was dedicated to his memory. Years later during renovations the memorial plaque was removed, never to be returned. Later even the name of the hospital was changed to honor an American Jewish foundation, and the affiliated medical school, named after its founder, was retitled after a living Swiss donor.

Reference

1. Amichai, Y.: *In Here We Loved. A Life of Poetry.* New York, Harper/Collins, 1994, p. 23