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Holding Out Hope in a Cruel World

Geneticist Arno Motulsky recalls wartime Europe

Dr. Arno Motulsky made a remarkable journey from his boyhood in Germany through his youthful struggles to escape Nazi persecution to his achievements as one of the fathers of modern genetics. Above, the young Motulsky's portrait is shown with the SS St. Louis, the ship that brought him to asylum in Cuba — only to be turned back upon its arrival in Havana.

On May 10, 1940, 16-year-old Arno Motulsky awoke to what he thought was the roar of a thunderstorm. Looking out the window, he saw blue sky filled with swarms of giant bombers in formation over Brussels. The Germans were attacking Belgium.

The bombing of Brussels is one of Motulsky's many vivid wartime memories. Before age 18, the renowned UW

professor of medicine and genome sciences lived through prewar Germany, an ill-fated passage to Cuba, the attack on Belgium by the Germans, and deportation to French internment camps, before emigrating to the United States. His experiences gave him a mature perspective on the world — one that accepts the whims of fate and that understands how humans learn to endure even under the worst circumstances. He attributes his survival to luck. And his world view remains, despite early hardships and evidence to the contrary, guardedly hopeful.

Darkening Climate

Motulsky, whose experiences were recorded as part of Steven Spielberg's *Survivors of the Shoah* project, recalls a happy childhood, free of anti-Semitism. But with the arrival of the Nazis in 1933, anti-Semitic remarks became commonplace. Motulsky remembers feeling frightened, saying, "You wondered how this could happen. But after awhile, you learned to live with it." The situation escalated, and by 1937, it was nearly intolerable. The family moved to Hamburg, intending to emigrate to the United States.

When Motulsky's father was forced to leave Germany in early 1938, he was able to go to Cuba. He hoped to move from there to the United States. Still in Germany, Motulsky's mother tried to obtain U.S. visas for her three children and herself, but with strict quotas, the task was difficult.

On November 10, 1938, later known as Kristallnacht (Crystal Night), the Nazis led a rampage of vicious attacks against Jewish property and individuals — burning synagogues, smashing windows, and hauling men to concentration camps. Motulsky and his family could hear the chaos and pillage.

Voyage to Nowhere

After Kristallnacht, most Jews within Germany tried to leave. Because immigration quotas had tightened, obtaining visas was nearly impossible. But with persistence, the Motulskys were able to arrange passage to Cuba on the SS *St. Louis*, a German luxury liner. The ship, carrying nearly 1,000 Jewish refugees, departed on May 13, 1939. Passengers were treated well and, after the horrors of recent events, the journey was a welcome respite. When the ship set sail, all passengers bore



After months in French internment camps, 17-year-old Motulsky was able to travel to Marseilles, where he arranged passage to America.

legitimate landing certificates for Cuba. But during the two-week passage, the Cuban government invalidated almost all certificates. In Havana, the passengers were required to remain on board. Days passed and negotiations with the Cuban government ultimately failed.

Motulsky recalls the growing desperation among passengers. One man cut his wrists and jumped overboard. Desperation was also mounting on land. Motulsky's father and others awaiting the ship hired motorboats to take them within 10-30 yards of the ship. Motulsky's mother, at the sight of her husband in the distance, broke down and cried. Motulsky says that, even then, "You learned to cope. We believed that, sooner or later, we would meet my father again."

The ship sailed along Miami's coastline, but because the U.S. also refused entry, the SS *St. Louis* finally began the trip back to Europe. Conditions on board changed dramatically. Morale was low, especially among previous concentration camp detainees. Passengers nearly panicked as they approached Europe. Two days before the ship was to arrive in Germany, the Belgian, British, French, and Dutch governments granted

Excerpt from Motulsky's early account of his experiences

Some hours later we were marching thru the ~~streets~~ streets of Tournai towards the big armory, ~~fixixxxxsmallxfrextiexxiexx~~ that two days later was a heap of ruins. We stood eight full hours in the yard under a blazing sun, every 15 feet a soldier with a charged bayonet watching us. These soldiers were particularly outraged ~~againxiexx~~, their division had been destroyed the day before and only a few hun-

temporary asylum to the travelers. The Motulskys were sent to Brussels. Meanwhile, Motulsky's father emigrated to America and settled in Chicago.

Deportation to France

In Brussels, the Motulskys again worked toward a U.S. visa, and on May 1, 1940, were successful. But on May 10, before they could escape, the Germans attacked Belgium. The Belgian police arrested Motulsky and his family along with thousands of German nationals. Women and children were released, but men, including the 16-year-old Motulsky, were detained.

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Motulsky writes, “We were driven outside and ordered to run, pushed forward by the charged bayonets of the Belgian guards. The mob jeered and booed at us.”

Motulsky and other German nationals, now enemy aliens, were loaded and transported in cattle cars. More than 50 men were squeezed into each car without food or water, with the sound of planes and bombing outside. One explosion hit the train and killed 25 people. After four days without food and with little water, the passengers were nearly delirious.

Eventually, the train arrived at a small internment camp in western France, built to accommodate 500 people but packed with 5,000. As the Germans approached, they were moved to another camp, St. Cyprien, close to the Spanish border. The camp's ramshackle wooden barracks held more than 2,000 people. After France was defeated, non-Jewish Germans went home while Jews were detained. Food was scarce. Medical conditions deteriorated, with rampant diarrhea and growing spread of a febrile illness. When French authorities did not respond to concerns about the epidemic, a physician crept out of the camp and went to a nearby medical laboratory. With help, the illness was identified as typhoid fever. Detainees were

vaccinated, but not before 200 fell ill and 60 died. Yet, in the midst of hunger, illness, and uncertainty, the detainees created a rich cultural life, even organizing lectures by internees who were well known professors.

Shortly after intense rains and near flooding of the camp in October 1940, Motulsky and others were moved to Gurs, a camp with 10,000 people. Living conditions were worse there, with no beds, little food, rampant dysentery, and ankle-deep mud from chronic rains. Motulsky says, “We were hungry all the time. All you could think about was food.” Despite camp conditions, Motulsky adapted, saying, “I did not give up. I had an American visa.”

Passage to America

Motulsky was moved to a transit camp near Aix-en-Provence where he was able to travel to Marseilles to arrange passage to the U.S. His visa was renewed, and, with his father sending the fare for passage by boat, he arranged transit to Spain and Portugal. The Nationalist Spaniards, friends of the Nazis, would not grant a transit visa to anyone between the ages of 18 and 40. Motulsky, 10 days short of his 18th birthday, slipped under the wire. He arrived in Lisbon, and sailed for New York, where he was met by relatives. Motulsky was reunited with his father in Chicago in 1941, after a separation of three years.

Motulsky's mother, brother, and sister, he later learned, fled into France. The German Army overtook them and sent them back to occupied Brussels. There, they lived by selling personal items they had brought with them from Germany. In 1943, orders were received to assemble for deportation to Poland. With help from friends in Belgium, the Motulskys went underground and entered Switzerland, walking across the border. They were arrested by Swiss police and sent to camps, but were treated sympathetically. After the war, the Motulsky family was reunited in the United States.

At age 18 and en route to American citizenship, Motulsky's life normalized. He had observed and appreciated the work of physicians in French camps. A laboratory position in Chicago confirmed his interest in medicine and he enrolled in premedical classes at night. Drafted into the Army, which sought to secure its supply of physicians, he was assigned to Yale University to finish his undergraduate studies. At Yale, he

Food in the early weeks of our stay was scarce and monotonous. For 4 weeks we didn't get anything else but porridge. There was nothing to buy. Sanitary conditions were horri-

fic and never improved. ~~xxxxxx~~~~xxxxxx~~~~xxxxxx~~~~xxxxxx~~~~xxxxxx~~

Going
~~xxxx~~ into details would be an offense to good taste. A dysentery

epidemic did not spare one of us. Doctors short of medicines could

not do anything to help the sick. Our ramshackle huts had no

studied under outstanding biology and genetics teachers. Sent to the University of Illinois in Chicago for medical school under the Army's specialized training program, Motulsky finished second in his class of 170 students. During residency training in internal medicine at Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago, he worked with Karl Singer, a charismatic mentor who sparked Motulsky's interest in hematology. Recruited to the University of Washington as a hematology instructor in 1953, Motulsky initiated lectures in the neglected field of medical genetics. Encouraged by the late Robert Williams, chair of the Department of Medicine, he eventually concentrated his efforts in that specialty.

Reflecting on Fate

Motulsky has gone on to an illustrious career in medical genetics, much of it spent at the University of Washington. His contributions to medical genetics have been well documented. He is a husband, father, and grandfather. For 10 years, he served on the Scientific Advisory Board of Studies on

Hiroshima and Nagasaki to determine the medical and genetic impact of the atomic explosions. He served as an expert witness during the hearings on Josef Mengele, the escaped Nazi medical geneticist who performed horrible experiments on human beings at Auschwitz. Of serving at the hearings, Motulsky says, "It stimulated my interest to understand how this could have happened and how science became perverted."

Asked what message he would give his grandchildren, Motulsky concludes that there is no simple answer. He says, "Unfortunately, large populations can be seduced by a demagogue. While there are many bad things in this world, there is much good in human beings. We should try to bring out the best in people." He goes on, "I've been very fortunate in my career as a physician-scientist. Yet there is this remarkable story of my life in Europe between 1939 and 1941. If fate had been just a little different, I would not have survived, but instead would have ended up in the gas chambers, as did many of my co-internees from the French camps who were deported to Auschwitz. That thought is often with me."