

Dr Joseph Melzak (1903-1972). A pupil of two Jewish-Polish giants: Prof. Edward Flatau (1868- 1932), and Sir Ludwig Guttmann (1899-1980)

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ABSTRACT

Dr Joseph Melzak, was born in Poland , September 1903 and died in September 1972 in Haifa, Israel. He joined the Polish army in the First World War. He studied medicine after the world war and became a neurologist. He was trained by the father of Polish neurology, Prof Edward Flatau (1868- 1932). During the second world war Joseph escaped from Poland . joined the Polish free army which became part of the British 8th army. He worked as a physician and surgeon in the British army in Italy and in Palestine. After the war he came to the UK and worked in the field of neuro-

rehabilitation and eventually settled at Stoke Mandeville Hospital , and worked under the father of the comprehensive rehabilitation of the spinally injured: Sir Ludwig Guttmann (1899-1980). He retired from the National Health Service in the UK and immigrated to Israel, and worked for Community Health Organization, in Haifa. His academic publications are well known to those who work with spinal cord injuries.

Keywords: Joseph Melzak, Edward Flatau, Ludwig Guttmann

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He was born as " Jerzy Izrael" in Poland, September 1903 and died in September 1972 in Haifa, Israel. He was one of large Jewish family living in Warsaw in Miła street, later, the street became the center of the ghetto . Joseph was the youngest of six children and his mother died soon after his birth from breast cancer. He was cared for by his older sisters. The family was poor. He pretended to be older than his age and was recruited willingly to the Polish army in the first world war . His daughter, Sheila Melzak, wrote me that he succeeded in his aim to study medicine after the first world war and became a neurologist. He worked

under the father of Polish neurology: Prof Edward Flatau [1].

" Teofil Simchowicz became the director of the Edward Flatau Warsaw Institute of Neurobiology. The Institute's offices were located in the building at Puławska 41 Street, apartment 9. Numerous people worked there – Eufemiusz Herman, Bronisław Karbowski, Leon Lipszowicz, Jerzy Melzak, Natan Mesz, Jakub Pinczewski, Jakub Mackiewicz, Zygmunt Szymanowski and Natalia Zylberlast-Zand " [2].



Picture 1, from United States Holocaust Memorial Museum .RP_12736.pdf https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/wexner/cache/1655119411-2823705-RP_12736.pdf, Sarah Kopelman-Noyes. The David M. Rubenstein National Institute for Holocaust Documentation, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, S.W. Washington, D.C. 20024, www.ushmm.org



Picture 2: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. RP_12736.pdf, https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/wexner/cache/1655119411-2823705-RP_12736.pdf. Sarah Kopelman-Noyes, The David M. Rubenstein National Institute for Holocaust Documentation, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,, 100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, S.W. Washington, D.C. 20024, www.ushmm.org

He lived in Warsaw at Złota St. 45, near famous physicians: the pediatrician-educationalist Dr. Henryk Goldszmit ("Janusz Korczak") who lived in Złota St. 8; Dr Emil Apfelbaum, Złota 58

(later a member of the researchers on The Hunger Disease at Warsaw ghetto); and the neurologist Teofil Simchowicz , Złota 27, [2].



Picture 3. from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum., RP_12736.pdf. https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/wexner/cache/1655119411-2823705-RP_12736.pdf Sarah Kopelman-Noyes, The David M. Rubenstein National Institute for Holocaust Documentation, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20024, www.ushmm.org



Picture 4. from : the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum .RP_12736.pdf, https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/wexner/cache/1655119411-2823705-RP_12736.pdf, Sarah Kopelman-Noyes, The David M. Rubenstein National Institute for Holocaust Documentation, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, S.W. , Washington, D.C. 20024, www.ushmm.org

During the second world war most of his family were murdered in Auschwitz. He and two sisters survived. One sister was in Siberia with her family during the war, another, a concert pianist, survived Auschwitz and being experimented on and eventually went to live in Tel Aviv. Joseph supported her financially and emotionally until his death.

During the second world war Joseph with other Jewish Polish men, escaped from Poland with the Polish free army which became part of a unit within the British army (the 8th army). He worked as a physician and surgeon in the British army in Italy and in Palestine [3].

After the war he came to the UK and worked in the field of rehabilitation and eventually settled at Stoke Mandeville. He was offered professorships in UK universities but after the poverty and disruption of his early years, rooted in the Holocaust and the war, he decided to remain with his family living in Aston-Clinton, near to Stoke Mandeville (Bucks.) and to continue to develop his skills in rehabilitation work. He married Ernestine Mermelstein in 1948 in London knowing her for only three weeks. They met at David and Lili Sacks's place (David's brother was the author-neurologist Oliver Sacks). They had two children, Maurice who worked as a film maker, ornithologist,

conservationist and naturalist and Sheila, Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist in London, and director and founder of a small charity working with young and unaccompanied asylum seekers and refugees (the Baobab Centre for Young Survivors in Exile).

Joseph retired from the National Health Service in the UK and immigrated to Israel. He learned Hebrew, and worked for Community Health Organization, in Haifa and remained connected to other neurologists. His list of publications is short but important [4-11]. Sir Ludwig mentioned two of them, on p 710 and 716, in his monumental book [12]. John Silver mentioned him in his book review of Sir Ludwig's basic book: "*with regard to the method of dealing with inflated Foley catheter that will not deflate the technique of gradual dilatation as used by Dr Melzak, is no longer carried out at SMH...*" [13].

In the book on Polish neurologists [15], Melzak is mentioned twice: on p 74' as one of Flatau's pupils, and on p 375, as one who collaborated in 1934 with Dr. Jakub Pinczewski (1893-1943). They measured the calcium levels in the cerebro-spinal-fluid in various clinical situations. They published together an article [15].



Picture 5. At Stoke Mandeville Hospital: Melzak (1st on the left, L. Michalis (third from left), John Silver (5th from left), Jack Walsh (1st on the right). (from Ms. Sheila Melzak collection)

Sir Ludwig wrote an obituary on Melzak: "*following the defeat of the Polish Army, made his way through Rumania and Israel (should be Palestine. AO) to join the Free Polish Army. He took part in the campaign in the Middle East and Italy including the terrible battle at Monte Casino. After the Free Polish Army disbanded he joined the National Spinal Injuries Centre, Stoke Mandeville,*

as Medical Officer in 1951. Thanks to his neurological knowledge and understanding of the principles of rehabilitation, he became a great asset to the Unit. In due course he was appointed Senior Medical Officer and later consultant. In 1966, when I retired from the Directorship and Dr. Walsh took over, Dr. Melzak became Deputy Director of the Unit" [16].



Picture 6. (Dr Melzak) (from Ms Sheila Melzak collection)



Picture 7. The original Polish material was obtained from the archival holdings of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. RP_12736.pdf, (https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/wexner/cache/1655119411-2823705-RP_12736.pdf). Sarah Kopelman-Noyes, The David M. Rubenstein National Institute for Holocaust Documentation, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20024, www.ushmm.org, My sincere and warm thanks to Mrs. Sheila Melzak, (Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist, Director Baobab Centre for Young Survivors in Exile, London, Website: www.baobabsurvivors.org), for sending me precious information and photos

In order to complete information on the “<stars> around Sir Ludwig, I’ll add some more information: John James Walsh, (1917 - 1992), was born in Cork, Ireland. He joined Ludwig Guttman’s team at the National Spinal Injuries Centre, Stoke Mandeville. He was appointed SHMO there but was made a consultant when that grade was abolished. He became expert in the general surgical care of paraplegics and in particular in the treatment of pressure sores. He was appointed deputy to the somewhat dictatorial Sir Ludwig in 1957 and applied in practice the principles laid down by his chief. He was founder member of the International Medical Society for Paraplegia in 1961 and was

appointed an honorary consultant to the National Centre for Paraplegia in Ireland. His book *Understanding paraplegia* (1964) was widely read. When Sir Ludwig retired in 1966 he insisted that Walsh should succeed him in the Director’s chair, a position which brought him many honours, including the FRCS by election in 1969 and the FRCP in 1975. His period of office was not, however, an unqualified success: he never fully gained the confidence of his senior colleagues and the future of the unit was at one time in doubt. He retired in 1977 to take up a consultancy at the Paddocks Private Clinic in Princes Risborough” [17].

On Lorenz Michaelis : Silver wrote me once that "My memory is that Lorenz Michaelis came from Germany in 1933 when he saw the Nazi tide. He wrote his MD in Germany and requalified in Great Britain. He worked during the war as a surgeon for the Emergency Medical Services between 1939-1945. He joined Stoke Mandeville on the spinal unit and was an intellectual. As an intellectual he devoted himself to teaching. He was a senior hospital medical officer he never actually achieved a higher qualification. I was actually appointed a consultant. He wrote a book on surgery in spinal injury. Eventually when all the SHMOs were reviewed he was appointed a consultant about a year before his retirement. He was a very cultured man, keen on music and it was his wish which was constantly frustrated by Guttmann to introduce orthopaedics and spinal injuries into general orthopaedics. He was a very gifted teacher and frustrated during his time at Stoke Mandeville. Apart from Guttmann, the other two, Melzak and Jack Walsh were intellectuals, compared with him and he was junior to them such was the hierarchical structure at Stoke Mandeville" I met Dr Sheila Pope-Jennett who also spent a few years At SMH and later became a professor of physiology and the wife of Professor Sir Bryan Jennett (1926–2008) [18].

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

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