

Editor's Page

A Personal Note With A Non-Personal Lesson

I was six years old in 1933 and lived in Berlin, Germany. My father was a reasonably successful businessman who could afford a German nursemaid to help raise me. My mother, who like her parents was born in Germany, felt she was German in every respect.

My German nursemaid and her S.S. boyfriend used to take me, blond and cute as I used to be, to Nazi parades which I enjoyed thoroughly, as little boys are apt to. The marching and the bands were impressive. My nursemaid and her S.S. boyfriend apparently loved me, and so I came home on my sixth birthday all dressed up in a brown uniform and greeted my father with a loud and cheerful "Heil Hitler." They had outfitted me as they did without malice and almost innocently, or so it seemed at least. But my father, wise to the early signals of danger, knew instinctively and immediately that the time had come to leave. Generations of precarious existence had sharpened his senses. His business places were already being picketed by the Nazis.



DR. BAR-LEVAV

My mother was far from enthusiastic. She was not at all convinced that the German nation, with such a magnificent cultural heritage and advanced civilization could really lose its humanity and actually threaten the lives of innocent people. She believed, like so many of her generation, that an appeal to the better in Man, and the basic decency of the German people would suffice to change what seemed an ominous course. She was, obviously, not well versed in the realities of power, and tended to underrate the strength and persistence of economic and political interests. She must have thought at that time that if the intended victims only behaved well, lived up to their civic responsibilities and made no waves, the Germans probably would reform themselves.

Less than five years later, living in another country, she was most appreciative of my father's far-sighted understanding and courage in taking the bold step of leaving, and of leaving everything he had. She was alive. The children were alive. Within one year, her own parents were burned in a German incinerator.

* * *

Physicians in the United States are not in danger of physical extinction, but the private practice of medicine is. The advent of the *science* of medicine and the decline of the *art* of medicine have tended to de-emphasize the traditional relationship of trust between patient and physician, which used to be a cornerstone of medicine. Greedy physicians, who have streamlined their practices not only to increase productivity, but also to maximize their incomes, have aggravated the problem. But the attacks on the private practice of medicine are mostly a consequence of a basic psychologic crisis that wreaks havoc in this society. The crisis is a function of widespread psychologic hunger in a society that encourages unrealistic expectations and hopes for getting something for nothing. Both patients and physicians are victims of it.

Nonetheless, respect for life and for the dignity of Man are basic tenets that still hold true in Medicine even today. They are being challenged now by a different system

of values in which the group is primary, and individual needs are subjected and secondary to it. Such a society measures the individual by societal norms, and its citizens are psychologically manipulated by hidden persuaders and by the tyranny of public opinion polls. Mass-media are used to control the masses, as individuals and individualism are ground to dust. 1984 is upon us in 1975. The bureaucratic thrust against the traditional approach of Medicine that stresses The Patient, rather than patient populations, is a small detail in a much larger picture. It is, strangely enough, all promoted under the banner of finding a more equitable and a more humane approach to the delivery of medical care. In reality, it is neither equitable nor humane, but much more expensive and wasteful.

Impersonal care in massive health maintenance institutional centers, controlled by computerized and standardized procedures, endangers more than just the one to one relationship between a doctor and his or her patient. It is part of a cancer that erodes the most basic values of our civilization. Physicians must assume individual responsibility in this fight or realize that they are in effect helping those who patronizingly assume the right to decide what is best for the public, and then whip up irrational support for it. Utopian schemes dreamt up by holier-than-thou reformers usually ignore the cost of such programs, financially, and in terms of time and dignity to the consumer, the patient.

* * *

Physicians must not fail to realize the position they are in. Some still believe, as the Jews of Germany did, that if physicians only behave well and make no waves, their right of professional survival will be respected. This appears to be no more than wishful thinking.

George Santayana pointed out that "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." This is a war for survival of the traditions of Medicine and the rights and dignity of each individual patient. It is not a war in defense of all physicians, some of whom fall miserably short. It may be the fate and good fortune of physicians to have been swept by history into a position to defend individuality, not only in the realm of medicine. Paying tribute has never deterred determined attackers for very long. It will not deter them now.

Guilt and timidity on the part of some physicians need to be recognized as such. These qualities serve well the needs of individuals and cannot, therefore, be sanely condemned, but surely they cannot be allowed to become the basis of public policy. Reality and Rationality must guide actions, not wishful thinking. Physicians must coolly identify the forces that are marshalled against their position, and not be disarmed by disclaimers nor by disguises. These are designed to lull the profession into continuing sleep. Rationalizations have clearly played into the hands of the Nazis. It is no less dangerous to depend on rationalizations now. The lesson of history is simple and clear.

R. Pan-Lerman, M.D.