A Forgotten Pupil of Sir Ludwig Guttmann: Ralph Spira, M.D.(Paris), LRCP & Surg (Edin.), and LRCPS (Glas). (1913 Krakow, Poland-1997, Tel Aviv, Israel)

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Ralph Spira (1913 Krakow, Poland-1997, Tel Aviv, Israel) studied medicine in Paris and, in 1938, moved to London to work in emergency medicine and surgery. During the War, he volunteered to serve with the British Royal Navy and in a few general hospitals. Later on, he was affiliated with the rehabilitation medicine units, and in 1948, he was sent to join Dr. Ludwig Guttmann's at the first National Spinal Unit, Stoke Mandeville Hospital, Aylesbury, Bucks. In 1952, he immigrated to Israel and is regarded as one of the first rehabilitation medicine physicians in the newly established state.

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INTRODUCTION

Ralph Spira was born in Krakow, Poland, in 1913. In 1937, Ralph obtained his M.D. degree in Paris, France. Many Polish or Russian Jews who wished to study medicine were forced to study abroad due to the numerous clauses policy [1]. After graduation, before the war, he crossed the channel and continued his studies in London. He obtained the LRCP & Surg before the war [2], crossed the channel, and continued his studies in London. He obtained the LRCP & Surg (Edin) and LRCPs (Glas) [2] and was allowed to practice surgery and emergency medicine in the U.K. Until 1941, he worked in London at Middlesex Hospital, and then he volunteered to serve for a year in the British Royal Navy. He continued to work with trauma patients at Winterton Hospital north of Sedgefield in County Durham, Fulham, at Sussex County Hospital, Brighton and later worked with repatriated British POWs. He met his future wife, Miriam at St. Mary Hospital. She was a German-Jewish nurse. She also worked with German POWs at Park Prewett Hospital in Basingstoke, Hampshire. In 1944, he was asked again to join the army; on this occasion, he was affiliated with rehabilitation units. In 1948, he was sent to join Dr. Ludwig Guttmann's at the first National Spinal Unit, Stoke Mandeville Hospital, Aylesbury, Bucks. [3-4]. There he met other physicians-refugees, like Joseph [Jerzy Izrael] Melzak [1903-1974] [5], Lorentz Sigmund Michaels [1902-1979], and the director founder of the center, Ludwig Guttmann (later Professor, Sir, CBE FRS), a neurosurgeon refugee from Breslau, Germany. Sir Ludwig told me that during the 40s and 50s, even the spinal unit orderlies spoke Polish or German. It is interesting to read Weindling's article on the Medical Refugees and the modernization of British Medicine [6]. To gain experience with electrotherapy and electrodiagnosis, he joined Dr. Philippe Bauwens (1901 – 1974) at St. Thomas Hospital, London, a founder member of the British Association Of Physical Medicine. In 1952 he met Dr Haim Sheba (1908 – 1971) the first director of the Israeli Health Ministry and the director of Tel Hashomer Military Hospital (about 15 Km from the Mediterranean shore), who convinced him to immigrate to Israel. For two years, he worked at the rehabilitation center at Tel Hashomer, mainly with spinal cord-injured patients, under the orthopedic surgeon Dr Ernst Spira [7]. They were unrelated. Because of many professional disputes, Ralph Spira left Ernst Spira, and worked as a rehabilitation medicine consultant for the MALBEN AJDC organization. The MALBEN institutions were created following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 when the needs of the massive numbers of new immigrants overwhelmed the fledgling Jewish State. The government of Israel invited The American Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC) to join forces with it to confront these challenges. The outcome was MALBEN - a Hebrew acronym for Organization for the Care of Handicapped Immigrants. MALBEN established a network of institutions for elderly and disabled new immigrants, including homes for the aged, hospitals, tuberculosis sanitariums, sheltered workshops, and rehabilitation centers. MALBEN also funded the training of nurses and rehabilitation workers. In 1951, AJDC assumed the entire responsibility for MALBEN, an arrangement that remained in place until 1975, when AJDC transferred its MALBEN facilities to the government of Israel [8].

AT ASSAF-HAROFE HOSPITAL

Ralph began a long career (27 years) at Assaf -Harofe Governmental Hospital (near the International Ben Gurion Airport, 20 Km from Tel Aviv). In 1949, Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and Sheba invited Dr. Guttmann to overview the treatment of spinaly injured patients in Israel. He produced a lengthy report and recommendations on the proper comprehensive treatment of paraplegics. It was never implemented by Sheba and Ernst Spira [7]; Ralph Spira was confronted at Tel Hashomer military hospital with the traditional "orthopedic model" and could not implement the "Guttmann's model". When Guttmann established the Spinal Injuries Centre at Stoke Mandeville, life expectancy for spinal cord injured patients was only two years from injury. He did not accept that these patients were doomed, and his advanced model in treating paraplegia has convinced the health authorities and the public slowly. He mentored a whole generation of physicians worldwide with his methods, and "Guttmann centers" were established worldwide (including those named after him in Barcelona, Heidelberg, and Tel Hashomer, Israel). The main goal was to bring back the patients to the mainstream of life. Today, it sounds trivial, but in the 40s and 50s, Guttmann's model was regarded as revolutionary: the bio-psycho-social approach. This led to another historical achievement of Sir Ludwig: the creation of the Sports for the Disabled movement. At Assaf-Harofe Hospital, Ralph's main focus was on disabled children with cerebral palsy or those who were paralyzed during the poliomyelitis epidemic. At this hospital, he established the first Israeli school for physiotherapy. He followed his mentor's ideas, Sir Ludwig's ideas, and, with others, opened a national Israeli sports center for disabled children. Later, he served as the team physician for the Stoke Mandeville Games in England. He was known for his vast knowledge in neuro-rehabilitation, electrophysiology, and sports medicine, and more specifically, the electrophysiology of spasticity, rehabilitation treatment of multiple sclerosis, genetic and family aspects of children with muscular
atrophy, muscular dystrophy, myopathies and cerebral palsy [8-17].

THE NEW METHOD FOR SEMEN RETRIEVAL FROM PARAPLEGICS

Although Guttmann reported back in 1949 at a conference about ejaculation induction for paraplegics using an intrathecal injection of neostigmine [18], no other reports appeared in the literature until Ralph Spira published in The Lancet in 1956 about his Israeli experience [19]. Guttmann and his successor, Dr. Jack Walsh (1917 - 1992), published their Stoke Mandeville artificial ejaculation experience only in 1971 [20].

THE FAMOUS PARAPLEGIC FROM WADI SALIB, HAIFA, ISRAEL

Sometimes patients become famous [21]: On July 9, 1959, police confronted a violent demonstration of angry inhabitants in Wadi Salib, a poor suburb of Haifa, Israel, and among them was Yaakov Elkarif, a 35-year-old drunk and illiterate new immigrant from Morocco. When he began throwing empty bottles at the police officers sent to arrest him, he was shot and seriously wounded. False rumors indicated that he had died, and the frustrated residents began storming nearby well-off neighborhoods and official governmental buildings. Angry and violent demonstrations spread all over the country. Elkarif, who became paraplegic due to a gunshot wound, was initially treated at Hadassah-Rothschild Hospital on Mount Carmel, Haifa, and then was transferred to Assaf-Harofe Hospital's Department of Rehabilitation at Zrifin (about 140 km south from Haifa), headed by Ralph Spira. Soldiers with paraplegia were referred to Ernst Spira at Tel-Hashomer Military Hospital, while civilians were referred to Ralph Spira at Assaf-Harofe. Later, Elkarif was compensated by the government and returned to an accommodated, accessible apartment. I could not find who continued the follow-up of this patient. He died in 1970.

RALPH SPIRA – A PERSONAL ACCOUNT

In 1957, Ralph Spira was elected member of the "International Society for Rehabilitation of the Handicapped," in 1961, he became a member of the editorial board of the journal "Paraplegia." He spent several sabbatical periods in the U.S. I met Ralph often during medical conferences. The last occasion was in 1995 when I interviewed him and his wife. This interview was included in a booklet that described the history of rehabilitation medicine in Israel [22]. Ralph was highly respected by his colleagues and known for his dedicated and professional attitude toward disabled persons. He had vast knowledge in history, music, and literature, chatted elegantly in English, Polish, French, and Hebrew, and always expressed his optimism with a humble smile.

SPIRA'S CONTRIBUTION AND LEGACY

As a true pupil and follower of Sir Ludwig Guttmann, Ralph Spira applied the integrative-comprehensive-humane approach of rehabilitation medicine to return disabled people to mainstream life. His humble and humanistic personality led him to fully integrate medicine, science, and sports for the benefit of the disadvantaged. While meeting him in person, he never forgot to mention painfully that he was the only survivor of his family after the Holocaust.

Figure 1. Acknowledgments: to Ralph Spira's daughters, Judith and Daniella, and his son-in-law Eldad Rechavia, MD.

Figure 2. Ralph Spira (from his family's collection)
A Forgotten pupil Sir Ludwig Guttmann: Ralph Spira, M.D.(Paris), LRCP &Surg (Edin.) and LRCPS (Glas). (1913 Krakow, Poland-1997, Tel Aviv, Israel)

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Conflict of interest
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