

DR. THANNHAUSER

During my first year at Tufts Medical School in 1958, we neophytes were eager to break out of the classroom and experience some real medicine – the kind that was going on across the street at the teaching hospital where the academic highlight every week was a conference called Medical Grand Rounds. All the chiefs of departments would gather in a large auditorium to discuss a few challenging cases and, although we freshmen were too green to understand the nuances, we could relish the pure theater of our professors matching wits and egos. Some of them were world authorities, but no one seemed to get any respect – except for one man whose guttural, heavily accented voice was almost unintelligible. Even our most arrogant teachers deferred to him and I once asked one of our sophisticated seniors, “Who is that man?” He replied, “That’s Dr. Siegfried Thannhauser. Before the War he was the greatest internist in Europe.” That was impressive and what a name! – quintessentially German. Indeed, both Siegfried and Thannhauser were folk heroes and the names of operas written by the famously anti-Semite Richard Wagner. What could be more Teutonic? Except that this doctor was Jewish.

Born in Munich in 1885 in a wealthy and cultured family, Siegfried Thannhauser (1885-1962) believed in what he called “the old spirit of German idealism.” As a schoolboy he attended the same Bavarian gymnasium as Albert Einstein, he was a gifted pianist and later developed a connoisseur’s love of art. (The Thannhauser wing of New York’s Guggenheim Museum houses the vast personal collection of his cousin Justin.) After medical school, Dr. Thannhauser served in the army for four years during World War I and was decorated with The Iron Cross. He thought of himself as more German than Jew and, never having any interest in religion, he married a Christian woman, but resisted her suggestion that he convert because that would be “dishonorable.” As a patriotic German war veteran, he felt totally secure as the Nazis assumed power; he saw himself as a member of the intellectual elite, a scientist who was totally removed from politics.

After World War I, Thannhauser began to rise the academic ladder. He was an expert on lipid disorders and his textbook on metabolism was required reading for all German medical students. In 1930 he accepted the coveted position as Professor of Medicine of the University of Freiburg and the next year, at the opening of a new clinic that was especially constructed for him,, he spoke optimistically of the future, seemingly oblivious of the gathering storm. He was an academician on the rise and the ultimate prize, Chief of Medicine in Munich, the top job in Europe, was clearly in sight.

All that would change when Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933. Faced with boycotts and acts of terror, Jewish doctors were excluded from the national health insurance programs — they no longer even could be addressed as “Doctor.” Some were placed under “protective arrest” or given permanent “leaves of absence,” and almost all Jews in academic life were dismissed. Despite all this, and even as colleagues tried to escape, Siegfried Thannhauser was in denial and stayed on at his post at Freiburg. Like many others, he deluded himself that Hitler was only a passing fancy and that Germany would reemerge in its former democratic glory. He resisted attempts to dismiss him and for a while was spared because of his reputation and war record.

Friends and colleagues disowned Thannhauser, he was slandered and accused of financial improprieties until in 1934, he was forced to take a much lesser post. For a while he maintained a small private practice but even this became difficult. Fortunately his wife was more pragmatic and when the Rockefeller Foundation, which had funded much of his work, was unwilling to put more money into German research, she encouraged him to emigrate. So at age 50 and barely able to speak English, Siegfried Thannhauser reluctantly accepted a position in Boston at Tufts University School of Medicine. He half jested, “America? Isn’t that where the indians live?”

Dr. Thannhauser was one of only a very small number of exceptional scientists who were allowed into the United States during the 1930s. Only 30 were admitted in 1933 and the maximum in any year was 97 in 1939. A combination of anti-Semitism, isolationism and professional jealousy contributed to a quota system which severely restricted immigration to this country. The heroes during that period were the English who gave refuge to hundreds, if not thousands, of scientists, many of whom later came to the United States. British scientists established an agency that helped them to find jobs and twenty of these refugees to England went on to win Nobel Prizes. Among them was Ernst Chain, who was one of the discoverers of penicillin, and Hans Krebs, Dr. Thannhauser’s assistant, who discovered the citric acid cycle that is named after him. They were Hitler’s “gift” to the West. They also were Hitler’s gift to German physicians and scientists who eagerly took their former colleagues’ places.

After the war, Dr. Thannhauser was shaken by emerging news of the Holocaust. Belatedly, he was offered his dream post in Munich but a whole generation of German doctors had been lost and now he would be expected to rekindle the old spirit of German idealism. He declined the offer as well as offers to speak at medical meetings in Germany. Refusing one, he said, “If I stood up before you, I would have tears in my eyes and you would say, ‘He’s just a sentimental Jew.’” Although Siegfried Thannhauser

continued to work until his death at age 77, he never returned to Germany. Today a street in Freiburg is named after him and a Thannhauser Medal for Medicine is awarded every other year.

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