

In the Gray Zones of History

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The Prague Pediatrician Berthold Epstein (1890–1962)

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Forewords

“The story of those in Auschwitz is told here, not to sensationalize, but to pass it on as a legacy for us Jews and all people. This book will fulfill its purpose only if we, who call ourselves God’s creatures, learn from it to become better human beings, to truly love our neighbor, and to work for the atrocities to disappear from the earth.”

Dr. Lucie Adelsberger, 1956¹

1 Adelsberger, Lucie: Auschwitz, ein Tatsachenbericht. Lettner, Berlin 1956.

Vera Trnka

Dedicated to my parents, Míla and Karel Nerad

When I was half a year old, I contracted pneumonia. It was then that I made my first acquaintance with Professor Epstein: I was born in the first post-war year, 1946, into a family in which almost no one had survived the events of the war. I only knew the departed members of my family from a few surviving photographs and many anecdotes passed down in the family, some happy ones from the time before the war, others almost unbearably sad from the time of the war.

In Czechoslovakia, where we lived, there was no penicillin available on the market, it was only produced after the autumn of 1949. In 1947 it was therefore almost inevitable for a baby to die from such a disease. Miraculously, and presumably with Epstein's support, my parents managed to get penicillin from military supplies. I survived pneumonia and Prof. Epstein remained my doctor throughout childhood.

Only much later did I learn from conversations with friends, mostly from Jewish families, that many of them had also been Epstein's patients. My friend Eliška, for example, has a diary that her father wrote about the first year of his first "gold treasure." On 1 August 1949, when Eliška was just one month old, he wrote: "Visit Prof. Epstein. Found a hernia of the navel and an inflammation of the middle ear of the right ear. Otherwise, Eliška is fine." Upon Prof. Epstein's advice, she was given two teaspoons of porridge before breastfeeding,¹ consisting of 50 g water, 50 g whole milk, a cube of sugar, and 3 teaspoons of crumbled Karlovy Vary rusk (which was boiled up and strained).² What Epstein said was sacred.

Professor Epstein was not only a great personality highly respected by parents, but also an original whose sayings were sometimes quoted in our home. I was my mother's only child and for her, of course, the most beautiful child of all. She was deeply shocked when Epstein, in response to her concern that I didn't want to eat, said to her: "She's as fat as a pig. I beg you, don't call her 'little dot'." My mother went home

1 "Porridge pre-feeding according to Epstein," a procedure developed and published by Epstein for spitting-up infants, see chapter 4.

2 Eliška Schulz-Fantlová, personal communication to the author (VT).

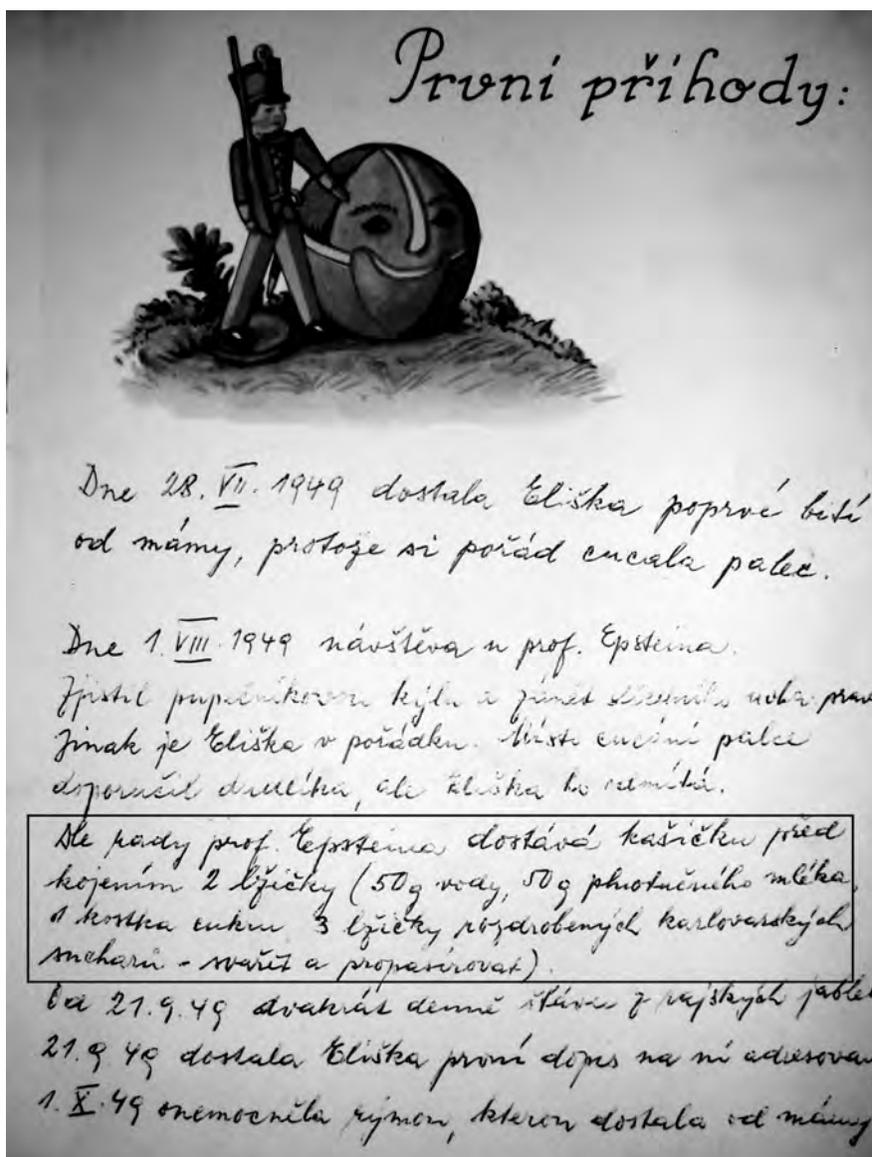


Fig. 1: "The first events:" the father of Eliška Fantlová, born 25 June 1949, describes the consultation with Prof. Epstein and the recipe of the "Epstein porridge feeding" for the five-week-old infant

and now, sad enough, suddenly interpreted the looks of people passing by quite differently. But, of course, she couldn't be angry with a capacity like Epstein, even if he called her "little dot" a pig.

My parents also spoke about Professor Epstein in connection with Auschwitz, where both he and my parents were deported. But what my parents were able to tell me about Epstein's work in Auschwitz I had to correct completely during my research. When Terezín memorial



Fig. 2: Vera, the child who ate too little

book³ appeared in 1995, I tried to find Epstein's name among many other names. At that time, I was very surprised and even annoyed that he had been forgotten. However, there was no mistake by Terezín Initiative, which published the memorial book: Epstein had never been to Terezín.

Early in 2003, on the advice of my Prague cousin, who was a former patient of Epstein as well, I placed an advertisement in the monthly newspaper of the Czech and Slovak Jewish communities, *Roš Chodeš*, in search of information on Epstein from contemporary witnesses, especially Jewish survivors. I had not expected much from the little note; the more I was surprised when little by little some letters arrived as well as many telephone calls.

Dr. Otto Klíma answered practically immediately: "At some time in the years 1948–49 I visited Prof. Epstein in his practice with my daughter Eva (born 1946), because my little daughter ate too little, and it was always a problem to feed her. Professor Epstein examined her and explained: 'there is absolutely nothing wrong with her, when she gets hungry, she will eat.'" – "Otherwise," wrote Dr. Klíma, "I can assure you of one thing: the awareness of Dr. Epstein as an outstanding physician continues to this day."⁴

Mrs. Andrée Kolbenová described a similar eating problem with her little daughter when she came to Epstein's practice in 1955. She does not recall what the doctor advised. However, she remembers that he was a handsome, elegant, and stern old gentleman.⁵ I recall that he seemed strict.

Understandably, parents who had been close to death by starvation only a short time before in the concentration camps reacted nervously when their offspring did not want to eat.

One day Mrs. T. from the area of Frankfurt called me. She told me a few details about Epstein's time in Buna-Monowitz and she also mentioned her daughter who had also been Epstein's patient. I guessed right away that she also had a feeding problem with her daughter. What I didn't know was that this daughter lived only a few kilometers away

3 Terezínská pamětní kniha (Teresienstadt Memorial Book), díl 1 a 2, ed. Miroslav Kárný a kol., Nadace Terezínská iniciativa, Melantrich, Praha 1995.

4 Letter from Dr. Otto Klíma to VT, author's archive.

5 Letter from Andrée Kolben to VT, author's archive.

from me. What luck to make a very, very good friend: my “Hanka by advertisement.”

In May 2003, a child psychiatrist, Dr. Michaela Kral from Munich, sent me a beautiful letter from which I would like to quote:⁶ “I would like to contribute my ‘case.’ I enclose a copy of a newspaper article that has been on my album for at least 47 years. [...] I was born in the spring of 1955, 6 weeks before my due date. I weighed less than 2.5 kilos at birth. [...] The pediatrician had prescribed a written fixed feeding schedule for me and I was to be bathed once a day. My life didn’t seem to be that valuable to me, I stopped drinking, slept all the time, and lost weight. After 3 weeks, acquaintances of my parents put me in touch with Prof. Epstein. He came to see us. And with him a radical change: He ordered that I should no longer be bathed, and to be given breast milk, every 2 hours, day and night, spoon by spoon. I swallowed it reflexively.

The success was unbelievable: at the age of 4 weeks, I had my birth weight regained, and at three months I weighed 4.89 kg, as my father recorded. Till the age of three years, Prof. Epstein followed me regularly [...]” And, maybe, he also influenced Michaela’s later choice of profession.

From all these letters and phone calls, I felt that people wanted to get information from me about Epstein’s life and wartime. It was a kind of appeal that I should let them know if I could find out anything about it. My parents were not the only ones who had the wrong information.

One of the letters reached me from London in 2003, written by Epstein’s son, Francis Elston,⁷ who, with his father’s help, had managed to escape to England in 1939 with one of the Winton transports⁸. During the war, young Francis, then called František, served as a pilot in the RAF. It was a very special letter as he also described his father’s years during the war. I was quite surprised that it seemed to me a sort of defense of his father. I was overcome by the feeling that Francis feared that I was writing a kind of indictment of his father. In 2003, he mistakenly assumed that Jews, “brother in faith” as he mentioned with a touch of irony, had denounced his father for Auschwitz.

6 Letter from Michaela Kral to VT, author’s archive.

7 Letter from Francis Elston to VT, author’s archive.

8 Sir Nicolas Winton (1909–2015) organized together with many others the rescue of 669 Czechoslovak children, mostly of Jewish origin, to England. Known as the Czech Kindertransport, see also chapter 16.

At that time, I knew very little about Epstein's work in Auschwitz. In the following years, I wrote many other things and left the subject of Epstein behind. It wasn't until 2019 that I began to tackle the subject intensively again. And it was just in that year that the book "Mengeles Koffer" (Mengele's Suitcase) by Bogdan Musial was published,⁹ in the notes section of which I happened to find a small note that the doctor Dr. Stephan Heinrich Nolte had been dealing with Epstein for some time.



Fig. 3: Epstein's patients, then (left) and now (right): well-developed children!

⁹ Musial, Bogdan: Mengeles Koffer. Eine Spurensuche (Mengele's Suitcase. A search for traces). Osburg Verlag, Hamburg 2019.

Stephan Heinrich Nolte

The name “Epstein” had a high profile in the great era of developing pediatrics before World War I. Alois Epstein (1849–1918), since 1881 the director of the Foundling Hospital in Prague, a Bohemian state institution, and since 1884 professor at the German Medical Faculty (Deutsche Medizinische Fakultät, DMF) of the University of Prague, was particularly concerned with infant care and pathology. His interests included oral thrush,¹⁰ we owe him the name of the “Epstein pearls,” white coarse gingival cysts in the midline of the soft palate, which can be found without disease value in many newborns, the name of “Epstein’s pseudo diphtheria,” and above all an orthopedic piece of furniture, the “Epstein swing.” At the turn of the 20th century, the rocking chair designed by Professor Epstein¹¹ became so widespread that in the 1920s/1930s it was not missing in any children’s hospital or infant home. Contemporaries described it as “the best invention in pediatrics”¹² and thus made the Epstein name well-known even in lay circles. By chance, I found a dilapidated specimen from a bulk waste of the Marburg Children’s Hospital and I became interested in this furniture, which I had restored by the manufacturer, Thonet Frankenberg, and then with its describer Epstein, with the history of pediatrics in Prague and in particular the history of the Foundling Hospital.

The history of German-speaking pediatrics in Prague ended after World War II with the retroactive dissolution of the German University and thus also of the DMF by a decree of the Ministry of Education under President Beneš. According to the official Czech diction at that time, university pediatrics of the DMF during the “protectorate” had never existed. This will be discussed in detail later. The last position holder as director of the Foundling Hospital, by then the 2nd pediatric hospital of the DME, was the nephew of Alois Epstein, Berthold Epstein (1890–1962). In dealing with the extraordinary fate of this great pediatrician,

10 Epstein, Alois: Über Soor bei Kindern. *Prager Medizinische Wochenschrift*, 1880, p. 5.

11 Epstein, Alois: Ein Schaukelsessel für kleine Rachitiker und Schwächlinge. *Zentralblatt für Kinderheilkunde* 8 1890, p. 194.

12 Nolte, Stephan: Die beste Erfindung der Kinderheilkunde: Die „Epstein-Schaukel“, ein pädiatrisch-orthopädisches Möbel der ersten Hälfte dieses Jahrhunderts. In: *Pädiatrie hautnah* 8, 1999, pp. 498–500.



Fig. 4: “Epstein swing” from the possession of the author

I came across such complex circumstances, so many contradictions and so much unpublished material that I set myself the task of bringing his story to light and paradigmatically studying the spirit of the times, trends, and the history of science. A fate “sitting between the chairs.” It also was the last opportunity to seek out and interview contemporary witnesses, a chance that previous generations could have managed much more easily. But for human reasons, the time was not ripe yet. A generation had to grow up on both the Czech and the German sides that



Fig. 5: Use of the “Epstein swing” from the atlas by Langstein and Rot

would unprejudiced, unreservedly, and soberly try to put together the puzzle stones from the numerous archival records available, whereby one or the other piece of the puzzle could not be found or were deliberately removed. Contacts that had been made during this research in Germany, the USA, and the Czech Republic were very lively and enriching.

Through contact with the current head of the pediatric department in Bulovka, Epstein’s last place of action, Primarius Dr. Ivan Peychl, we had the opportunity to organize a small symposium there on 24 September 2019, which was also attended by one of Epstein’s patients from Auschwitz, Eva Umlauf, and by more distant relatives.

How fate plays out I came into contact with Vera Trnka, who had approached the personality of Berthold Epstein from a different viewpoint and who has not let go of her since childhood. The aforementioned footnote drew her attention to me, and that’s how we came together for this project.