When life in pre-war Germany turned corrosive, Siegfried Thannhauser found a new home at Tufts

by Dr. Michael Nevins, ’62

When I was a medical student at Tufts (1958-62), Grand Rounds at the Pratt Diagnostic Hospital (now the New England Medical Center) was a weekly highlight. We neophytes understood few of the medical nuances, but enjoyed observing the theater of our faculty heads, many of them world-famous, vying with each other to score clinical points and to outshine their colleagues.

A frequent participant at these conferences was Dr. Siegfried Josef Thannhauser, a tall man with a large head who spoke in a loud, heavily accented voice. By then, Thannhauser was in his 70s (he died the year I graduated), and it was whispered that he had been the outstanding internist in Europe before World War II. What particularly impressed me was the deference and respect shown to him by the senior faculty.

I remembered Thannhauser decades later when I became interested in the history of medicine and wrote *The Jewish Doctor: A Narrative History* (Jason Aronson Inc., 1996). Even casual observers of the history of our profession have noticed a disproportionate number of Jewish physicians in various eras. Among gentiles, Jewish doctors have been both admired and reviled, sometimes simultaneously. Their fortunes have varied according to the times. Jewish physicians frequently have had to combat ignorance and intolerance. At other times, they have been perceived as intelligent, honest and principled.
In our own century, nearly one-quarter of all recipients of the Nobel Prize for medicine and physiology have been Jews—a surprising figure given that Jews account for only a fraction of 1 percent of the world's population.

In The Jewish Doctor, I asked whether there are legitimate generalizations we can make about Jewish physicians. Can we identify characteristics that distinguish Jewish doctors from their non-Jewish colleagues? Do they reflect traditional Jewish values such as a passion for knowledge and an abiding commitment to social justice? Some of the themes of Jewish medical history played out in the life of the eminent, well-known Jewish internist whom I encountered during my student days at Tufts. Paris of Thannhauser's story were told to me by his daughter, Trudi Beyer. Siegfried Thannhauser was born in 1885 in Munich into an assimilated and cultured family. Legend held that during the 1840s, an ancestor had come to the rescue of the mistress of King Ludwig I of Bavaria, the notorious Lola Montez, who more than once was assaulted by outraged citizens. In gratitude, the king granted the Jewish tavern-keeper the privilege of living within Munich's city walls, which, in time, improved the family's fortune and led to a degree of financial security. Siegfried attended Luitpold Gymnasium at about the same time as the young Albert Einstein. He grew up imbued with the German cultural heritage and believing in what he called "the old spirit of German idealism." A lover of classical music and an excellent pianist, he once remarked that he could be called to be considered a mediocre chemist, but that to be regarded as a man ignorant of the arts would be an infamy.

During a year of study abroad in Padua, he became fascinated by anatomy, and, to the relief of his parents, decided to seek a practical career in medicine rather than pursuing the arts. In 1910, Thannhauser received his medical degree cum laude from the University of Munich. At first he worked under Friedrich von Muller, but soon took time off to study chemistry under Adolf von Baeyer, earning his Ph.D. magna cum laude in 1913.

Thannhauser served in the army for four years during World War I. He headed a field hospital, was decorated for his military work and reported on the effects of poison gas on the kidneys. After the war, he resumed clinical duties and had a meteoric rise up the academic ladder, first in Heidelberg (1924) and then in Düsseldorf (1927). Endowed with a charismatic personality, he was an intuitive diagnostician. Indeed, his diagnostic skills were enhanced by his early interest in radiology and fluoroscopy.

In 1930, he agreed to head the eminently medical faculty at the University of Freiburg, once of the most prestigious academic institutions in Germany. He was first in line for the top position at the University of Munich, then the leading European center for internal medicine and chemistry, but his advancement was thwarted by political events. During this period, he wrote his first German textbook on metabolic disorders and began his research on lipids.

Perhaps Thannhauser's most brilliant assistant at Freiburg was Hans Krebs (1900-1981). The chief was suggestive of the junior man's work, and contrary to the custom of the time, declined to include his name on Krebs' original work on the ornithine cycle that results in urea synthesis. In 1933, Krebs was dismissed by the Nazi regime, but Thannhauser helped to secure a position for him in England, where in 1937, he completed work on the citric acid cycle (now known as the Krebs cycle) for which he won the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1953 and was knighted.

Considering the dramatic events of the 1930s, the name Siegfried Thannhauser is supremely ironic because both his first and last names are titles of operas by Richard Wagner, the virulent anti-Semite who later was lionized by the Nazis. The irony is compounded if one considers that the opera "Thannhauser" involves a conflict between two kinds of love—sensual and spiritual—because Thannhauser's early life also can be understood as a conflict between his love of homeland and his insinuus for self-preservation and freedom. No doubt Thannhauser thought of himself as more German than Jew. He never had any interest in religion, but when he married a Christian woman, he declined her request that he convert, thinking that this would be dishonorable. He never was ashamed to admit his heritage, and as a patriot and a war veteran, he felt relatively secure. However, he soon was thrust into the midst of anti-Semitic actions in Freiburg. The Nazis felt that his prominent position gave him too much influence in the community and resorted to fabrications to undermine him. Many friends and colleagues disowned him, and continuous efforts were made to compromise him by accusing him of financial irregularities or anti-Nazi remarks.

Thannhauser wrote to Krebs: "I do not know how long I will be able to defend my position." Despite his vigorous efforts, in 1934, he was forced to resign his position as university professor. He considered an offer to emigrate to Ankara, Turkey, but during a trip on the Orient Express, a representative from the Rockefeller Foundation persuaded him to seriously consider coming to America. In another letter to Krebs, he wrote: "I have been invited to teach internal medicine at the New England Medical Center and to establish a scientific research group. Although my material situation here is good ... the spiritual situation is so corrosive that I am considering accepting the call from Boston."

The invitation to Tufts came from Dr. Joseph Pratt, who, during the second World War, invited a number of German Jewish scientists to join the faculty (including Alice Ertinger and Gerhard Schmidt).

Thannhauser, left, with Dr. Joseph Pratt.

With his three daughters in Germany in 1934.

In 1934, Thannhauser accepted the invitation. Trudi Beyer, one of his three daughters, recalls that when they left Freiburg, the family was given a rousing send-off at the railroad station. The girls' classmates serenaded them, singing "Muss I Den" ("Must I Then Leave the Village"). The family had been relatively insulated from politics, and Thannhauser's daughter now recalls that they personally experienced more anti-Semitism in pre-World War II Boston than they ever did in Germany.

In Boston, Thannhauser began his second career by learning English and caring for patients. He became associate medical director of the Boston Dispensary, and a laboratory was established in his name where he resumed his research on lipids and nucleic acids. As a clinical professor of medicine at Tufts from 1934 to 1948, he was an acknowledged authority on lipid storage diseases and wrote several review articles and a textbook on lipidoses in 1950.

Embittered by what he considered to be a personal betrayal by the German government, he was grateful to the country that gave his family safe haven. Thannhauser never returned to Germany. He declined an invitation to address the first medical symposium held there after the war, saying, "If I stood up before you, I would have tears in my eyes, and you would say, 'He's just a sentimental Jew.'"

After Thannhauser died in 1962, a former colleague, Dr. Nepomuk Zollner, wrote that Thannhauser had been at once a great physician, a great chemist and a very great personality who did not allow the tragic fate of his generation to cast a shadow over his life. Although personally uprooted, he found fertile soil in America and served as an important bridge between the best medical and cultural traditions of the old world and the maturation of the new.

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