

Rudolph Virchow's Upper Silesia report: the starting point for his simultaneous engagement with public health and antisemitism

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Summary

In 2023 an important anniversary took place. It regards Virchow's report on the Upper Silesia epidemic typhus, which was associated with the death of numerous Polish peasants. It is also the starting point of Virchow's political career and fight against antisemitism, which has reached fearful levels in academia. Antisemitism is not new, but the recrudescence following the October 7th massacre of Jewish and not-Jewish people is appalling and recalls Virchow's vehemence of the past a few decades before the Nazi extermination of the Shoah during the World War II.

Key words: Virchow, public health, policy, politics, holocaust, typhus

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Upper Silesia is located on the Oder River's upper course, north of the Eastern Sudetes Mountain range and the Moravian Gate. Upper Silesia has a boundary with Greater Poland to the north and Lower Silesian territories to the west. Currently, the territory is divided into a larger Polish half and a smaller Czech Silesian section, which is situated within the Czech regions of Moravia-Silesia and Olomouc. In 2023 recurred the 175th year of Rudolph Virchow's Upper Silesia Discovery of one of history's most devastating epidemic typhus¹⁻⁴. Epidemic typhus, sometimes called louse-borne typhus, is a type of typhus. This disease has triggered fears and despair, generating widespread outbreaks after wars and natural calamities, and disrupting normal societal functioning^{5,6}. Typhus is an infrequent illness that primarily affects communities experiencing unsanitary and severely overcrowded conditions. *Rickettsia prowazekii* is the causal agent transmitted by the human body louse (*Pediculus humanus corporis*). It was discovered by Henrique da Rocha Lima (1879-1956), a Brazilian pathologist and microbiologist from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He and his companion, Stanislaus von Prowazek, documented the pathogen responsible for epidemic typhus, which would eventually be named *Rickettsia prowazekii*. Rocha Lima designated the organism with the name of his colleague Stanislaus Josef Mathias von Prowazek, who succumbed following his infection, and American bacteriologist Howard Taylor Ricketts (1871-1910)^{7,8}.

Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902) (Fig. 1) was a prominent figure in pathology and public health during the nineteenth century^{1,9}. He formulated theories regarding cellular pathology, actively participated in the Berlin barricades during the year 1848, held a prominent position as a liberal politician, engaged in a political struggle against Bismarck to a liberal constitution, researched the anthropology of the Veddas of Ceylon and German schoolchildren, and collaborated with Schliemann in archaeological ex-



Figure 1. Rudolf Virchow.

Source: <http://ihm.nlm.nih.gov/images/B25666>, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

cavations at Troy. The Prussian government commissioned Virchow to investigate the typhus outbreak in Upper Silesia during 1847-1848. Virchow's beliefs on social medicine were shaped by his observations of the victims and their poverty during his medical activities. Despite his failure to control the outbreak, his extensive 190-page report on the Typhus outbreak in Upper Silesia in 1848 proved pivotal in German public health. On March 10, 1848, he arrived back in Berlin, and within just eight days, a revolution erupted against the government, in which he actively participated. In July of that year, he was crucial in establishing "*Die Medizinische Reform*" (Medical Reform), a weekly publication advocating social medicine and addressing political injustice^{1,4}.

Despite the multifaceted nature of Virchow, it is less known that he voiced opposition against antisemitism vehemently long before the Nazis approached the Reichstag. Virchow's battle against antisemitism was remarkable, following the discovery of the conditions of the Jewish people, who were enslaved, emarginated, and despised by all nations over centuries^{1,10}. In the 1870s, Stocker, the court chaplain, orchestrated large gatherings to rally against the Jewish community¹¹. His supporters disseminated a formal written request,

known as a petition, urging Bismarck to terminate the practice of Jewish immigration and to prohibit Jews from holding teaching and authoritative posts within the government. Virchow, along with 30 other prominent individuals, expressed their opposition to the petition and issued statements in German media advocating for the preservation of Germany's tradition of tolerance and the eradication of racial hatred and religious extremism reminiscent of the medieval past¹². Stocker contested against Virchow in the second district of Berlin during the 1881 Reichstag elections. During a large-scale election rally, the "Virchow song" was performed to the melody of "Deutschland über alles," with the final line proclaiming, "Virchow, triumphant overall in the election." Virchow criticized Bismarck's unrestricted authority and Stocker's prejudice against Jews, ultimately prevailing over Stocker in the approaching elections. Virchow opposed Bismarck, the "iron chancellor," throughout his entire life. Virchow characterized Bismarck's approach to the Jewish community in Berlin as "frigid to the very core" because of his lack of enthusiasm towards their protests against the government over the initial forms of exclusion they were facing. Since Virchow was born in Schivelbein, Pomerania, an area along the Bay of Pomerania of the Baltic Sea between the rivers Recknitz, Trebel, Tollense, and Augraben in the West and Vistula in the East, he most likely had firsthand knowledge of the densely populated Jewish communities in Central Europe.

The Union of German Students, known for their anti-semitic views, attempted to disrupt one of Virchow's seminars. In 1895, Virchow requested the Prussian Cultural Ministry to investigate the assaults on Jewish instructors in public schools. The Prussian Ministry was obliged to implement measures to avoid similar attacks in the future. He stated that classifying a particular ethnic group as inferior would result in efforts to eradicate it, like what happened to the indigenous people of North America. Virchow authored a study on Finnish, Estonian, and north-east German skulls, collected physical measurements from seven million German kids, and demonstrated that 54% exhibited traits like dark skin and blue eyes, differently from the Aryan mythology of purity of race¹³. According to his studies, 32% of children had blond hair, including 11% of the Jewish schoolchildren. Subsequently, the Nazis demonized Virchow due to his research that debunked their racist ideologies on the Aryan race. As a form of defamation, they even portrayed him in a derogatory manner in a film centered around Koch¹⁴. While *en route* to a gathering of the Berlin Anthropological Society in January 1902, Virchow's consistent practice of disembarking from trams before they had come to a complete halt led to a mishap on icy ground, causing him to have a hip fracture. He experienced continuous pain in walking but ultimately succumbed to heart disease and passed away in September 1902¹⁰.

During the night of November 9th, 1938, and the following day, the Nazis orchestrated brutal programs targeting the Jewish community in Germany. Under the

influence of their leaders, the rioters launched aggressive assaults on Jewish inhabitants, resulting in physical harm. They also set fire to and demolished a total of 267 synagogues, defaced 7,500 Jewish shops, looted hospitals, schools, and residences, and desecrated several Jewish cemeteries. Throughout these acts, the police and firefighters were, unfortunately, passive observers. A total of 91 Jewish individuals lost their lives, while some 20,000 individuals of Jewish descent were forcibly transported to death camps. The programs, collectively referred to as Kristallnacht, marked a significant turning point in Nazi anti-Jewish policy, as seen by the widespread destruction of thousands of windows¹⁵. Following the massacre of October 7th, 2023, horrific antisemitic attacks were perpetrated in numerous North American and European universities, despite calls that antisemitism has no place in academic institutions or anywhere else¹⁶.

Nevertheless, several officials, healthcare practitioners, and academics started to deny the brutalities and atrocities of October 7th, raising a tearful and threatening comparison to the denialism of the Jewish Holocaust during the World War in Germany and after¹⁷. The responsibility of Judaic-Christian communities in supporting and preserving the Trivium-Quadrivium fundamentals of the Ancient University roots is critical now more than ever, following the extreme politicization of the Universities in the Old and New World¹⁸. If rights are promulgated and supported, obligations and duties are discouraged, and institutions are vilified, we may face the crepuscule of our civilization. We cannot and must not accept the denial of brutalities and sadism that occurred in the past and now, despite these coming from prestigious academics. Free speech has obvious boundaries and needs to be respected in every country to avoid becoming bystanders again as it was in the past. Thus, here, we make a solid case for the risks associated with the climate of denial that some North American and European campuses have fostered in the wake of the October 7th massacre in Israel. In the face of the threat of anti-Semitic resurgences, the name of the father of cellular pathology should serve as an example. In addition to his well-known active involvement as a liberal politician, Virchow was a highly active member of the social medicine community. Virchow's resistance to the emerging eugenic currents, since his anthropological research refuted the existence of an "Aryan race" and his significance is still felt today inside and outside of the field of medicine. Although we need to preserve and share the rich heritage of Jewish culture for future generations, we should also be committed to promoting tolerance and understanding among all peoples, envisioning a world where different cultures, religions, and beliefs coexist in harmony.

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