

Chalmers I (2021). Marek Klingberg: an appreciation

Appendix to:

Klingberg M (2010). An epidemiologist's journey from typhus to thalidomide, and from the Soviet Union to Seveso. JLL Bulletin: Commentaries on the history of treatment evaluation. (Republished in J Roy Soc Med 2010;103:418–423. DOI 10.1258/jrsm.2010.10k037)

Introduction

Marek Klingberg and I became friends in Oxford in the late 1970s, when I was establishing the National Perinatal Epidemiology Unit (NPEU). In the early 1980s Marek invited me to edit a book for an epidemiology series he was commissioning for the publisher Karger. I declined because of other commitments for the new research unit, and my correspondence with him petered out. Either of us would have responded promptly to any letter or telephone call from the other; but I guess I must have reckoned that both of us were too busy to attempt to maintain regular contact 'proactively'. It was not until fifteen years later that I learned that, even if we had wanted to, we would not have been able to contact each other. In 1982, two years after my last contact with him, Marek had been 'disappeared' by the Israeli secret service – the Shin Beth.

Before prison

My wife Jan and I first met Marek and his wife Wanda when they visited us at home during the summer of 1978. I had recently moved to Oxford to establish the NPEU. Marek, an Israeli epidemiologist who chaired the scientific committee of the European Clearinghouse for Congenital Malformations, was on sabbatical leave in Oxford. Although Marek's and my research interests overlapped only slightly, another epidemiologist, Klim McPherson, suggested that Jan and I would enjoy meeting Marek and Wanda because of our shared interest in the Middle East. In 1969 and 1970, Jan and I had worked for UNRWA in Palestinian refugee camps in the Gaza Strip.

At our first meeting with Marek and Wanda, it became clear that they understood and sympathised with our pro-Palestinian views. Our discussions ranged widely, but what fascinated us particularly was Marek's accounts of his escape to the Soviet Union from Nazi-occupied Warsaw, and the years he had served in the Red Army. On a subsequent visit to our home at the end of 1978, Marek and Wanda were accompanied by their daughter, Sylvia, a sociologist. Again, it was politics, not epidemiological and social research that dominated our conversations, particularly as Sylvia's husband, Udi Adiv, was in jail in Ashkelon (just up the road from Gaza), having been sentenced to a 18-year term for 'security offences'.

After Marek's return to Israel, and apart from some brief correspondence, we lost contact with each other. I have a vague memory of hearing a rumour that he was receiving psychiatric treatment in Switzerland, but I didn't try to contact him or Wanda.

During a 20-year prison sentence

It was not until 1995, while browsing through letters published in the *British Medical Journal*, that I learned that Marek was in prison, and ill. Ruchama Marton (1995), the founding president of Israeli-Palestinian Physicians for Human Rights, had written to the *BMJ* to draw attention to Marek's deteriorating health. Her letter asked concerned individuals to write to the Israeli President, Prime Minister and Minister of Justice calling for clemency for and release of this elderly prisoner, so that he could spend his remaining years with his wife, who was also ill.

I contacted Josephine Weatherall, an epidemiologist colleague of Marek, and we sent 'sample' letters to well over a hundred people whom we thought would be prepared to ask the Israeli authorities for clemency. As a recently elected member of the US Institute of Medicine, I also asked its Human Rights Committee to take up Marek's case; but it refused because he did not meet the committee's definition of 'a prisoner of conscience'. I asked help from Pauline Neville-Jones, a senior civil servant in the British security services whom I knew slightly, and she asked the British Ambassador in Tel Aviv to explore the possibility that Marek might be released. The message came back that the Israeli establishment was very unforgiving of people it regarded as traitors.

In 1998, after Marek had served the first ten years of his 20-year sentence in solitary confinement and a further five years in jail, a successful application was made by his lawyer, Avigdor Feldman, for his transfer to home arrest. It was around this time that Marek's daughter Sylvia contacted me by phone from Paris. She explained that, although her father was forbidden to contact anyone in the outside world, he was allowed to receive communications that had been passed by the censor, if these were sent to an intermediary – Avraham Kaldor. Sylvia said that her father would appreciate receiving epidemiological papers, so I started to send some to him and urged other epidemiological colleagues to do so.

Life after prison

The day after Marek had completed his 20-year prison term, he returned to freedom, in Paris. Jan and I and two friends visited him within a few weeks of his arrival there. While under arrest he had been forbidden to speak any language (including Yiddish) other than Hebrew. For about four hours non-stop, Marek rejoiced in using his English again, and sometimes his Polish (the mother tongue of one of the friends who visited him with us).

Every year, from autumn 2003 to Marek's death in November 2015, we visited Marek and Sylvia in Paris, and they spent a long weekend in Oxford with us every summer. These visits to Oxford provided opportunities for Marek to catch up with some old epidemiological and political friends, and to make some new ones.

On one of Marek's and Sylvia's visits to Oxford in May 2006, Marek was invited by Harold Jaffe, Head of Oxford University's Department of Public Health, to give a seminar on his experiences of using epidemiological research. The notice of the meeting announced that Dr Marcus Klingberg would "discuss his experiences as an epidemiologist in the Russian Army during World War II and his subsequent work in the Byelorussian Republic, Poland, and Israel". The announcement led to the small meeting room being filled to capacity to hear and discuss Marek's remarkable story. His experience of prison proved of greater interest to the audience than his pioneering epidemiological research. Alfredo Morabia's then recently published interview with Marek was an important and timely resource (Morabia 2006).

The advance notices of Marek's seminar in Oxford came to the attention of a 'Shlomo Eisen PhD', who introduced himself in a long email to me (sent on 26 May 2006) as "an Israeli scientist [writing from Zurich], who had "much knowledge about the scientific and other aspects of the work of Dr Klingberg." Dr Eisen explained that he thought it important to be aware that Dr Klingberg had "never studied properly and his documents had been forged by the KGB"; that he had "never been a senior scientist at the Israeli Institute of Biological Research"; and that he was "a highly intelligent and shrewd person who was using me "to convey his scientific standing". I responded to Dr Eisen by return of post to say that I would deliver a copy of his message to Dr Klingberg so that he would have the opportunity to take account of his allegations during the meeting the following day.

Email correspondence over the subsequent 48 hours, including an offer by Marek and me to meet Dr Eisen in Zurich, made no impact on the latter's failure to provide evidence to support his attack. In response, Marek assembled documentation and a list of nearly ninety five reports and publications which challenged Dr Eisen's unsupported allegations (Klingberg 2010). I concluded my interaction with Dr Eisen as follows (email sent on 28 May 2006):

"You ask me to specify which of your allegations about Dr Klingberg are wrong. To give just one example, you allege that there is no record of Dr Klingberg's cooperation with Dr Weatherall. It is really not difficult to identify *Klingberg MA, Weatherall J. Epidemiologic methods for detection of teratogens. New York: S. Karger, 1979*. I urge you to be more thorough in your research and evaluation of Dr

Klingberg, to identify those of your allegations about him which you believe can be supported with evidence, then put them directly to him or his lawyer (assuming, that is, that you are prepared to accept that he has a right to defend himself).

“You remain secretive both about your motivation for writing to me and your identity; you have made clear that your research on Dr Klingberg has been superficial; you have ignored an invitation to meet with you in Zurich; and you have not copied your latest message to those to whom I copied my message to you yesterday. All this leaves me highly suspicious and has eroded any benefit of the doubt that I have been prepared to accord to you. Your failure to reciprocate the openness that I have endeavoured to show to you and the clear evidence that your research on Dr Klingberg has been superficial, leaves me no appetite for continuing this interaction. It has been an interesting experience, but do not expect any further responses to your messages to me.”

Dr Eisen’s allegations seem likely to be motivated by political rather than scientific considerations. Indeed, it was inevitable that reactions to Marek’s story would focus primarily on his politics and how these were expressed in espionage, and not on his scientific work. In 2007, his biography was published in Hebrew with the assistance of his lawyer, Michel Sfard (Klingberg and Sfard 2007). The investigative journalist Peter Pringle has reported that Israeli reviewers of the biography were derisive:

“The newspaper *Haaretz* portrayed Klingberg as a self-deceiving actor in the ‘theatre real’ of the espionage world and, in the end, as a ‘petty clerk, and mainly as a childish and pitiful person’. Israel’s *Ynet*, a news website, said that Klingberg simply fooled himself. An Israeli who supported the Russians at the beginning of the 1950s was naïve. An Israeli who supplied them with information in the 60s and 70s was a scoundrel” (Pringle 2014).

The biography was well on the way to publication in a French translation when I was sent draft translations of the first six chapters in English. I told Marek that I thought they were excellent, and that the writing style made them real ‘page-turners’. At Sylvia’s request, I was recruited to do some ‘light touch’ subediting of the draft English translations. The book is a good read and I look forward to its publication in English. I am not aware of the reasons that there is still no published English translation seven years after one was prepared.

PHOTO PORTRAIT HERE

The photographic portrait of Marek made by our photographer son Theo accompanied an appreciation of Marek by Richard Horton, editor of *The Lancet*, to whom I introduced Marek in 2010. Horton wrote "Talking with him now, in the welcoming home of Iain and Jan Chalmers, revealed a man who has tried his hardest to lead a moral life." Horton ended his piece by noting that Marek's dramatic personal story - *An epidemiologist's journey from typhus to thalidomide, and from the Soviet Union to Seveso* (Klingberg 2010) - would soon appear on the website of the James Lind Library (www.jameslindlibrary.org). For those who wish to assess his scientific output, the article is accompanied by the references to 95 reports and articles. The article ends as follows:

"In spite of my suffering during [my] long imprisonment, I have never regretted my modest attempt during the Cold War to undermine what I believed to be the dangers associated with imbalances in scientific knowledge. My feelings about this remain with me despite the fall of the Soviet Union – a country to which not only I owe my life, as well as my career in epidemiology and my most useful work; but, above all, the opportunity to fight fascism (Klingberg 2010)."

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