

HISTORICAL VIGNETTE

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The portrait of James Israel by the German impressionist Max Liebermann: a selected pictorial view on the early twentieth century development of surgical urology in Berlin

Abstract On the occasion of his retirement from the position as head of the Jewish Hospital in Berlin in 1917, the famous kidney surgeon James Israel (1848–1926) was portrayed by Max Liebermann (1847–1935). At that time both men were leading members of their professions – medicine and fine arts – and represented the Jewish community in Berlin. Private contacts between the surgeon and the artist had been established when Liebermann and his wife needed surgical treatment themselves some years before. Liebermann's later friendship with the surgeon Ferdinand Sauerbruch (1875–1951) culminated in one of the best-known portraits of a member of the medical profession. This biographical article from the history of medicine and fine arts reflecting the relation of these men provides a special view of the development of urological surgery in Berlin at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Key words History of medicine · Art · Urology · Renal surgery · James Israel · Max Liebermann

During the first three decades of the twentieth century Berlin became a leading center of urology in Europe. One of the first in the line of important urologists was the famous kidney surgeon James Israel (Fig. 1). Most of the following pioneers of this new speciality in Berlin were also Jewish and therefore dismissed from their positions after 1933.

The famous artist and painter Max Liebermann had to experience a similar fate during the last years of his life. Once the most regarded artist in Berlin, he was withdrawn from his official offices, his paintings were removed from public museums and he died almost unrecognized in 1935.

Through the eye of Max Liebermann's paintings this article will highlight the biographies of these two men and reveal some special aspects about the medical life and the Jewish community in Berlin during the first half of the twentieth century.

James Israel (1848–1926)

James Adolph Israel was born in Berlin on the 2nd of February 1848 as the son of a successful Jewish businessman. Even before taking his final examinations in medicine he joined the “War of 1870/71” between Germany and France as a young doctor and was highly decorated with the “Eiserne Kreuz”. After completing his studies in Berlin and going to Vienna for another year he became assistant of the famous surgeon Bernhard von Langenbeck (1810–1887) at the Jewish Hospital in Berlin. In 1874 Israel visited Sir Joseph Lister (1827–1912) in Edinburgh for a few months to adopt the recently introduced principles of antiseptis. During the following years Israel proved to be a talented surgeon and practically took over the work of the retiring von Langenbeck in 1875 until he was definitely appointed head of the surgical department at the Jewish Hospital in 1880, a position he kept for the next 37 years. In the same year Israel married Meta Goldstein (1854–1930) from Danzig, who gave birth to three children over the following years [1, 23].

Israel's name is commemorated in medicine for describing the “Actinomyces Israeli” between 1878 and 1882 [7, 8]. This scientific work was so correct and complete that hardly anything had to be added to the knowledge about this infectious disease during the next century [9].

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Fig. 1 James Israel (1848–1926); by Max Liebermann, 1917 [Jewish Museum Berlin]

Although Gustav Simon (1824–1876) initiated modern kidney surgery with the first planned nephrectomy in 1869 [6] and his milestone publication “Chirurgie der Nieren” in 1871 and 1876 [22], it was Israel who systematically dedicated all his clinical and scientific efforts towards this field and was finally known as one of the most important kidney surgeons world-wide at the turn of the century. During his lifetime he regularly published his experience on this field: “Erfahrungen über Nierenchirurgie” (1894), “Chirurgische Klinik der Nierenerkrankheiten” (1901) and “Chirurgie der Niere und des Harnleiters” (1925) [10, 11, 13]. Israel called himself a “descending urologist” by pointing at the fact that he entered the field of urology as a surgeon and not like many of his colleagues as a venereologist. Perhaps this was the reason why in the beginning Israel hesitated to use the new methods of cystoscopic retrograde investigation of the upper urinary tract and only adopted these techniques later [20, 23].

At the beginning of the 1890s Israel was offered the position of a full professor at the University of Berlin. But he refused to be baptized for this purpose and therefore remained at the Jewish Hospital until 1917 and also at his private clinic “Hygiea” for the rest of his life. Nevertheless he received an extraordinary professorship a few years later in 1894.

Colleagues from all over the world visited his department, which became a European academic centre

for urological surgery. In 1915 Israel travelled to Turkey where he performed a *sectio alta* for bladder stone on the Sultan Mohammed V. This remarkable journey is reported in his diary and worth reading [12].

In 1907 Israel founded the first international journal for urology, “*Folia Urologica*”. Together with Felix Guyon (1831–1920), the French nestor of urology, he was president of the first congress of the newly founded “*Association internationale d’Urologie*” in Paris in 1908. James Israel, who had been troubled by poor health all his life, died of myocardial infarction on the twentieth of February 1926 and was buried at the old Jewish cemetery “*Schönhauser Allee*” in Berlin.

Max Liebermann (1847–1935)

At the beginning of the twentieth century Max Liebermann was one of the most famous artists in Germany and an outstanding personality of the cultural and social life of Berlin. Together with Lovis Corinth (1858–1925) and Max Slevogt (1868–1932) he belonged to the group of the so-called German Impressionists [15].

Liebermann was born in Berlin on 20 July 1847 and, like Israel’s family, his father was a successful Jewish businessman and industrialist. From 1868 to 1873 Liebermann was trained at the “*Kunstschule*” in Weimar. From 1873 to 1878 he moved to Paris where he got acquainted with Mihály Munkácsy (1844–1900) and Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) thereby dedicating his art to realism and to motives of the working people. A journey to Holland in 1875 awakened his preference for the Dutch painters of the 17th century, like Frans Hals, and the landscape of this country. After some years in Munich he finally settled in Berlin in 1884 and established a comfortable studio at his prosperous family house at the “*Pariser Platz*” next to the “*Brandenburger Tor*”. In the same year he married Martha Marckwald (1858–1943) and their daughter Käthe (1885–1951) was born in the following year. Max Liebermann gained increasing popularity and was appointed “*Professor of the Fine Arts*” in 1897. He was at the height of his artistic work during the first decade of the new century and furthermore one of the most sought-after portraitists of his time (Fig. 2). Since 1910 his family owned a summerhouse at the “*Wannsee*” on the outskirts of Berlin where he found his new favourite motives in the surrounding natural landscape and the garden of his estate. In 1920 he became president of the “*Preußische Akademie der Künste*” [3, 4, 12]. Unfortunately he had to witness the political changes after 1933 and could not escape the following reprisals. He was forbidden to paint and dismissed from his official functions. Furthermore, his paintings were removed from all public exhibitions and museums. Max Liebermann died almost unrecognized and without official appreciation of his achievements in 1935. At the end of her life his wife Martha Liebermann only escaped deportation to a concentra-



Fig. 2 Max Liebermann (1847–1935); self-portrait, 1916 [Kunsthalle Bremen]

tion camp by committing suicide in 1943. Both were buried in the family grave at the cemetery “Schönhauser Allee” [2, 18].

“Art meets medicine”

James Israel and Max Liebermann were highly respected citizens of Berlin’s high society and represented the Jewish community at that time. They were both leading members of their profession with great international influence and characterized by their strong personalities.

Most likely the first contact between them resulted from the breast cancer of Liebermann’s wife in 1904. Martha Liebermann (Fig. 3) was successfully operated by Israel and her husband showed his thankfulness with a special present to the surgeon: the oil study “Grooms at the Beach” (Fig. 4), one of Liebermann’s favourite motives at that time. It was most likely painted 1 or 2 years earlier at the Dutch coast and was signed in 1904 by Liebermann on the lower left corner of the front side with the dedication “Herrn Prof. Israel/in Dankbarkeit/M. Liebermann”. An ongoing contact of the two families is documented, for example during their holidays in Switzerland [1, 2, 4].

In March 1910 Liebermann himself had to undergo surgery by Israel; the exact character of the disease is not



Fig. 3 Martha Liebermann (1858–1943) sitting at the beach of Scheveningen; by Max Liebermann, 1895 [Kunstsammlungen zu Weimar]



Fig. 4 “Grooms at the Beach”; by Max Liebermann, 1902/1903 [private collection, New York]

reported. The operation was uneventful and Liebermann fully recovered after a few weeks. During the same year he outlined some sketches for a new painting that was inspired by the circumstances of his postoperative recovery in hospital. These early studies and the final version of “The Good Samaritan” from 1911 (Fig. 5) convey Liebermann’s recognition of the situation when he was lifted into the bath tub for his first bath after the above-mentioned operation [4].

When Israel retired from his official position at the Jewish Hospital of Berlin in 1917, the Jewish community asked for a portrait of this surgeon of outstanding merit and Israel decided on Liebermann as the portraying artist. This decision surely was not only due to the personal contacts but even more to Liebermann’s



Fig. 5 “The Good Samaritan”; by Max Liebermann, 1911 [Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne]

enormous reputation as a portraitist at that time. The painting (Fig. 1) shows the nearly 69-year-old Israel from a lowered perspective as a powerful and self-confident man. From the reports of Israel’s grandson we know that this painting, along with the beach scene from 1904 (Fig. 4), was kept in the surgeon’s private house during his lifetime [2]. After Israel’s death the portrait was given to the Jewish Hospital and was then transferred to the Jewish Museum of Berlin in 1933. During World War II it was lost and finally rediscovered in Israel in the 1970s. Since 1991 it is a permanent loan to the Berlin Museum and has now been transferred to the new Jewish Museum in Berlin [2].

Late masterpiece: the portrait of Ferdinand Sauerbruch (1875–1951)

In 1928 the ingenious surgeon Ferdinand Sauerbruch (1875–1951) became head of the surgical department at the Berlin Charité. His achievements mainly in thoracic surgery and limb prosthesis made him a legend of medicine during his lifetime. In regard to urology Sauerbruch was not really a promoter of this new speciality and was very cautious that his colleague Otto Ringleb should establish an independent unit for urology at the Charité Hospital [5, 19, 21]. Most open urological interventions for example were performed at the surgical department at that time and not predominantly by the urological staff members.

When Sauerbruch came to Berlin, he purchased a house at the “Wannsee” outside the city centre and thus became a neighbour of Max Liebermann whose summer house was located nearby. Over the years a friendship obviously developed between these two neighbours at the Wannsee [6, 14].

In his biography Sauerbruch reports an incident from 1932 when Liebermann suffered from an incarcerated inguinal hernia. Sauerbruch immediately took him to the Charité where the disease was treated conservatively. According to Sauerbruch it was during this hospital stay that Liebermann for the first time mentioned the idea of portraying the famous surgeon and even outlined first sketches right away in the hospital. Later when Sauerbruch had to sit for Liebermann in the studio of the artist he sometimes became impatient and refused to spend more time in the studio. Liebermann replied to the surgeon: “There is no other way. If you make a mistake it will be covered by grass the next day. But my mistakes will be looked at for over a hundred years.” [17].

The portrait of Sauerbruch (Fig. 6) was very successful when exhibited in 1932 and even today remains one of the best-known paintings of a member of the medical profession in Germany. In contrast to the portrait of James Israel, we realize Sauerbruch as a more intimate doctor who is open-minded towards the observer, in this case the artist as his patient, and listens to him patiently. A second portrait of Sauerbruch from the same year is lost without trace [4].

The life and personal conviction of Sauerbruch, in some ways a conflicted individual, is not the object of



Fig. 6 Ferdinand Sauerbruch (1875–1951); by Max Liebermann, 1932 [Hamburger Kunsthalle]

this article but obviously he did not succumb to the latest political changes after 1933 and did not negotiate his relation to Jewish colleagues and friends. At the funeral celebration of Max Liebermann in 1935 Sauerbruch, together with his son who was to become an artist and had received painting lessons from Liebermann, was one of the very few non-Jewish participants [4, 18]. Furthermore, in his autobiography from 1951 he tells us the following story about a university lecture he held about 1936. When presenting an operation of the kidney and pointing out that this technique was established by the great James Israel, the auditory showed some signs of restlessness and protest. Sauerbruch replied: “In future times, when all of you will be forgotten, the name of James Israel will still be shining” [1, 17].

Epilogue

The relationship between Israel and Liebermann does not only reveal new aspects of the private life of an important urological surgeon, but also gives an impression of the Jewish academic society in Berlin before the political takeover by the Nazi regime. Like Israel, many of his Jewish colleagues and disciples in Berlin became international leaders of urology during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Among them are well-known names like Leopold Casper (1859–1959), Alexander von Lichtenberg (1880–1949), Paul Rosenstein (1875–1964; one of the successors of James Israel at the Jewish Hospital), Max Zondek (1868–1933), Eugen Joseph (1879–1933) and Ernst Unger (1875–1938; pioneer of renal transplantation).

They were all forced to give up their official medical positions after 1933, left Germany or even committed suicide.

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