

Dr. Arthur Kessler (1903-2000)

David Kessler

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Note

Dr Arthur Kessler was responsible for an influential paper on lathyrism, which concerned an outbreak as a result of inclusion of high proportions of *Lathyrus sativus* in food consumed in the Vapniarca concentration camp during World War II. Dr Kessler was himself interned in the camp. The author of this article (David Kessler) is the son of Dr Arthur Kessler. For some more background see Lambein F, Ngudi DD and Kuo Y. (2001). Vapniarca revisited: Lessons from an inhuman experience. Lathyrus Lathyrism Newsletter 2, 5-7.



Dr Arthur Kessler in 1973

History

Arthur Kessler was born in the town of Gewitsch (also called Gewiczor Jevicko) in Moravia (Maehren) on October 11, 1903 to Dr. David Kessler (1866-1945) and Anna Gottfried (1875-1947). He was their second son following Joseph who was born a year earlier. Gewitsch is 56 km north of Brno, now in the Czech Republic.

In Nov. 1913, the family moved to Czernowitz, Bukovina province, (today in Ukraine). David Kessler

worked as a theology professor and in July 1914 was appointed rabbi and deputy to chief rabbi Dr. Rosenfeld. However, the First World War started and Czernowitz was too close to the Russians. David and his family, together with some relatives from Czernowitz, returned to Gewitsch where they stayed till the end of the war.

Arthur went to the Gymnasium at Mara Strivova. The family stayed in Gewitsch till April 1918 when they decided to return to Czernowitz, the war ending in November 1918. In Czernowitz, now part of Romania, 15 year old Arthur enrolled in State High School L3. The city was quite a diverse one; L1 was the high school for the Romanians, L2 for the Germans, L3 for the Jews, L4 for the Ukrainians, and L5 for the Poles. He passed matriculation exams in the classics program with distinction and graduated in 1923. On 27 Oct. 1923, he enrolled at the University of Vienna Faculty of Medicine, and received his diploma in 1929.

Soon after, Dr. Kessler was recruited to the Romanian army as a doctor in "Sanitary Company 2" of the 2nd Army Corps. He was transferred to reserve duty on 1 Oct. 1930 and allowed to work in civilian practice. He then spent three years in a German hospital south of Zwickau. In 1933, with anti-Semitism increasing in Germany, he could no longer stay there and he returned to Romania. On 6 May 1937 he married Chaia Schulsinger in Czernowitz. Their daughter Vera was born in 1940.

When on 28 June 1940 the Russians took over Bukovina, the Romanian physicians fled. Arthur then became the hospital manager. On 22 June 1941 the German army invaded the Soviet Union with their Romanian and Hungarian allies and in early July, occupied Czernowitz, reestablishing Romanian rule. Dr. Kessler as a director of a hospital under the Soviets was considered an agent of the Soviet Union. He was accused of "commandeering the Czernowitz Hospital" and thrown to jail on 30 Dec 1941. He was released on 7 Feb 1942.

Romania was then under Fascist rule and on 4 Oct. 1941, the Czernowitz Military Command instructed that "All Jews from Bukovina will be sent east of the Dniester within 10 days."

Dr. Kessler was not transported; he probably stayed due to the efforts of the mayor of the city, Mr. Popovici, one of the few who tried to circumvent the expulsion order. This first transport, at the onset of the severe winter of 1941, was the most horrendous and murderous.

Later, in Sept. 1942, he was picked up in the street and sent to Vapniarca, a camp run by the Romanians for the Germans. The camp commander, Lieut. Col. Ion C. Murgescu, told the arriving inmates that they "will leave on all fours or on crutches". The detailed account of his experience at the camp is told in his 100-page summary titled "Ein Arzt im Lager" (yet to be published).

The events at this concentration camp were, however, documented in numerous publications. Attached is the dedication to Arthur in "L'Epidemie de Lathyrisme du Camp de Concentration Vapniarka" by Dr. A. Radovici, Societe Medicale des Hospitiaux de Bucarest, Nr. 5-7, Nai-Julliet

"To Dr. Kessler, An example of heroic resistance against the Teutonic fury unleashed against innocent and unarmed population. Deported and imprisoned in camp Vapniarca, he provided moral support to his comrades in suffering. He nursed with devotion the sick during the epidemic outburst and used all means to improve the living conditions by addressing with considerable risk repeated protests.

In the midst of the horrible circumstances, in the "house of the dead", he however conserved the tranquillity of the soul and the purity of the spirit to trace in a scientific manner the progress of paraplegic epidemic called Lathyrismus. He cultivated different varieties of the lathyrus and left us a collection of plants. "

On 1 May 1943 Dr. Kessler and 99 others were moved from Vapniarca to the ghetto at Ol'gopol where they spent almost a year. In 1944, he escaped, trailing the retreating Germans and arrived ahead of the advancing Russians back to Romania.

In 1944, Dr. Kessler, with his wife and daughter, immigrated to Israel where he started practicing again. His son David was born in 1948. Dr. Kessler became the director of the Allergy Department of the Zamenhof Clinic in Tel Aviv, and a leading pioneer of his field in Israel. His list of publications is attached. In Mar. 1968, he was elected Chairman of the Israel Society of Allergology. He engaged in lectures, workshops, and seminars in addition to practicing and publishing.

He was considered an authority in the area of lathyrism and continued for years to treat the invalid victims from Vapniarca without pay. Aside from his outstanding professional reputation, his empathy and compassion endeared him to his many patients. An unusually modest man, he always shunned away from all trappings of public recognition. He was keenly interested in many subjects beside medicine, mostly history and archeology. Arthur Kessler died on August 18, 2000.

Publications (not all on *Lathyrus* related topics)

- The struggle for survival and health in the ghettos in the days of the Nazi occupation (Hebrew). Dapim Refuim, Volume 6, September 1946
- Poisoning by the *Lathyrus sativus* beans, (Hebrew) Dr. A. Kessler, Harefua, Vol. 31, No.7, October 1946.
- Lathyrismus, von A. Kessler, Monthly Review of Psychiatry and Neurology, Vol. 113 No. 6 (1947).
- Survey of Airborne Pollen and Fungus Spores in Israel, 1952-1953, Arthur Kessler, M.D., Annals of Allergy, Vol. 11, pages 322-328, May-June, 1953.
- Asthma among our Children (Hebrew) , Eitanim, January 1954
- Survey of Airborne Pollen and Fungus Spores in Israel, 1953
- Arthur Kessler, M.D., Annals of Allergy, Vol. 12, pages 261-262, May-June, 1954.
- On the Problem of Hay-Asthma and Hay-Fever in Israel (Hebrew) by Dr. A. Kessler. Dapim Refuim, Vol. 13, No. 2, June 1954.
- Sensitivity to Penicillin (Hebrew) by Dr. A. Kessler, Dapim Refuim, Vol. 14, No. 1, February 1955, Medial Journal, Kupath Cholim, Tel Aviv.
- The Indications of Treatment of Bronchial Asthma with Cortisone. Dr. A. Kessler, Dapim Refuim, vol. 15, No. 5-6, December 1956.
- Sensitivity to Olive Pollen (*Olea europa*) as the cause for allergic diseases, Dr. A. Kessler, Dapim Refuim, Vol. 17, No. 2-3, August 1958.
- Survey of Airborne Pollen and Fungus Spores in Israel, 1954-1955
- Arthur Kessler, M.D., Annals of Allergy, Vol. 16, pages 445-450, July-August, 1958.
- Bronchial Asthma and Heredity, Dr. A. Kessler, Dapim Refuim, Vol. 19, No. 5, November 1960.
- La significacion de la herencia en el asma broncial, por Arthur Kessler, La Semana Medica, Buenos Aires, 30/4/1962
- Stings and Bites of Bees, Wasps, Mosquitoes and antes, Dr. A. Kessler, Dapim Refuim, Vol. 21, No. 7, November 1962.
- Airborne allergens and clinical response of asthmatics in Arad, a new town in a desert area in Israel. by S. Z. Kantor, Arthur Kessler et al, The Journal of Allergy, vol. 37, No. 2 February 1966.

- Advances in Diagnosis and Treatment in Allergology (Hebrew) (sometime after 1966)
- Bee Stings by Dr. A. Kessler, Harefua, Vol. 73, No. 1, July 2nd 1967, pp28-29.
- Allergy of babies, Dr. A. Kessler, Eitanim Vol. 21, No. 7, July 1968.
- Bronchial Asthma, Hypothyroidism (Myxoedema) and Glaucoma in Homozygous Twins, Dr. A. Kessler, Head of the Allergy Dept., Zamenhoff Clinic, Tel Aviv., Presented in honor of Prof. Ostrovsky on the occasion of his 80th birthday. Dapim Refuim, Vol. 27, No. 7-8, December 1968.
- On Sensitivity to Medications, Dr. A. Kessler, Dapim Refuim, Vol. 28, No. 2-3, Mars 1969.
- Panel discussion on Bronchial Asthma, Prof. Rakover, Dr. A. Kessler and 5 others, Dapim Refuim, Vol. 28, No. 2-3, Mars 1969.
- The Asthmatic Child from the Point of View of the Allergy Expert, Dr. A. Kessler, Eitanim No. 1, January 1970.
- Mortality of Asthma Bronchiale and its causes, Dr. A. Kessler, Harefua, Vol. 80, No. 5, March 1971.
- House dust, Mites and Bronchial Asthma, Harefua, Vol. 85, No. 6, September 1973.
- Short article, same title as above in the 30 October 1973 issue of the daily "Davar"
- Itching of Dermanyssus Avium (from birds) in Israel, A. Kessler, Harefua, Vol. 87, No. 9, November 1974.
- Risks in the Use of Aerosols, Dr. A. Kessler, Harefua, Vol. 89, No. 4, August 1975.
- Bees and Wasps Bites, Dr. A. Kessler, Harefua, Vol. 89, No. 12, December 1975.
- The Lower Motoric Neuron in Chronic Lathyrism, by M. Strifler, A. Arlasarov, A. Kessler and D. Cohen, Harefua, Vol. 90, No. 10, May 1976.
- Bites by Bees, Wasps, Mosquitoes and ants, Dr. A. Kessler, "The Family Physician". Vol. 7, No. 1-2, December 1977.
- The influence of the Israeli climate on Asthma patients, Dr. A. Kessler, Harefua, Vol. 94, No. 11, June 1978.
- Electromyographic observations in chronic lathyrism.in Electroencephalography and Clinical Neurophysiology. 1967 Dec; 23(6):588 Arlazoroff A, Kessler A, Streifler M.

Unpublished paper

- Vascular Diseases by Consumption of Lathyrismus sativus, by Dr. Kessler.

Other publications

- Book review: Clinical Allergy by French and Hanel, Mosby Co., Harefua, 1953.
- Review of the 5th International Conference of Allergology in Madrid, by Dr. A. Kessler, Dapim Refuim, Vol. 24, No. 3, May 1965.

- Book Review by Dr. A. Kessler: The Allergic Child, by P. Sapir, Dapim Refuim, Vol. 24, No. 7-8, December 1965.
- Obituary to Dr. Kissman, 1967. Dapim Refuim.
- Obituary to Dr. Ester Lindenbaum, December 1967. Dapim Refuim.
- Book Review by Dr. A. Kessler: Allergology, by Charpin et al. Harefua, 1973.
- Book Review by Dr. A. Kessler: Bronchial Asthma, by M.J. Gross, Harper & Row. Harefua, July 1974.
- Book Review by Dr. A. Kessler: Asthma in Children, by R.J. Jones, Edward Arnold Ltd. London. May 1977.
- Book Review by Dr. A. Kessler: Asthma, by T.J.H. Clark, Chapman and Hall, London, Harefua, Vol. 94, No. 7-8, April 1978.
- Book Review by Dr. A. Kessler: Research and Medical Practice: Their Interaction, Ciba Foundation Symposium 44, Elsevier Experta Medical, North Holland, Harefua, Vol. 94, No. 9, May 1978.

Notable citations

Dr Kessler's citation index is quite extensive and includes many citations in Hebrew papers and professional medical magazines. A partial list is shown:

- L'Epidemie de Lathyrisme du Camp de Concentration Vapniarka, by Dr. A. Radovici, Societe Medicale des Hospitaux de Bucarest, Nr. 5-7, Nai-Julliet. 1945. *The paper is dedicated to Dr Kessler.*
- Das motorische Neuron in chronischen Lathyrismus by D.F. Cohn, M. Striefler and E.Schujman, Nervenarzt 48, 127-129 (1977)
- Neurolathyrism, Historical Notes (A Chapter from the Holocaust) by Dan F. Cohen and M. Streifler (English and Hebrew) Koroth 7, No. 7-7, (1978).
- Guam Amyotrophic lateral Sclerosis-Parkinsonism-Dementia Linked to a plant Excitant Neurotoxin, by Peter S, Spencer et al., Science, Vol. 237, 465-564 (1987). *This extensive paper finds the connection between the Guam disease and lathyrismus where both are initiated by consumption of different plants but with very similar active ingredients.*
- Toscanini's Fumble and other Tales of Clinical Neurology by H.L. Klawans, CB contemporary Books, Chicago NY. ISBN 0-8092-4727-5. *The third chapter is called "Vapniarka" in which the Lathyrismus outbreak is detailed with emphasis on Dr Kessler's role.*
- Barbed Wire on the Dniester, by Ema Talmai, Sifriat Hapoalim (1947). *A book in Hebrew, describing from first survivor accounts the events in Vapniarka. Dr. Korn is the alias for Dr. Kessler.*