

Murmurs: Stories from Our Journey in Medicine

Season 2, Episode 1: Michael Hirsh

2021-11-29

Podcast Transcript

Speakers: Divya Bhatia, Hugh Silk, Michael Hirsh

Divya Bhatia: Hello and welcome to another episode of the podcast Murmurs: Stories from Our Journey in Medicine. This is Divya Bhatia --

Hugh Silk: -- and Hugh Silk --

Divya Bhatia: And today we're pleased to host Dr. Michael Hirsh. So Dr. Michael Hirsh was born in New York City. He is the son of Holocaust survivors. He grew up in New York and he attended Harvard Medical School and then did his surgical residency at Columbia. He has worked as a pediatric surgeon at UMass for 26 of the last 35 years, with nine years in Pittsburgh. He is married to Julianne and has two great kids, Scott and Estie. He is one of the founding members of Dr. Barlow's injury Free Coalition and he is the co-founder of Good For Guns Coalition. Dr Hirsh wears numerous hats within the Worcester community. He is a past president of the Worcester District Medical Society. He is chairman of their committee on Public Health and he was appointed medical director of the Worcester Department of Public Health in 2012. Dr. Hirsh has been awarded numerous surgical and medical education as well as community service awards throughout his career, most recently the DAV Public Service Award and the Harvey Ball Healthcare Hero Award. He also serves as the assistant vice Provost for health and wellness promotion at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. We are so lucky to have him here today.

Dr. Hirsh will be sharing his piece "Reflections on a visit to Holland" -- thanks so much for being here.

Michael Hirsh: Oh, this is so nice of you Divya, and thank you Dr. Silk for inviting me. I appreciate the opportunity.

Divya Bhatia: So before we dive into listening to your piece, can you share with us the context behind this piece?

Michael Hirsh: Yes, uh my wife and I were planning a 40th anniversary trip to Europe and we decided we wanted to go to the lowlands, you know the Netherlands. The Netherlands had a lot of different meanings for me. I wanted to see the city of Brugge, which had really caught my attention in a movie called, "In Brugge", which was produced in 2017. I don't know if any of you have not seen it; you should definitely pick it up. It's a very dark comedy, but the town is beautiful and I loved it so I wanted to see that I wanted to see Bastogne, which was the epicenter of the Battle of the Bulge because it was the 45th anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge that year in 2019. And I had watched the "Band of Brothers" miniseries and Easy Company, which was the subject of that series, was so involved with the battle. I wanted to see that.

And then my parents had been incarcerated in a transit camp in Holland for five years in the war and fortunately were one of only 800 out of the almost 300,000 that had gone to that camp that survived. So I felt an obligation to go take a look at it. I'd heard a lot about it over my then about 65 years of life and I just was tired of visualizing it in my head. I wanted to take a look for myself.

Hugh Silk: That's great, thank you for giving us that background, 'cause I think that'll make it easier for people listening to this story. You know Dr. Hirsh, you're known around campus as a bit of a storyteller. I've listened to you tell stories at Med moth and in other places, and I guess we're both curious where that comes from. I mean, do you come from a long line of storytellers or is this just, you know, your special talent?

Michael Hirsh: I don't know how special it is. My dad was a very good raconteur back in the day, but I think some of it comes from, you know, when they came to the United States in 1946 and '47, they spoke no English. And when I was born, they had acquired some English, but it wasn't fluent and they wanted me to learn by watching television. The kind of shows that I watch were a lot of storytelling kind of shows, and I think I just picked it up from watching a lot of great stories on television. You know, "Adventures on the Wonderful World of Disney" or "Daniel Boone" or "Davy Crockett" or "Swampfox" --All these serialized stories -- "The Hardy Boys". I just got to love talking about those things.

Hugh Silk: That's great; the tradition of storytelling is so important.

Well, with that being said, I think what we'd like to have you do now is read the story that you wrote, and then we'll ask you some more questions after that.

Michael Hirsh: Sounds great, I hope you like it. At least on Zoom, you can't throw tomatoes. So here goes:

So the title is "Reflections on a visit to Holland".

When most people think of Holland they think of Dutch chocolate, wooden shoes, canals and dykes to redirect and reclaim land from the sea. Growing up as a kid in NYC, Holland was very important in my life. My parents surrounded me with various surrogate aunts, uncles and cousins that they referred to as the Dutch crowd. It was not immediately understandable to me as all of the grownups were actually from Germany or Austria- so why did these gatherings involve prattling in that guttural language and relishing Dutch treats like herring salad, Dutch cocoa and pancakes?

I later came to learn that this Dutch Crowd was not a social club from some summer camp near Amsterdam- instead they were survivors of Kamp Westerbork, a transit camp first organized as a refugee facility by various relief organizations trying to save German Jews after the night of the broken glass in December of 1938.

After Holland was overrun in just 5 days in 1940, what was a displaced persons/internment camp functioning much like Manzanar in our own sordid treatment of Japanese-Americans post-Pearl Harbor, (or dare I say today's immigration centers on our southern border) became a concentration camp that held over the 5 years of Nazi Occupation as many as 240K denizens of which only 5K survived by war's end. 102K of the fatalities were Dutch Jews. The rest were non-Dutch Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, Political prisoners and Resistance fighters. When the camp itself was liberated on April 12,1945, only 800 people were still in the camp- my parents being two of them.

As a kid my parents did not share a lot about their experiences in Kamp Westerbork. But over time more and more they became willing to share their stories. After my father passed away in 2006 my mother actually gave an oral history of her experience to the Leo Boeck Society whose mission was to record the histories of Austrian Jews. Listening to the tapes gave me a much better understanding of their suffering and their triumph. Even more so when my Mom, still alive and going strong at age 94, gave a different oral history to a grad student from the Clark institute of Holocaust studies.

So when my wife and I decided to take a European vacation this summer with visits to Belgium and Holland, I cautiously booked an excursion to see the Kamp as it now has a commemorative center there. My Mother advised against it saying there would be “nothing to see” and that it would nonetheless be upsetting to me. I have never felt that I was anywhere as tough as my my parents, so for better or worse I decided to challenge myself to handle a visit to a place where only ghosts could harm me.

My wife and I were fortunate to have picked a beautiful day to drive from Amsterdam to Westerbork- about 2.5 hours to the northeast. Fields of farm animals and vegetable harvesting were to our left and right. We arrived to the Kamp Westerbork and walked around their museum. We saw diorama mockups of the camp, recreations of the triple bunk bed living in the barracks. A Nazi produced film created to absolve the Kommandant of atrocities (he produced it once he knew the German war effort was failing) portrayed the camp as a work camp- farming (my Father, a city kid from Berlin who knew nothing about farms, was in charge of a farming detail) and weaving and sports activities and even a weekly Cabaret night on Saturday night featuring some of the top German and Dutch performers of the now defunct Weimar age depicted by Bertholdt Brecht and the movie Cabaret. It showed the excellent hospital facilities at the camp- so good that non-Jewish German war casualties were frequently brought there and the Nazi staff of the camp and their families were treated there. This medical information heartened me as my mother was trained as a nurse there when she arrived at the camp in 1942. Both my parents were lucky to have been given vital functions that helped the camp to continue to be self-sufficient. This helped to keep them off the train that ran through the camp every Tuesday- destination Auschwitz. The Memorial they erected consisted of two WW2 German box cars and a section of train track that consisted of 49 railroad ties- one for each of the transports that carried approximately 2000 Jews to Auschwitz from 1942-1945. The last transport sent Anne Frank, possibly Westerbork’s most famous resident (albeit for only 5 weeks) to her death at Auschwitz (along with her Mother and sister).

Walking around the now grassy fields with mounds of grass-covered earth where the many barracks stood (1/2 of a barrack had been preserved) looking at the trees planted on the perimeter that had replaced the barbed wire and the watch towers (one watch tower had been preserved)- it was hard to picture the evil and sadness that had once filled this place. The central path that led to the cattle cars that departed every Tuesday was called the Boulevard of Misery, especially after returning empty train cars were found to be filled with feces and urine and small notes of warning surreptitiously hidden in the slats of the railcars. The notes were depicted at the camp as saying things like - “we have been traveling for 5 days without food or water or light. This cannot be good”. Even till the end the Westerbork denizens thought there was still a chance they were truly being sent to work in Nazi Germany rather than to end up in some crematorium in Poland. The 102,000 little red stones laid about on a field near the train tracks showed how wrong they were.

We hooked up with a guided tour. The tour guide was 81 years old and had been a school teacher for over 40 years. Encouragingly, the attendance for his and subsequent tours was quite numerous. People in the region were reverent and taking heed of these events. They wanted to know what happened. The guide tried to put the emphasis on the stories that would mean the most to kids- the deprivations, the lack of hygiene, the monotony and the terror. When speaking to him afterwards, I told the guide of my personal history. He told me as a little boy his grandmother would bring him down to the train tracks to retrieve notes thrown out of the trains as they departed Westerbork. He would gather them and some which were written on postcards he would help his grandmother stamp and actually mail. Most landed up back in the camp. But some got out and alerted family members in hiding or in the Resistance to avoid coming to the camp at all costs.

We left Westerbork and returned to complete a few more days of our vacation in Amsterdam. We visited the Anne Frank Huis with a new understanding of her history and that of my parents. 4000 visitors a day come to visit the Anne Frank house, another sign that perhaps the “never forget” slogan is more than that for people around the world.

The people that lived the events surrounding Westerbork are almost all gone now. When the horrible anti-Semitism wave that seemed to be sweeping Europe and now My beloved country, the USA, hit, my mother said, “I have seen this all before.” After this visit I feel personally committed not to stand by and allow this to ever recur. I told my mother of my resolve and said if beautiful trees can grow on the soil of Westerbork, might there not be hope that we can avoid this again? She sighed and said, “Your father planted those trees.”

Hugh Silk: Wow. Thank you very much for sharing that Dr. Hirsh that was, you know, a very powerful reflection, and I'm sure there's just so much for you personally behind that. You know, it strikes us that we've mostly interviewed faculty and learners about medical experiences, and yet your story is clearly not, you know, sort of directly medical in nature. And yet you know this is the story you wanted to share with us for the podcast, so let me ask you this. Why is this story important for you to share with others and maybe as you reflect on that, what do you take away from this experience that perhaps affects your clinical work and your approach to patient care and people here in the US?

Michael Hirsh: Well, I wrote this in the beginning of 2020, just when the pandemic was starting. I had no idea what was going to happen but my original goal was because we had seen this, you know, Tree of Life shooting in the synagogue in Pittsburgh, where I had spent ten years of my life, and I knew that congregation very well. And I was also seeing lots of evidence of right wing factions rising up in all of the European areas, Hungary and Poland and Austria, and then here you know, right here in our backyard.

The level of anti-Semitism, the level of hate crimes, and the lack of understanding at the Capitol level, meaning the White House level, where lots of good people on both sides were marching in Charlottesville, saying, “Jews will not replace us.” It was really getting to me, Hugh, and I, I just felt like, to be asleep at the switch again after what happened in Europe to my parents, I wasn't gonna let that happen. And I mean writing like this is obviously, you know, spitting in the ocean, but I thought at least it would give me an opportunity to talk to people and carry the flame for what my parents went through.

Divya Bhatia: I could sense a moment of pride in your piece when you wrote about your parents' roles and their vital functions for the camp, and especially again at the end when you reveal that your mother tells you that your father planted those trees that you were admiring when you were there.

So just knowing that information help to make this tragic experience a little bit more positive for you or for your memory of it?

Michael Hirsh: You know, I was very proud when I saw, you know, how highly regarded that hospital was where my mom worked. When the Canadian Army liberated her, she was a nurse that they recruited into the Canadian Army, and she spent the next year liberating other concentration camps because not only was she great nurse, but she spoke German and Dutch, which was very helpful. She gradually learned the Canadian English that way too.

And my dad's participation in this farm detail and realizing that the most beautiful thing about Westerbork now is that it looks idyllic. I mean, except for these remnants of barracks and train tracks and box cars, it's a beautiful part of Holland. Absolutely beautiful.

It really did give me a sense of extra pride when Mom said, "Oh yeah, your dad planted all those trees." They wanted to make it look like a fairy land when the Red Cross inspectors came.

So now, 75 years later, those have taken root then are making it a beautiful place for people to visit, but with a terrible legacy.

Divya Bhatia: Thanks for sharing that I love that image that you provide, that it's idyllic now. I know that it was challenging for you to talk to your parents about this as a kid and I'm just curious, how did you bring up your questions about these experiences with your parents?

Michael Hirsh: I think it came out gradually. I was raised as I said, with a lot of these other survivors and they would always call them Uncle Sammy and Uncle Gary, and I'm like -- I'm an only child. I don't know where all these uncles are. They all had children of their own and we were all raised as cousins, and we were all very tight. And I think it was like, you know, some of the older kids, so maybe 3-4 or five years -- I was born in 54, so some of the kids that were born in the late 40s and early 50s. They're the ones figuring out, like, what is this association. We'd be down in a basement in somebody house, or we'd be, you know, in a different room while the parents were laughing and giggling and telling old war stories -- in Dutch, so we couldn't understand the word.

And they would say, "Hey. Do you know that your dad was a leader of a big farm detail? You know your mother was a nurse in this hospital? She was like a head nurse in this hospital."

I gradually started asking questions based on that: "Is it true that you did, you know...?" the Sunday after these Saturday night parties, and gradually the word came out.

But I'm telling you still to this day my mother will shock me with a new story, and for her it's yesterday. She is a living example of the wound that never heals. It's in her head all the time. It's in her head, and she's very conflicted about her life. Obviously, she's had a good life, but she had a wonderful life in Vienna before she was cast out.

Hugh Silk: Dr. Hirsh, I want to come back to something. You spoke about the reason for doing the writing, but I want to come back to the actual trip that you took. In your essay and in today's interview, you talked about how the place was beautified, that you know trees have replaced the barbed wire and the watchtowers. And so, as you say, it was hard to picture the evil and sadness that had once filled this place, and yet it sounds like there's still a few remnants there.

But I guess what I'm interested in, even though your mom said, you know, it's maybe not worth this trip, you felt the need to go. I think of FDR after the war having to go himself so he could see things for himself so no one could ever talk him out of, you know, what evil had taken place.

Why did you have to go and see this for yourself? I know why you wrote about it, but why did you have to go?

Michael Hirsh: You know, people have written a lot about the of the survivors kids and how it has affected them. And this has affected me profoundly, and in my mind's eye I had been picturing this for a long time. And of course, you know, once the Internet came along, you could Google "Kamp Westerbork" and you could see the grainy black and white pictures. I just felt this need to satisfy myself that something good somehow had come from all of this. I have two wonderful children, and I hope I didn't mess their heads up too badly thinking that they were also a legacy of all this and they had to make the best of things, you know.

But I also feel that for me, I just needed to see the kind of deprivation and the struggles that my parents must have had in order to survive, tell their story, and move on with a new generation that hopefully would never experience anything like this again.

I didn't write about this, but in Christmas of 1944 -- so this is when the battle of the Bulge was raising. It was the coldest winter in Europe in the 20th century. There was no heat, and all the food that was in Holland was being eaten by the Germans. They were not giving any to the Dutch citizens, let alone to the, you know, the camp dwellers. My mother took care of an injured German soldier. I guess they must have been talkin,g and then my mother had mentioned that she had come there with her older sister, and they hadn't seen each other for two years.

Her older sister had been indentured as a maid in a SS General house that he had commandeered in Arnhem, which was a nearby city to Westerbork, featured very prominently in the movie "A Bridge Too Far" about Operation Market Garden which was a failed attempt by the British Army to liberate Holland.

Anyway, he said, you know, I'm stationed in Arnhem. I can take a note to her if you tell me where she lives.

So she gave the information; 'e wrote a note. She and her best friend actually both wrote notes. They stuffed it in this envelope and gave it to this German soldier when he was discharged.

But, three days later, she got called to the Commandant's office. And he had the letter on his desk.

The Commandant asked her, "Why should I not send you to Auschwitz now, you're trying to communicate like this."

She and her friend got their hair shorn. They were put into solitary, which meant no heat at all. They each got half a potato and a bowl soup twice a week. The soup had maggots in it and other stuff.

In the coldest January in European history for that century, there she was, and I just know I could not have done that. I know, I know myself well enough -- I am too much of a softie to have ever endured that kind of stuff.

So I just had to see.

I had to see where this all occurred and project in my head, could I have done it and the answer was no, which just filled me with much more respect and gratitude for the sacrifices my parents made.

Hugh Silk: Thank you.

Divya Bhatia: I would like to bring attention to a part of your story that particularly stuck out to me, and it's when you say, "When the horrible anti-Semitism waves that seem to be sweeping Europe and now my beloved country, the USA hit my mother said I have seen this all before."

You then state your personal commitment to not allow this to ever recur in your capacity, and obviously we are in the midst of facing our own inequities in the US right now. Not the same, but there are certainly parallels we can draw and lessons we can learn.

And so I want to ask you, how can we, especially those of us within medicine, which has its own set of inequities that are continually perpetuated? How could we take actions to prevent such injustice from reoccurring now and in the future?

Michael Hirsh: Well, I think the first thing is recognizing what has transpired. I mean, when you dig into this, a lot of the science and a lot of the background for the Nazi program of purification of the Aryan race came from the United States. It was developed here in the in the late 1910s, promoted very heavily by people like Henry Ford who owned the biggest companies, period, in the United States, and was used by some of the great jurists here including Oliver Wendell Holmes as a justification for forced sterilization and lobotomy.

That's right here in the United States.

And so we talk about the Nuremberg laws, how they gradually took away all the privileges of Jewish and gypsy and homosexual denizens of Germany, but there was a huge amount of support for that kind of ethnic cleansing here in the United States.

So, when I see what's happening with the movements now to end health disparities and to end our racial inequity in general in this country, it starts with recognizing what happened. What happened, and you know the years of slavery before the Civil War, the years of failed reconstruction, the years of Jim Crow and the civil rights movement that followed, we have to understand that well to do well moving forward.

In the grander scheme of the Hippocratic Oath, or the oath of Maimonides, we're all creatures of pain, some more than others, and I think what we need to do is recognize that and do everything we can in our power to promote both health and wellness to all, and equity in how we move forward to at least acknowledge the terrible evils that all started right here in this country.

Divya Bhatia: That just reminded me of in your story when you said that the attendance for the tour was quite numerous and that people in the region they wanted to know what had happened. And I think that just supports the importance of questioning and remembering and owning the history that we are all somehow a part of.

Michael Hirsh: Absolutely, that was that was my hope.

Hugh Silk: Well, thanks again Dr. Hirsh for sharing your piece but you know also for telling us these other stories really, really important piece of history for us all to think about. So thank you.

Michael Hirsh: My pleasure and thank you for giving me the opportunity. I'm much more optimistic now, and even after a pandemic, then I was when I wrote that.

So I'll say that.