Bárány and traumatic brain injury

TO THE EDITOR: I read with great interest the article by Michael E. Carey¹ (Carey ME: Cushing and the treatment of brain wounds during World War I. Historical vignette. J Neurosurg 114:1495–1501, June 2011) in which he discusses the evolution of the surgical treatment of penetrating cerebral trauma during World War I. My grandfather, Robert Bárány, was called to military service in July 1914 and was assigned to serve in the fortress hospital in Przemyśl, now a part of eastern Poland. In the absence of necessary instruments he asked his wife to send his own from Vienna.² Every day he performed up to 100 operations. Cranial injuries were common and soon he developed a surgical technique for fresh bullet wounds in the brain. The primary suture of fresh wounds led to far better results than did the conventional technique at that time. A couple of surviving patients are shown in Figs. 1 and 2. The staff was not fully educated in medicine—an anesthetist had formerly served as a swimming-pool superintendent and masseur.² In spite of the poor conditions and the Russian army siege of the fortress, Robert Bárány enjoyed the hard work. He wrote, “Even though I was far away from my family, my wife, my small children, my parents and my siblings in the besieged Fortress of Przemyśl, it was still one of the happiest times of my life.” In March 1915 the Russian army overtook the fortress and soon thereafter Bárány was deported to Merv in Turkmenistan. The staff is shown in a photograph taken shortly before the deportation (Fig. 3).

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The author reports no conflict of interest.

References

RESPONSE: I appreciate Peter Bárány’s interest in my paper. I discovered a letter written in German from Robert Bárány to Cushing in the Cushing Archive at Yale University (reel 7, box 9, folder 147, frames 161–168) that further elucidates Bárány’s life after capture by the Russians and shows his friendliness towards Cushing:

Fig. 1. Photograph of a patient on whom surgery was performed at the fortress hospital in Przemyśl, 1915.

Fig. 2. Photograph of patients in the fortress hospital in Przemyśl, 1915.
I received your kind letter from March 30th a few days ago. I am happy that my book interested you. I will try to find your articles here and to read them. I only read some time ago a brief summary in a French journal. Your congratulations for the Nobel Prize which I received after I came back from Russia I have already answered from Vienna. Did you receive my letters? I will now try to answer your questions about my experiences in Russia, however I really don’t know what you are interested in, more personal or general impressions. I will, therefore, report to you about both. I was imprisoned in the Fortress of Przemyśl where I worked since the beginning of the war. The Russians were first very kind with us. But that changed very soon. One day, 4 weeks after Przemyśl was conquered we, about 100 doctors, were ordered to see the Russian commander. After we waited there over 2 hours a young lieutenant led us from there to a prison. Of course there was a great uproar in our group. I laughed and decided not to be afraid and arranged immediately a bridge party in prison. I said, “We have done nothing therefore nothing can happen to us.” After some hours of waiting—we still did not know why we were put into prison—we learned we were supposed to depart tomorrow. We also learned that the event of today was only meant to be a “concentration.” Next day, indeed, we were transported in cattle cars to Russia. All of us had blankets to lie on. The weather was warm and the transport was not bad at all. Starting at the Russian border we travelled third class to Kiev. On the way we experienced continual for eight months. There are no clouds in Turkistan during 8 months straight. I experienced some clouds only 3 times in those 8 months. Starting in June the temperature is 40 degrees Réaumur in the shade! From Tashkent I came to the so-called worst location in Turkistan—Merv. The first impression is not enthusiastic for a Central European. Merv is an oasis in a sandy desert. The desert sand fills the streets and behind every vehicle dust rises as high as a house. I reported to the commander and was led to a villa already occupied by imprisoned doctors. We were 3 in a small room. No beds existed but I got one anyhow; no armoires. Obviously no table cloths, napkins, etc. I slept the first night on the platform of the railway. We would be cheated upon various times by this Russian so that this young man “saved” for himself 1,000 rubles. Arriving in Kiev our baggage was searched very lightly and little was taken away. We sighed a breath of relief. Next day we were told that we were supposed to visit the Governor and also to eat lunch there!

And indeed we were led through the city like a herd on long roundabouts, finally concentrated at the fortified wall. There our luggage was again searched and all valuable things taken away, my instruments, books, etc. I heard that within an hour these instruments were offered for sale in the city, that means all stolen by the Russians. I complained to a Russian officer and he said that such instruments are in every hospital. In reality I did not find them even in the university city of Kazan.

From Kiev one part of our group was transported to Siberia, the other to Turkestan in 3 weeks on the train. The train at that time was excellent, heating with petrol, therefore no rust, clean, each one of us had his bed. Since we had our servants with us we could take care of our food ourselves. We were not badly off. To play bridge helped us pass our time. This is the only time of my life when I played bridge daily. Otherwise I almost never played. I travelled together with Dr. Ernst Jäger, a well-known vascular surgeon, who may be known to you. This young, excellent surgeon died of typhus in Siberia.

First I arrived in Taschkent, the capital of Turkistan and we stayed in a garrison sleeping on wooden planks. It was the beginning of May and the most beautiful weather; always sunshine. I didn’t know yet that this sun would shine almost continually for eight months. There are no clouds in Turkistan during 8 months straight. I experienced some clouds only 3 times in those 8 months. Starting in June the temperature is day after day 40 degrees Réaumur in the shade! From Taschkent I came to the so-called worst location in Turkistan—Merv. The first impression is not enthusiastic for a Central European. Merv is an oasis in a sandy desert. The desert sand fills the streets and behind every vehicle dust rises as high as a house. I reported to the commander and was led to a villa already occupied by imprisoned doctors. We were 3 in a small room. No beds existed but I got one anyhow; no armoires. Obviously no table cloths, napkins, etc. I slept the first night in this room but it was so unbearably hot and the bedbugs bit me that I said to myself, “I’ll never do that again.” Next evening I had my blanket spread out on the terrace of the villa’s garden. I was warned about scorpions and indeed while my servant brought a glass of water he stepped next to my bed on something which proved to be a scorpion. I was very pleased because the others had heard about scorpions but had never seen one, now I was convinced that this would be the first and last I would ever meet. What was bothering me far more were mosquitos which swarmed around me the first nights. Therefore when my bed arrived