

Prof. Dr Ludwik Fleck

In the Buchenwald case

/A commentary to the book “Croix Gammée contre Caducée” by F. Bayle

In the book “Croix Gammée contre Caducée” by F. Bayle, 1950, on page 1162 there is the following statement of Dr Alfred Bałachowski¹, a former prisoner of the Concentration Camp Buchenwald, made in 1945 or 1946:

“le Pr. Ludwik Fleck, de Lwow, interné politique polonais juif, indiqua délibérément à Schuler², en Juillet 1944, qu’il pensait avoir observé des modifications dans le réactions sérologiques, à l’occasion d’une élévation soudaine du taux d’agglutination dans la réaction de Weil-Félix 1/400 à 1/800 aux cours de troisième et quatrième jours de la maladie. Schuler envoya immédiatement un rapport à Leipzig pour demander de nouvelles expériences, qui furent autorisées très rapidement. Le 6 Septembre 1944, vingt nouveaux sujets furent inoculés au block 46, et des observations sérologiques furent faites jour par jour. La réaction des Weil-Félix ne s’est pas montrée spécifique, deux sujets sur vingt seulement l’ont présentée.” According to Bałachowski, 19 out of 20 infected prisoners died.

Since in this opinion there is an implicit accusation, namely that supposedly due to my indiscretion, boastfulness or mere talkativeness a horrific experiment with tragic consequences was carried out on the camp’s prisoners by the Nazis, I therefore declare as follows:

Dr Bałachowski’s statement is absurd and vicious rubbish and shall only be understood as such. Bałachowski is a zoologist, not a doctor and is not knowledgeable about medical issues. The sentence: “La réaction des Weil-Félix ne s’est pas montrée spécifique, deux sujets sur vingt seulement l’ont présentée” is the best example of his ignorance.³

¹ I became familiar with it when I read the copy sent from Warsaw in July 1958.

² Dr Ding Schuler, SS-Sturmbahnfuhrer (!) was a director of the Hygiene Institut der Waffen-SS in the Concentration Camp Buchenwald.

³ The reaction was negative, since all the cases according to Bałachowski’s data were in critical condition and died very soon. Concerning the specific and non-specific character of the Weil-Felix reaction, it is impossible to draw a conclusion on the basis of 20 cases.

The first ambiguous and trumped up sentence of the quoted paragraph may only mean so much that I drew the Germans' (Dr Schuler's) attention to the fact that the Weil-Felix reaction was positive on the 3rd and 4th day of the illness in one or a few cases. First of all, however, it was not me who carried out the Weil-Felix experiments in the camp, but Dr René Morat, a French prisoner. It is Bałachowski himself, who claims so: page 1158 and 1163 of Bayle's book. Therefore, only Morat could have determined such fact, not me. It is possible that one of the blood samples sent, taken on the 3rd and 4th day of the illness was found to be positive by Morat. Schuler might have asked me, whether or not such a result was plausible. I want to stress here, that I do not recall such a situation, yet it might have taken place. Dr Morat as well as Dr Bałachowski could not speak German, therefore the Germans did not communicate with them directly. In such case, I would apparently have to confirm the positive results, that might in fact occur. Positive results detected on the 4th or 5th day of the illness were not rare. It's mentioned in the handbook "Experimentelle Bakteriologie" by Hetsch and Schlosberger of 1942, page 796: "Die Weil-Felix Reaktion wird in der Regel am 4 oder 5 Krankheitstage positiv."

This book was constantly used by Dr Schuler. So if Dr Schuler had asked my opinion on that matter (I want to stress once more that I do not recall such an event) my 'strong' or 'deliberate' statement that the Weil-Felix reaction might be positive as early as on the 3rd day of the illness, would have neither been a discovery nor revealed a secret. It would be of no theoretical or practical value, because a positive Weil-Felix reaction occurs rarely on the 3rd day. Yet, it might have been needed to conceal the true executor of the study, whom I was not.

Infecting 20 people in order to check if the Weil-Felix reaction could be positive on the 3rd day of the illness is not only a crime, but also nonsensical, since one could not expect such rare phenomenon to recur in so small a number of cases. Schuler never asked any prisoners for advice when he planned to carry out his experiments.

If, however, in this case he had, it would have been absolutely essential to dissuade him of the idea, as the results would be predictable from the start.

Even if I had had a conversation with Schuler about the Weil-Felix reaction on the 3rd day of the illness, Bałachowski couldn't have understood it, since he couldn't speak German. So he might have known the content of the conversation from a third party, and surely

not an expert one. Therefore, I could assume that he simply repeated an absurd piece of gossip in a biased way and then in 1945 or 1946 just spread it. He must have repeated it several times, as he had a series of lectures on Buchenwald in the USA (Bayle, page 1166). Bałachowski, the son of a Russian emigrant, had a particularly strong pro-Nazi attitude and therefore was prejudiced against me.

We rarely argued, but an exceptionally fierce dispute took place when I rejected as non-sterile a vaccine sample he had been working on. Bałachowski couldn't understand the fact that if, the vaccine had been accepted, it would have been extremely dangerous, as there would be complaints about the infections.

Dr Mikołaj Kołomow, a Russian prisoner, microbiology assistant in Kursk, who checked the sterility of the samples, witnessed that event. In the past I heard some unclear, general and unsupported rumors concerning some accusations against my person. Since there was nothing specific in them and I was unable to identify their source, I simply ignored them. On the other hand, since I received numerous oral and written compliments and thanks in appreciation of my work; I still have them today; I was not bothered by any sort of rumors that were spread not only about me, but a lot of decent people.

The source of the gossip about me turned out to be Bałachowski, and only him. Other inmates from the camp do not confirm his version. In Bayle's book on page 1178 there is the following statement made by the inmate Dr E. Kogon:

“Quand le Dr. Ludwig Fleck vint au block 50 à Buchenwald, il nous dit, après avoir vu les germes du typhus, que nous avions produits en partant de poumons de lapins, qu'il ne s'agissait pas des Rickettsies, mais d'un autre type des germe. Nous lui demandames de ne pas communiquer cette découverte avec à Ding-Schuler, mais d'expérimenter avec nous, pour essayer de nous sortir convenablement de cette difficulté. Pendant les deux ans que le Dr. Fleck travailla avec nous, il garda son secret.”

It proves that other prisoners (none of whom had any medical knowledge) learnt directly from me that they had been making a totally ineffective typhus vaccine for the SS army.

From that moment on, we were taking part in organised sabotage, which lasted for nearly 2 years and resulted in the production of 500 litres of the neutral liquid used by the SS

army as a vaccine against typhus. We were also making small amounts of the proper, effective vaccine that was used by the prisoners or given as samples to the control authorities. Keeping this process secret from other inmates and Germans likewise, was not an easy task. I carried an exceptionally heavy burden of responsibility on my shoulders and the lack of knowledge could not be used as an excuse. The Germans were aware of the fact that I had dealt with typhus fever before and published some works on the subject. In those 2 years, I and other conspirators were forced to conduct several extremely difficult and risky conversations with Schuler and other high-ranking German officials, that Bałachowski couldn't have known about.

K. Barbariski wrote about the sabotage in the concentration camp Buchenwald in the article "Sabotage in the Ampoule", published in *Przekrój* (1947, no 99), most probably inspired by Dr Ciepielowski⁴:

"It's essential to add, that it was a conscious action. It was initiated by Dr Ciepielowski, yet among the conspirators were also Prof. Fleck and Dr Makowicka⁵. It was too risky to get a wider circle of inmates engaged in the sabotage."

Those two quotations clearly prove that prisoners trusted me and I never failed them. Bałachowski did not belong to the inner circle and his lofty statement, that unlike me, he followed the strict rules: "not to take any scientific initiative, not to reveal any personal experience, and not to give any suggestions to Schuler..." (page 1162 in Bayle's book) is simply ridiculous, as nobody expected any initiative on his behalf, nor consulted him in any matter. The situation described by Kogon clearly shows that I could not have adopted an entirely passive, safe attitude.

As a proof of the trust and respect on the part of the inmates that I received prior to liberation in April 1945, I would like to say that a secret communist organisation of prisoners (by the way, the one that Dr Bałachowski spoke viciously of on page (?) of Bayle's book) hid me, because in the last days of the war the Nazis made all the Jews gather together with the intent of murdering them. It was the organisation's own initiative, even though I was not a member of it. In 1948 I was invited by the Office of

⁴ **A Polish prisoner; appointed by the Germans a vaccines production manager.**

⁵ **A Czech prisoner, currently a serving colonel in the Czech-Slovak army. He lives in Prague.**

Chief of Counsel for War Crimes by the Nuremberg Court to give testimony as a witness and an expert in the trial against IG Farben due to criminal involvement in the medical experiments which took place in the concentration camp Buchenwald. My task was to perform an expert analysis and determine the efficacy of various Farben typhus vaccines, as in the case we are taking about. Therefore, if there had been any serious charges against me, the Counsel would have rejected my participation in the trial. Furthermore, even if the Counsel had not done it, then the defence, having access to all the data, could have raised charges against me. I am sure they wouldn't have missed an opportunity to get rid of me. Meanwhile, once my task was completed, I received a letter of thanks from the Counsel, which I hereby attached. It reads as follows:

“Prof. Ludwig Fleck of the University of Lublin, Poland, has cooperated and rendered substantial assistance to the Prosecution... He furnished an expert analysis of the documentary evidence concerning the criminal involvement of the Farben officials in the medical experiments which took place in the concentration camp Buchenwald to determine the efficacy of Farben typhus vaccines...”

Finally, I would like to quote the opinion of Prof. Dr Robert Waitz from the Doctors' Department in Strasbourg, the Knight of the Legion of Honour, former leader of the Resistance movement Auvergne, who worked with me in the same lab in block 50 in the Buchenwald camp. After the war he was a witness in the Nuremberg Trial and published two articles about the experiments which took place in the concentration camp Buchenwald. One in cooperation with Dr Ciepielowski, in *Presse Medicale* (No 23, 1946, page 322 and the following), and the other in “*Publication de la faculté des lettres de l'université de Strasbourg*”, “*De Université aux Camps Concentration*”, Paris (1947, page 109 and the following). Moreover, in 1956, after my return from the United States, I asked Prof Waitz to express his opinion on my activities and attitude in the camp. I did that after hearing from one of my relatives about the article he had written about my negative attitude and activities in the concentration camp Buchenwald, published in one of the post-war newspapers. I sent this opinion to America.

Professor Waitz, being well-acquainted with all the camp events in the book quoted above, namely: “*De Université aux Camps Concentration*” (page 117) and the book “*Der SS Staat*” by Dr E. Kogon, published in 1946 in Western Germany, wrote as follows:

“Je puis certifier sur l’honneur, qu’ à aucun moment, le Professeur Fleck n’a fait la moindre expérimentation sur le détenu, ni participé de près ou loin à une telle expérimentation. Je n’ai jamais entendu parler par des camarades de camp, du moindre fait pouvant être reproché au Professeur Fleck. Au contraire, je tiens à affirmer, que le Professeur Fleck a toujours su garder vis-à-vis des SS une attitude très digne, et qu’il s’est efforcé de saboter le travail des médecins-SS.”

No charges or accusations against my attitude or activities in the camp can be found in any of the publications. I also have letters from the inmates with words of gratitude for my help in the camp.

Therefore, I believe that I have the right to call Dr Bałachowski’s statement “absurd and malicious gossip”.

I am sure that in Poland, where I have spent over 50 years and where there are many witnesses of my stay in the concentration camps in Oświęcim and Buchenwald, the gossip is discounted.

(Übersetzt von Anita Żytowicz)