



**Professor Sir Ludwig "Poppa" Guttmann, CBE, FRS**  
(3 July 1899 – 18 March 1980)

Anyone who has seen the recently completed Paralympics London 2012 will have been moved by the enthusiasm and bravery of the Paralympians, but may not be aware that the 'Father' of the Paralympic movement was directly connected with the Oxford Jewish Congregation, as an involved member. His daughter too remains in the near vicinity and was also a member for many years. This is a story of bravery and scientific foresight that changed the treatment for the spinally injured in a way he could not have envisaged.

Born into an Orthodox Jewish family in Tost, Upper Silesia, Germany in 1899 Ludwig Guttmann was the eldest of four children and the only boy. At the age of 18, he volunteered to be an orderly at the local Accident Hospital for Coalminers where he witnessed an incident that left a profound impression.

Guttmann became interested in a particular patient; a strong, young miner admitted with a broken back and paralysis below the waist. The outlook for the miner was so bleak that death was expected within weeks. Guttmann was shocked that the miner was left encased in plaster and moved away from other patients, where he developed urinary tract infections and sepsis. Five weeks later he was dead. 'Although I saw many more victims suffering the same fate,' Guttmann said, 'it was the picture of that young man which remained indelibly fixed in my memory.' (*Spirit of Stoke Mandeville* by Susan Goodman, Collins, 1986).

In April 1918, having been turned down for military service on medical grounds, Guttmann started medical studies at the University of Breslau, now Wroclaw, Poland, passing his finals five years later in 1923. Guttmann had intended to work in paediatrics but when his efforts to find work in this particular specialty failed he reluctantly took a job in Neurology and Neurosurgery - a decision that would affect the rest of his life, and those of countless others.

From 1919 until 1924 while he was studying medicine in Freiburg he became active in a Jewish fraternity, whose purpose was information and awareness against anti-Semitism in the Universities. This fraternity gradually evolved into a centre of physical training and sport, to acquire body strength, skills, confidence and self-esteem so that nobody needed to be ashamed of being a Jew. When Guttmann graduated medical school in 1924, financial reasons forced him to return to Breslau

where he took up a position in the neurological department of the distinguished professor, Otfried Foester. From 1928 he worked as a neurosurgeon in a 300 bed psychiatric clinic at Hamburg University and in 1929 became Foester's assistant. In 1930 he was made a lecturer in Breslau University.

In 1933 after Adolph Hitler became Chancellor of Germany it was prohibited for Jews to practice medicine in public hospitals. Guttman was fired on the 30<sup>th</sup> June 1933 but immediately took over as the director of the neurological and neurosurgical department of the Breslau Jewish hospital. After Hitler's rise to power, the position of Germans with Jewish origin was getting more and more difficult. Guttman had plenty of proposals to migrate abroad so he could carry on with his career, thanks to his growing international reputation, but he believed that Nazism would not last for long. He became president of the local Jewish Medical Community and many times exposed himself to danger by helping refugees and patients. In September 1938 he was ordered by the Gestapo to discharge all non-Jewish patients from the Jewish Hospital that he was managing. Later that same year, when thousands of Jews were taken to concentration camps, Guttman was summoned by the local Gestapo Commissar to justify the presence of the 63 Jewish patients that were admitted to his Hospital. He managed to save all but three who were sent to concentration camps. It was then that he realised that he would have to leave Germany.

Together with his wife, Else, and two young children, Dennis and Eva, the Gutmans headed for England arriving in Dover on March 14 1939, having been invited by the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning. Once in Britain they settled in Oxford where Guttman busied himself with various research projects. (*Goodman, Collins, 1986*). With the sponsorship of Hugh Cairns, one of the leading neurosurgeons of that period, he restarted his research in Oxford. They were assisted by CARA (Council for Assisting Refugee Academics) that negotiated with the British Home Office on their behalf and gave Guttman and his family £250 (equivalent to around £11,500 today) to help them settle in Oxford. Guttman continued his spinal injury research at the Nuffield Department of Neurosurgery in the Radcliffe Infirmary and at St Hugh's College Military Hospital for Head Injuries.



A young Guttman soon after his arrival at Stoke Mandeville Hospital

For the first few weeks after arrival the family resided in the Master's Lodge of Balliol College until they moved into a small house in Lonsdale Road, Summertown. The headmistress of Greycotes School offered both children free places. The family became members of the Oxford Jewish Community, and Eva remembers becoming friendly with one of her neighbours, Miriam Margolyes. The Jewish community in Oxford was growing rapidly as a result of the influx of displaced academic Jews from Europe.

His daughter, Eva Leoffler wrote, "Although Jews were allowed to take out some furniture, clothes and linen they were not allowed to take any money, gold silver or jewellery. But the official who was supervising us came round the day before and told my mother 'I shall be an hour late

tomorrow'. It was obviously a hint that we might pack what we wanted; but my mother was too frightened to take anything forbidden as she thought it could be a trap."

In December 1941, Guttmann was invited to review the way patients suffering from spinal cord injuries, were dealt with and rehabilitated to the "Medical Research Council of England". As a result of that presentation the Medical Research Council decided on the creation of a special centre for patients with spinal cord injuries.

Then in 1943 he was asked by the Government to become Director of the new National Spinal Injury Centre at the Emergency Medical Services Hospital at Stoke Mandeville. He accepted the post on the condition that he could treat patients in his own way with no interference and that he could apply his philosophy as far as the whole approach to the treatment of those patients was concerned.

The mortality rate of traumatic paraplegia in British and American Armies during World War II was still very high reaching 80%. The few survivors carried on living as useless and hopeless cripples, unemployable and unwanted, condemned for the rest of their lives to institutions for incurable patients with no encouragement to return to a useful life. Life expectancy was a mere 3 months following injury. That decision to open a dedicated centre for the care of these patients was a part of the greater preparation for the planned attack of the Second Front in the spring of 1944, as the number of such patients was anticipated to rise.

The National Spinal Injuries Centre opened on the 1st of February 1944 with 26 beds and a new era started for spinal injuries patients. Guttmann introduced a whole new approach to the way tetraplegic and paraplegic patients were treated from the initial stages of injury until final resettlement. Perhaps Guttmann's involvement in sports activities during his youth in Germany, as a member of the Jewish fraternity, played an important part in the inclusion of sport in the rehabilitation programme for the spinal injuries patients. Guttmann's programme aimed at reintegration into a normal life, which in a modern society included sport.

Guttmann's goal was the integration of these patients into society as respectable and useful members despite their high degree of disability. The ever repeated question "Is it really worth while?" asked by visitors during the first two years that the Centre operated was indicative as to how difficult it was to get over the centuries old perceptions and prejudices. The defeatist attitude of the public was expressed by one of Guttmann's early patients who wrote, "One of the most difficult tasks for a paraplegic is to cheer up his visitors!"

The team games that Guttmann incorporated in the rehabilitation programme soon developed into sports activities in which men, women and children could participate upon their discharge from the National Spinal Injuries Centre. Soon more patients from other Units all over Great Britain started participating. A sports movement was developed that became known as the Stoke Mandeville Games. The



first Games, with 14 ex--Servicemen and 2 Ex-Servicewomen competing in Archery on the grass outside the hospital ward, were held on the 28th July 1948, the same day that the London Olympic Games started. The date was not chosen by accident. Guttman wanted his games to have a larger forum. He envisioned international Games. Initially in 1948 the Stoke Mandeville Games were held every year. In 1952 a team of Dutch paraplegic war veterans crossed the Channel to compete with their comrades at Stoke Mandeville in the first International Games for athletes with disabilities.

Sir Ludwig Guttman died on the 18th March 1980 of heart failure following a heart attack some months before. He did not live to see his vision of full integration of spinally injured patients into society realised, but his work continues through the current disabled sports organisations and through the National Spinal Injuries Centre at Stoke Mandeville, which continues to be a world leader in the treatment of spinal injuries.

The International Olympic Committee adopted the term “Paralympic Games” in 1984. It was decided that the games should be held in the country hosting the Olympic games every fourth year.

The Paralympics Games have become a worldwide phenomenon, watched and followed by millions. This has achieved a tremendous admiration for and understanding of disabled people, especially in countries which had previously denied and hid disability.

2012 saw the return of the Paralympics to their origin in London with the Guttman Stadium at Stoke Mandeville playing an important part welcoming many teams and being used as a training centre.

Ludwig Guttman's daughter who came with him from Germany as a young girl subsequently trained as a physiotherapist, working briefly at Stoke Mandeville. She was named as Mayor of the Paralympic Village for the London 2012 Games.



Eve Loeffler, daughter of the founder Paralympic games Ludwig Guttman, stands by the logo of the Paralympic Games August 2012

Michael Ward, Oxford 2012

Acknowledgements to the following sources:

1. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ludwig\\_Guttman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ludwig_Guttman)
2. Spirit of Stoke Mandeville' by Susan Goodman, Collins, 1986
3. <http://www.poppaguttmancelebration.org/poppa2.php>
4. [http://www.mandevillelegacy.org.uk/category\\_id\\_19\\_path\\_0p4p.aspx](http://www.mandevillelegacy.org.uk/category_id_19_path_0p4p.aspx)
5. <http://www.paralympics.org.uk/games/ludwig-guttman>
6. Eva Loeffler in Then and Now: A Collection of Recollections, Ed Freda Silver, 1992, OJC
7. [http://www.oxfordjewishheritage.co.uk/images/stories/pdfs/ThenandNow/then%20and%20now\\_05%20growing%20up%20in%20oxford.pdf](http://www.oxfordjewishheritage.co.uk/images/stories/pdfs/ThenandNow/then%20and%20now_05%20growing%20up%20in%20oxford.pdf)