The strange case of Irving Selikoff

Irving Selikoff was the leading figure of his time in asbestos research in the United States and a towering presence in occupational medicine. To be a towering presence in occupational medicine in the United States was not as comfortable as it might seem from this side of the Atlantic since the American mindset sees individuals taking sides, democrat or republican, pro- or anti-gun, pro-labour or pro-big business; fences are not there to sit on. So Selikoff was firmly identified with labour and the union movement and attracted opprobrium from industry and its supporters both within and outwith the medical profession. It was whispered that he took money from the unions, though as someone who tried unsuccessfully to do the same thing I would regard it as an indication of his skill as a fundraiser. Most readers will be aware of his pioneering studies of US asbestos workers and his campaigns against the asbestos industry. Fewer will know that he was responsible for the earliest studies of isoniazid as an anti-tuberculosis drug, work that contributed to the later demonstration of the efficacy of triple therapy for that disease.

It is curious that in spite of his notable achievements in medicine, his presidency of the American Thoracic Society and his chair in Mount Sinai, the damaging allegation has been made that he was not properly qualified as a doctor. A search on Google shows some controversy, with statements that he qualified in Scotland, perhaps Edinburgh, and in Middlesex University. What is the truth?

He was born in New York, the son of immigrant Russian Jews. He obtained his bachelor of science degree from Columbia University in 1941 and then went to Glasgow to study medicine at what was then Anderson’s College of Medicine and later the medical faculty of Glasgow University but at that time preparing students for the Scottish Triple Qualification through the examining board of the three Scottish Royal Colleges. The war was on and he completed his studies in Australia before returning to take his final examinations. His name appears on the roll of graduates in 1945, when he would have been 30 years old, number 8761. That same year, he returned to the United States and obtained a mysterious MD from Middlesex University, Massachusetts, which was in the throes of closing since the American Medical Association had stopped recognizing its degrees. At the same time, it stopped recognizing qualifications from Anderson’s Medical College. Interestingly, both institutions had a reputation for admitting American Jews who found it difficult to gain admission elsewhere. But Selikoff was already embarked on his distinguished career, having completed his medical internships. I am sorry I did not know all this when I knew him since my great grandfather qualified from the same Anderson’s College. It is apparent that Selikoff had an early struggle to qualify but qualify he did.

His determination to go to Glasgow and Australia to achieve this was an indication of what was to come. Had he stayed, he would surely have drawn attention to the scandal of mesothelioma then being recognized among the ship workers of Glasgow and first published in Thorax in 1946, 14 years before Chris Wagner’s famous paper from South Africa.

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