Comments on Dr. Wegener Editorial

To the Editor:

“The only record of this occurrence is in the Convocation Program printed that year.” In fact, there is a recording of Dr. Wegener’s presentation.

I attended the American College of Chest Physicians (ACCP) meeting in Boston in 1989 (I was 33 at the time), and I remember very well the presentation Dr. Wegener made at the meeting. As I was unable to attend his presentation, I managed to attend the award ceremony just to see the man (a tall, thin, apparently proud man) and, above all, I bought a tape recording of the presentation. I remember listening to the tape the following days in my car on my way to my hospital back in France. He was speaking in German (the first words were Es ist eine grosse Ehre . . . or something very close to that), and each sentence was immediately translated in English (my friend Dr. Sergio Salmeron who attended the presentation believes Dr. U. Specks was the translator). It was very moving to hear this man describing not only “his” disease and the way he discovered it, but also where he came from, and there was apparently (I did not see them, unfortunately) at least one slide with his family and one slide from Luëbeck. As far as I remember, there was no allusion to his past in the World War II years. Maybe this recording could provide evidence as to whether Dr. Wegener made any false or misleading statement regarding his past?

Shortly after the meeting (or a couple of years later), somebody told me about Dr. Wegener’s “unclear” past. I thought the ACCP was aware of that past and had considered there was insufficient evidence to deny or withdrawing the award.

Regarding what to do now, I support your current decision: if the award was given in good faith, as it was “scientifically” deserved, as there seems to be so far no evidence of Dr. Wegener participating directly in war crimes, and if there is no evidence of false or misleading statements, I believe he can be left with the “bénéfice du doute” (benefit of doubt).

Regarding the tape, I have been unable to locate it, but other attendees must have this tape, as well as, maybe, the ACCP and/or the company that made the recording. I certainly appreciate ACCP’s transparency on all this . . .

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The author has no conflict of interest to disclose.

On Wegener and the ACCP

To The Editor:

I read your editorial “Dr. Friedrich Wegener, the ACCP, and History” with great interest. In addition to the specific issues and concerns you addressed—namely the special recognition given by the American College of Chest Physicians to Dr. Wegener—the eponymous association of Wegener with the syndrome he described has also been called into question. Should we continue to call this disease Wegener granulomatosis? Several other, rather notorious, Nazis have eponymous disease associations. They include Hans Reiter, who was directly and personally implicated in multiple war crimes, including typhus experiments carried out on concentration camp victims. In 2003, an international group of rheumatology journal editors decided to eliminate usage of the term Reiter syndrome, and this eponym no longer appears in many journals nor in recent editions of several internal medicine textbooks (largely replaced with the term reactive arthritis). An analogous decision was made regarding Hallerorden-Spatz disease when it became clear that Julius Hallervorden’s wartime reputation was remarkably enhanced by his dissections of “wonderful material”: 500 brains obtained from euthanized “feeble-minded individuals.” Dr. Wegener was never convicted of any war crime. His war-time records have largely “disappeared.” He also never apologized for, or even publically acknowledged, his very early membership in the Sturm Abteilung (SA) Brownshirts and then the Nazi party. I have chosen not to use the term Wegener granulomatosis in my professional and educational activities and instead use the term granulomatous vasculitis. When my lack of eponymous usage is questioned, it provides an opportunity for historical education.

I also would like to point out a most interesting coincidence. The term Wegener’s granulomatosis was introduced into the English medical literature and promoted by the pathologists Jacob Churg and Gabriel Godman in 1954. Dr. Churg was born in 1910 in the eastern European Jewish shtetl of Dollinow. Following graduation from the medical school in Wilno in 1936, he immigrated to New York City and joined his uncle, Louis Chargin, Chief of Dermatology at Mt. Sinai. He later became a renal pathologist of great renown and has a disease named after him: Churg-Strauss syndrome. Is it not ironic that Dr. Wegener’s fame is largely attributable to an eastern European Jew, who, had he not escaped to the United States, would certainly have been incarcerated in a ghetto, perhaps even the notorious Lodz Ghetto, where Dr. Wegener was dissecting victims just 3 years later in 1939?

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I have no conflict of interest to declare except that I am the child of Holocaust survivors, was born in a displaced persons’ camp in Austria, and my oldest sister together with many uncles, aunts, and cousins were murdered by the Nazis.

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DOI: 10.1378/chest.07-2720

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