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Lucie Adelsberger (1895–1971): Emancipated Medical Doctor and Scientist in the Field of Allergology and Cancer Research – Survivor and Chronologist of Auschwitz

Lucie Adelsberger was born in Nuremberg on 12 April 1895. After finishing school, she began to study medicine at the nearby University of Erlangen in 1914, which she completed with a license to practice medicine in 1920. Her doctorate followed in 1923 with a thesis on „Digestive leukocytosis in infants“. Lucie Adelsberger came to Berlin in 1921 and opened her own practice in 1925, where she mainly treated patients with allergic diseases. In 1925 she acquired the title of specialist for internal medicine, and in 1926 the title of specialist for paediatrics. Her scientific interest was also focused on allergies. From 1927 to 1933 she worked at the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) in the newly founded “Observatory for Hypersensitivity Reactions”. She was one of the few women who conducted research at the RKI during the Weimar Republic. Lucie Adelsberger was scientifically interested, committed to professional politics and above all very emancipated. As a member of the German Medical Women’s Association, founded in 1924, she fought for the equality of women in medicine.

After the National Socialists came to power, she continued to look after her patients — although it was no longer possible to invoice her services to the health insurance companies and despite the later withdrawal of her license to practice medicine. She resigned from the scientific societies of which she was a member in order to avoid being excluded. She turned down a job offer from Harvard, where she even spent a few days in the fall of 1938, because she did not want to abandon her old and sick mother, for whom she had not been granted a visa. After the death of her mother, Lucie Adelsberger was deported to Auschwitz on 17 May 1943. There she arrived on May 19 and was assigned the prisoner number 45.171. She had to work as a prisoner doctor in the „Gypsy and Women’s Camp“ of Birkenau under the infamous „Angel of Death“, Josef Mengele. Due to the untenable hygienic conditions in the overcrowded camp barracks, Lucie Adelsberger fell ill with typhus after only a few weeks. In January 1945, she was among those who were sent on one of the infamous death marches when the Auschwitz camp was dissolved. She reached the Ravensbrück concentration camp and was freed by American soldiers in its subcamp Neustadt-Glewe on May 2. Lucie Adelsberger spent the following months as a „stateless person“ in Amsterdam. During this time she wrote down her memories of Auschwitz and published a report in the „Lancet“ entitled „Medical observations in Auschwitz concentration camp“.

In October 1946 she emigrated to the USA, where she settled in New York as a medical doctor. She passed the American medical exams and took US citizenship. From then on she worked at the Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx in cancer research and also published in this field. Lucie Adelsberger died at the age of 76 on November 2, 1971 as a result of metastatic breast cancer — in the same hospital where she herself had worked for almost 25 years.

Lucie Adelsberger has never returned to Germany. Her book „Auschwitz: a doctor's story“, first published in German in 1956, is an important testimony to the Holocaust. This year, which marks the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and the end of the Second World War and the 125th anniversary of Lucie Adelsberger's birthday, is an appropriate occasion to remember a committed and emancipated female paediatrician, internist and allergologist.

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