

The right foot of Joseph Goebbels

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ABSTRACT

Joseph Goebbels is considered to be one of Adolf Hitler's henchmen in this blood-soaked path to the rise and fall of the Third Reich. However, behind this seemingly strong personality, was hiding his humble origins, his inferiority complex due to physical disability and many unfulfilled individual ambitions, along with his great enthusiasm to climb the higher social ranks. Goebbels' role as Minister for Public Enlightening and Propaganda was decisive, both during the rise of the Nazis to power and in the last months before the end of the war, when it was clear that everything was lost. Little documentation exists today of the true nature of Joseph Goebbels' disability. The master of propaganda, who in a short period managed to rule the press, radio, cinema, theater and literature, managed to artificially silence his physical handicap and disorient public opinion in the wrong direction, ensuring its prestige and reputation. Newer research, however, clarifies the lameness in his right foot, classifying it as talipes equinovarus, a congenital deformity of the foot, which he never effectively treated.

KEYWORDS: Joseph Goebbels; clubfoot; talipes equinovarus; limp; lameness; disability.

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Introduction

The Weimar Republic, which took over to rule Germany at the end of the First World War, was unable to solve the large number of problems that had accumulated after the Treaty of Versailles. The humiliation of the German people, disarmament, sanctions, the loss of territory, the socio-economic crises of the 1920s that worsened the already collapsed standard of living, as well as the denial of the expectations that had been achieved, characterized an extremely ominous atmosphere. These were the same reasons, which acted as fertilizer for the flowering of radical tendencies that seemed capable of bringing the hope of change. [1].

National Socialism thus found fertile ground to grow and, from an insignificant party force with revolutionary ideas that at first seemed utopian, succeeded in taking power in Germany within a few years. In his announcements he succeeded in incorporating various social, political and ideological parameters.

After Hitler's failed attempt to seize power in the Munich coup on November 9, 1924, which resulted in his arrest and imprisonment for 5 months, it became apparent that the only credible route was the legitimate parliamentary one. After his release, he regrouped and established a "softer" and more persuasive discourse to appeal to the masses [1-3]. It was at the same time that Goebbels joined the ranks of the party, seduced by Hitler's leadership personality, passion and vision.

Childhood and Adolescence

Paul Joseph Goebbels was born on October 29, 1897 in the independent industrial town of Rheydt, south of Mönchengladbach near Düsseldorf. His parents were Catholics and made sure to instill the faith in their children by raising them in a strict manner. Father Fritz was a foreman in a textile industry and mother Katharina Maria was of Danish descent. Joseph had 5 other siblings: Konrad (1893-1947), Hans (1895-1949), Maria (1896-1896), Elisabeth (1901-1915) and Maria-Katarina (1910-1949), his successor. In 1932, Goebbels published his family tree, in order to dispel any suspicions of Jewish origin.

Little Joseph's health was never excellent. He suf-



Figure 1. Joseph Goebbels with his classmates in 1916.

fered from frequent respiratory infections, which kept him for long periods away from the play that is identified with the normal development of a child (Figure 1). Immediately after his birth, he was in danger of dying from pneumonia, while at the age of 3 he contracted osteomyelitis. There is unconfirmed testimony that the bone infection affected his right foot and caused a form of paralysis (apparently of the peroneal nerve), which explained in some way the limp that characterized his gait. However, another testimony speaks of a congenital deformity of the right foot, which his parents tried to cover up. The truth is that they did everything possible to successfully deal with their young son's physical disability [3].

Their first move was to react to the prospect of permanent deformity, as the doctors had predicted. They also sought another opinion, resorting to the distinguished scientists of the Medical School of the University of Bonn, which did not correspond to their poor financial situation. They then accepted the solution of applying an orthopedic brace that would support the foot and help the child walk comfortably. Nevertheless, they were persuaded to resort to surgical treatment, after the failure of the brace. Joseph was taken to the operating theater of the Maria Hilf Hospital in Mönchengladbach at the age of 10 to correct his clubfoot, but the operation was a complete failure.

Goebbels's childhood memories, as he recounts them, were full of unpleasant experiences from his classmates and teachers mainly due to his physical disability. The result was that he preferred long hours of isolation, finding refuge in study and reading. Any publication that fell into his hands - a book,



Figure 2. The right foot was crooked and the leg shorter than the left.

a newspaper or an encyclopedia- automatically turned into a source of his insatiable reading bulimia. The information he accumulated through this forced contact with knowledge would later prove beneficial to his goals and choices [3].

It is impressive how he managed, in his period of omnipotence, to keep the physical handicap hidden as a state secret. Reporters were specifically instructed to omit the clubfoot of his right foot. This explains his photographing from the waist up in most newspaper snapshots of the time or in cinematographic reportage. Few short videos rescued of Goebbels limping (**Figure 2**).

However, the permanently etched smile on his face in his public appearances, struggled to give a different image to the outside than what was going on inside. He did not take part in the First World War because he was deemed unfit for conscription. This was a godsend for him to study history and philology, first in Bonn and then in Würzburg and Freiburg. His literary ambitions did not find the desired response from publishing houses and newspapers, while he didn't manage to find work commensurate with his studies, despite obtaining a doctorate at the University of Heidelberg.

The constant and repeated frustrations in his personal life, along with the social and geopolitical circumstances of the time, combined with the constant struggle to compensate for his physical deficit, led the restless Goebbels to seek new ways to stand up



Figure 3. Goebbels emerged as a skilled orator and could rouse the masses who were literally hanging from his lips.

and emerge. Attuned to the times (which called for a radical attitude to the humiliating defeat that had preceded it, the weak Weimar Republic and the lurking communist danger), Goebbels early adopted ideologies opposed to the "old principles".

Minister of Propaganda

Hitler, trusting in Goebbels' abilities, appointed him head of the newly created Ministry of Propaganda on April 27, 1930. The duties of the new minister were many and significant. He had become competent to preach the principles of the party by any means, manipulating the press, cinema, radio and national education [4]. Goebbels soon emerged as a skilled orator and could rouse the masses who were literally hanging from his lips. Although he never fought in his life, his only weapons were the power of his inspired pen and the spear of his fanatical speech (**Figure 3**).

After Nazis' unprecedented electoral triumph in 1930, Goebbels wrote on September 21 in the party newspaper "Der Angriff": «Overnight we have been transformed from a small and despised group into a leading mass party, and our victory has no precedent in political history. In the past, a party that doubled its percentages celebrated its achievement as a triumph... The broad masses expressed through our movement made a clear and unshakable statement against the Germany of today and in favor of the Germany of tomorrow... It is clear



Figure 4. Adolf Hitler with his henchmen, Joseph Goebbels and Rudolf Hess.

that the desire to rid Germany of the old parties and their ideas no longer belongs only to a small party, but to an entire awakened nation. Our propaganda has liberated this popular will. Now we must put our words into action» [5].

In the same article, the incendiary last paragraph makes an impression: «We stand by the people and fight for Germany. We desire nothing for ourselves, everything for the nation! We will devote all our efforts to the good of the community, striving to regain honor and prosperity for the motherland. We shall stand or fall, following the fate of Germany. Raise the flags!» [5].

In the years of the rise of the Third Reich, the allure that Hitler's personality radiated captivated Goebbels, who believed that the final dominance of National Socialism was due, apart from the massiveness of its social reference, to this very charming personality (**Figure 4**). Striving to deify the image of Hitler, in view of the presidential elections of March 1932, he wrote in an article: «A man who has the power and gifts to build a movement of millions out of a little sect of seven men, a movement which today already includes the largest and best part of the German people, will also find a way to unite the whole nation, freeing it from the terrible political, ideological and social contradictions that divide and harm our people. The greater part of the nation now has a new will to resist. The German people want to rise from blind resignation to a new ideal. This is the work of Adolf Hitler! The masses see him as their last hope. For millions, his name has



Figure 5. Goebbels inspecting troops, in the last phase of the war.

become the shining symbol of the German will for freedom. Anyone who opposes class struggle and fratricide, anyone who seeks a way out of chaos and confusion, will vote for him!» [3-5].

On July 9, 1932, Goebbels delivered one of his most iconic speeches, aptly titled "The Storm Is Coming": «I speak as the representative of the largest movement, of millions of people, in German history. I am not here to beg for your vote, your grace, or your pardon. I just want you to be fair. Give your verdict on the past 14 years, on the shame and disgrace they have brought, on our intensifying national, political humiliation. You must decide whether the men and parties responsible for these past 14 years will have the right to participate in the government. We believe that the upliftment of our people will not come from a small clique that does not have strong ties to the people. Only a movement of millions has the active power and ability to change Germany».

Goebbels abhorred the outbreak of war, mainly because of his aversion to the "reactionary" generals who would inevitably come to the fore again. In the early years of war operations and successes, he remained relatively invisible. His role was almost complete. Nevertheless, he did not hesitate to express his opinion often, regarding the oxymoronic fact of Hitler's double policy, of fighting external enemies at the same time as maintaining peaceful conditions within Germany.

From 1943 onwards, he preached only blood, sweat, tears and pessimism. His essential driving



Figure 6. Joseph and Magda Goebbels, with their children in happy moments.

force was no longer his nationalism or fervent patriotism, but his sense of personal fulfillment, the projection of inner chaos (**Figure 5**). He was too dispassionate to become emotionally attached to anything, however ideal it might be. He measured his degree of success by the number of those he could emotionally attach to a cause, just enough to satisfy personal ambitions [5, 6].

He had indeed succeeded in fully mobilizing Germany's potential. He used to shout that "faith can move mountains". But in 1944, although the production of weapons of all kinds reached its zenith, faith alone could perhaps prolong the war, but not change its outcome. In the final phase of the war, when the end was in sight on the bleak horizon, Goebbels played his ultimate propaganda card. "Resistance at all costs" was the headline in his last article, on the last page of the newspaper "Das Reich".

On April 21, the eve of the publication of the article, Goebbels held a final meeting with his subordinates, heads of directorates. Witnesses testified that he began to scream at the German people and their inability to live up to Nazi standards. He was about to leave his stunned audience, when at the door turned back and exclaimed: "But when we leave, the earth will shake". On April 23, he makes a desperate call to the people of Berlin on the radio: «I call on you to fight for your city. Fight with all the means at your disposal, for the sake of your



Figure 7. Newborn with congenital talipes equinovarus bilaterally.

women and children, your mothers and fathers. Your weapons will defend everything we love to this day, and generations to come. Have courage and pride. Be resourceful and skillful... The battle of Berlin must be the signal that will stir up the whole nation» [4, 5].

The day after Hitler and his wife Eva Braun commit suicide, Magda Goebbels kills her children with poison in their sleep, and the pair then go up to the Chancellery garden, where Günther Schwägermann of the SS executes them with a revolver (**Figure 6**). The men of the guard attempt to cremate the bodies. But the gasoline they have is insufficient. The bodies are burned, but they can be identified. In the next few hours, Soviet soldiers will find the bodies of Magda and Joseph Goebbels, identify them and take the relevant photographs [5].

Talipes equinovarus

Regardless of whether the deformity of the right foot was due to osteomyelitis that had affected the growth cartilage and soft tissues, or to a peroneal nerve injury with similar consequences, Goebbels exhibited a characteristic limping throughout his life. The Soviet soldiers who identified his body in the Chancellery garden, described specific deformity in detail. The body was not completely charred and the deformity of the foot was obvious.

It is scientifically incompatible to suggest that Goebbels' foot deformity due to osteomyelitis could

resemble the one described by the soldiers or the one we see in the rescued photographs and videos. In this case, clubfoot would be atypical and simpler than a congenital deformity. In case of injury to the peroneal nerve, there would also be a permanent drop foot and weakness for dorsal extension.

In both situations, the problem could be treated surgically with satisfactory results, according to the knowledge of Medicine in Germany at the time. We strongly suspect that the deformity pre-existed and was known from Goebbels's infancy. Of course, infectious or traumatic experiences in his childhood would have given his parents a convincing alibi to absolve themselves of any inherited guilt against a strict society that based its principles on prejudice and stereotypes, while absolving the young Goebels of the need to give all his life explanations, anything but flattering, about his self-image.

Goebbels' clubfoot, known by the scientific term "congenital talipes equinovarus", is not a rare or unknown foot deformity (**Figure 7**). Nowadays, we know that it occurs in one in every 1,000 births, while it is considered the most common congenital deformity of the skeleton in infancy. The disease is apparently the result of the interaction of many factors acting in the fetal period, in a genetically susceptible foot. The pathogenesis refers to an abnormal morphology of the talus, together with a disturbance of its relations with the other bones of the foot, combined with a progressive shrinkage of the soft tissues on the sole and on the inner side of the foot [7].

Eminent figures in science, politics and art suffered from clubfoot. Emperor Gaius Claudius Germanicus of Rome is the most egregious example. After all, the nickname Claudius indicates the disorder in his gait that characterized him, since in Latin the word means *Lame*. Lord Gordon Byron, Walter Scott and others suffered from the same disease. Looking back at Hesiod's *Theogony*, we discover that Hephaestus, Hera's deformed son, for whom he did not need to copulate with Zeus, was thrown into the sea by his own mother in order to destroy him. He was saved from certain drowning by Thetis and the Oceanid Eurynome. Homer ascribes to Hephaestus the epithets of "amfigyieis" and "kyl-

lopodion" (the one who has both legs curved) [8].

The modern therapeutic treatment of talipes equinovarus promises satisfactory to excellent results with minimally invasive operations, as long as the treatment starts early with successive corrective braces and special exercises (Ponseti method). In cases of recurrence of initial deformity in older ages, we now resort to wide surgical ligament release, tendon lengthening, capsular divisions, and/or osteotomies [9, 10]. Nowadays, adults who once suffered from the disease move and work among us, no longer showing functional or aesthetic problems and without showing signs of reduced self-esteem.

The aspect of Individual Psychology

At the beginning of the 20th century, right after Sigmund Freud's publications, the foundations were laid for the principles of individual psychology, in other words the theory of analyzing the individual's personality and the psychotherapy method that derives from it. Alfred Adler, the first to teach this pioneering method, considers the individual as a single whole, on which the physical, psychological and social processes are completed.

In tracing Adler's childhood we discover many features in common with those of Joseph Goebbels. Here we also find physical lameness (rickets and spasms of glottis which often implied the risk of suffocation and death) forcing little Alfred to move with limitations under his mother's protection. Here the feeling of inferiority lurked beneath his efforts to stand out into his environment. Doctors always recommended fresh air to improve his health. This was the reason that explained why he used to play outside the house with the neighborhood children, constantly gaining experience and relentlessly drawing the courage and wider social interest he desired. He himself often claimed that he owed his "man's knowledge" to "his career as a child on the streets".

In 1902, he collaborates with Sigmund Freud as a member of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. The collaboration with Freud did not last more than 10 years. The differences between the two psychoanalysts in approaching neuroses were

more than obvious. Adler disagreed with Freud because, on the one hand, he considered the role of aggression and social factors important in shaping human behavior, and on the other hand, he questioned the omnipotence of libido. According to Alfred Adler, the personality is formed within the social environment into which the person lives. Soul and body are in absolute interdependence, complement each other, and completed within the individual [11].

In the individual psychology, human behavior is primarily motivated by social drives. Both heredity and environmental influences shape a person's character from a very early age and determine his behavior. The person constantly processes and interprets his experiences, looking for new ones, capable of contributing to the completion of a "life style", unique for each one. Consciousness in individual psychology plays a leading role because it is at the center of the person's personality, in contrast to Freudian theory where the unconscious dominates. Man is conscious of what he says or does, of the points in which he is inferior and of the goals for which it is worth fighting. Therefore, he is able to plan and direct his actions with full self-awareness [12].

In other words, in man there is an innate tendency to impose, but he often runs into his weaknesses, which he perceives from his daily experience. Along with the tendency to impose, a feeling of inferiority develops in the area of the unconscious, which is particularly pronounced in people with physical or other defects. The feeling of inferiority causes a series of unconscious actions aimed at preserving and developing the personality so as to cover real (or imagined) weaknesses. This effort is called "tendency to replenish".

In 1935, while individual psychoanalysis had al-

ready taken its course with the creation of educational counseling clinics, Adler introduced a classification that helps to categorize the different personality types, but is not absolute [12]. The "dominant" type (to which we could unreservedly classify the case of Goebbels) shows a high degree of activity to achieve his goals, but shows a deficient sense of sociability, which explains his antisocial behavior [13, 14]. On the contrary, the "receptive" type shows insufficient activity and a disadvantageous feeling of sociability. He expects others to take an interest in him. He loses his independence, does not know his abilities and, when faced with some difficulty, requires help from others. The "avoidant" type is characterized by indecisiveness, while the energy and sense of sociability that possess him are at their nadir. For him, his goal is to escape while keeping a safe distance from his fellow humans. The "socially useful" type is characterized by activity and energy in harmony with the needs of others, so as to prove beneficial to them in practice.

Conclusions

The disability of Joseph Goebbels, as an interesting and controversial clinical case, is today a real challenge for the scientific community. His right clubfoot, although never effectively treated as a physical deficit, apparently acted as a springboard for his social advancement, with substantial political extensions in modern world history. Apart from any theories that may be formulated from time to time, it is of interest to all to constantly process the historical events and analyze the behavior of the protagonists, with the ultimate goals of realizing mistakes and avoiding their repetition in the future. ▲

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

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