George H. Riess, DPM: Forty Years of Service to Medical Education

This podiatrist emerged from the horrors of Nazi Germany to become a legendary anatomy professor.

By Richard M. Rocco, PhD

**Editor's Note:** This is the first of a series of articles on podiatric legends. We welcome similar articles about great podiatrists of the past.

On the weekend of March 11, 1938, thirty thousand Reich troops marched into Vienna to enforce the an­schluss or unification of Germany with Aus­tria. On March 16th, Adolf Eichmann ar­rived in Vienna to manage Jewish affairs. Schools and universi­ties were closed for a month. When the Uni­versity of Vienna Medical School reopened on April 25th, 153 of the 197 members of the medical faculty had been dis­missed for being Jewish or for various political reasons. Many of the professors fled Austria to England and America, some stayed and died in concentration camps, others committed suicide. Jewish medical students were barred from campus. Among them was Hans George Riess (1914-2004), a 24-year-old medical student, one semester away from completing his MD degree.

This article will review the life of Dr. Riess from the dark days of Vien­na to his career as a DPM, professor of anatomy at the California School of Podiatric Medicine (CSPM), and mentor to hundreds of medical stu­dents for over forty years.

The German annexation of Aus­tria in the spring of 1938 marked the end of Austria as an indepen­dent nation and the start of the sys­tematic extermination of Austria's Jews. Riess' grandparents died in the German concentration camps. His father died when Reiss was eight­years-old. His mother fled through Russia, Siberia, Japan, and finally to America. His sister followed the same escape route. Her husband was captured and interred at Dachau but survived. Riess took a different route out. He contacted a man who lived in Detroit, Michigan who agreed to sponsor Riess' immi­gra­tion to America. Riess arrived in New York City in early 1939. His sponsor, as required by law, met him at the dock and signed the neces­sary documents that permitted Riess to enter the US. He handed Riess six dollars, told him he was now on his own, and returned to Detroit. They never spoke again.

Riess found a place to live in the Bronx and began to look for work. The only work available to him was to become a pest exter­minator, a trade that required a license that could only be obtained after passing a written exam. He kept a note­book while he studied for the exam. It is a wide ruled black cover studen­t's notebook of about 100 pages. Every page is filled with his notes in English block letters. There are di­mensional drawings of animal traps and exactly pro­portioned anatomical draw­ings of mice and rats. One page de­scribes the com­plete reproductive life cycle of a mouse. The book contains pages of detailed tables on the extermination processes for a wide variety of pests. Business cards are pasted between neat para­graphs of text. The notebook reflects a keen intellect and a commitment to master a difficult subject, two...
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characteristics that would help define him as a teacher in the years to come. Riess passed the exam and became an exterminator for the Standard Exterminating Company of Brooklyn, New York in late 1939. In 1941, he met the woman who would become his wife. He walked into a restaurant where she was seated alone, spoke to her and decided in his head that this was the woman he would marry. He was six years older than her, and unknown to both of them at first, had attended the same high school in Vienna.

On Friday, September 25, 1942 he married Susanne Kilman. On Sunday, they left for California.

Riess’ mother and sister by that time had settled in San Francisco. He had spent more than three years trying to get back into medical school.

BECOMING A PODIATRIST

The Jewish quotas practiced by most American medical schools at that time and his foreign training made his return to medical school difficult. The young exterminator was accepted as a first-year student at only one school, the California College of Podiatric Medicine in San Francisco, now known as CSPM and part of Samuel Merritt University (SMU) in Oakland, CA.

At CSPM, he applied for and obtained a position as a part-time anatomy lab instructor. In September 1942, the world was at war against Germany and its allies. Riess wanted to dissociate himself from this part of his past. He changed his first name to George from his original first name of Hans. He became George H. Riess. The registrar’s office at CSPM, however, needed a record of his middle name. One day he and his wife Susanne were walking down a San Francisco street when Riess looked up and saw the street sign, Howard St. On that day in 1942, Hans George Riess became George Howard Riess.

TEACHING ANATOMY

Riess moved quickly through the CSPM curriculum. For some courses, he was allowed to sit for the final exam rather than repeat a course he had already taken and passed at the University of Vienna Medical School. He completed all his courses while teaching anatomy lab part-time, and graduated from CSPM in 1944. The class voted him valedictorian but Riess declined the honor. He claimed that it should go to someone who had spent more time at the school and would be more deserving. Following graduation in 1944, he opened a private practice in San Francisco and continued to teach anatomy at CSPM for the next 40 years.

Sometime after the end of World War II, the University of Vienna Medical School contacted Riess. They offered to confer the MD degree on him if he would return for one semester. Riess declined the offer. He was now a DPM, had just started his private practice, and had two young children, Thomas and Stephen. His wife Susanne became an x-ray technician and worked with him in the office. It was another facet to their partnership that lasted for 62 years until his death in 2004.

Over the next few years, both his practice in San Francisco and his stature as a teacher of anatomy grew at CSPM. He would enter the classroom from the back of the room wearing his trademark bowtie. His teaching method was mostly Socratic. As he moved down the aisle he would select a student at random and ask a question, what is this called, pointing to some part of his own anatomy. Students called his skeletal anatomy classes, “Riessian osteology.”

Students claimed that he was “always enthusiastic about his teaching.” He assigned students the role of a particular body organ, then required them to sit in relation to each other based on which organ they were assigned. The words of his former students provided twenty to forty years after they had Dr. Riess as a teacher best describe his classroom style and the impressions left on them. “I remember being a kidney one day and just standing there in front of the entire class as he formed my body into looking like a kidney.” He would ask the students to answer questions from the perspective of being a body organ. “You are standing in the vagina,” he would say, “now what do you see?”

Dr. Reiss also taught the gross anatomy lab that included cadaver dissection. At the foot of the cadaver, he would remind the students that this person was once a living human being with the same dreams and aspirations as everyone standing here today ready to dissect. “He taught us to respect the human body,” one former student said many years later, “and we carried that message to all our patients.”

In 1961, a classroom at CSPM was dedicated to Dr. Riess, “one of those rare individuals who knew how to teach.” Dr. Riess refused to allow a ceremony on the dedication or any celebration of the occasion. In 2001, when CSPM merged with SMU in Oakland, the anatomy lab shared by nursing, podiatric medicine, physician assistants, physical therapy, and occupational therapy was named in his honor.

A MODEL OF HUMILITY

Dr. Riess consistently showed humility and a refusal to engage in self-promotion throughout his life. When he received a plaque for his...
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contributions to podiatric medicine, he brought it home and sanded off his name from the marble face of the mounted plaque. Until this day, the plaque has been used as a cheese tray in the Riess home. The words of one former student reflect this typical act of humility. He claimed that Dr. Riess always made the students strive for excellence but insisted that they maintain a degree of self-doubt.

In 1971, Dr. Riess' son Thomas entered CSPM as a first year student. That was the only year in forty years in which Dr. Riess did not teach at CSPM. He resigned for that year in order to avoid any conflict of interest. Between 1950 and 1972, he lived and practiced in Millbrae and continued to teach at CSPM (Figure 1). In 1975, he moved his home and practice to San Rafael where he remained for the rest of his life. For over twenty-five years, Dr. Riess volunteered his services every Friday in the Diabetes Clinic at UCSF. He may have been the first DPM to obtain staff privileges at that medical center.

Dr. Riess and his wife Susanne returned to Vienna in 1974 for the first time since they left in the 1930’s. They visited the high school that they had both attended. In the hallway was a plaque dedicated to the memory of the students who didn’t survive the Nazi persecutions. Listed among the names were those of five girls in Susanne’s class who died in the concentration camps.

In the late 1980’s, he retired from practice. He had been a teacher and practicing podiatrist from 1944 through 1986. Students claimed that he blessed all of them with his teaching. One wrote years later, "We owe Dr. Riess a large debt of gratitude for his substantial contributions to podiatric education." His patients included both the unknown and the famous. Among the public persons who were patients of Dr. Riess were Martha Graham, the founder of the Martha Graham Dance Company; K. Herbert Adler, head of the San Francisco Opera; Louise M. Davies, benefactor of Davies Symphony Hall and Milton Friedman, Nobel Prize winning economist. In March 2004, Dr. Riess died of heart failure after only three weeks of illness. A former student and practicing podiatrist recently said, "...we all became better doctors because of him."

Acknowledgements

The history of Austria and the University of Vienna Medical School during the period of the 1930s and ‘40s has been well documented. Primary sources for this article have included:

3) Schutz, W., The Medical Faculty of the University of Vienna 60 Years Following Austria’s Annexation. Perspectives Bio Med 43:389-396 (2000)

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