

People and places

Ernest Matsner Gruenberg

SYDNEY BRANDON, Professor of Psychiatry, University of Leicester

Ernest (Ernie) Gruenberg was born in New York City on 2 December 1915 and died in Washington on 2 July 1991. He was the second son of Ben, an educator, and Sidonie, founder of the Child Study Association of America, who together produced one of the earliest books for the sex education of children.

He received his early education at Dartington Hall, Devon.

Shortly after graduating in medicine from Johns Hopkins, Baltimore, Gruenberg served as medical officer to a parachute battalion which had the misfortune to be dropped on the eve of the Normandy landing into the middle of a German Panzer Brigade. After gruelling marches as a prisoner, the retreat to the East developed and he obtained permission to make an escape attempt. Contrary to prevailing wisdom he made his way through the Russian lines, eventually returning from Moscow on Air Force One (the US President's personal aircraft).

As Director of the New York State Mental Health Commission, Gruenberg organised a series of classic community studies ranging from the prevalence of mental retardation to the mental disorders of the elderly. However, it was his collaboration with Frank Boudreau at the Milbank Foundation that produced his most influential work, including the outstanding monograph *Causes of Mental Disorder. A review of epidemiological knowledge, 1959*. They organised a series of round table meetings which brought together Directors of State Hospitals and innovators in community health programmes usually with experts from many parts of the world. These discussions laid the foundations of the Kennedy Community Mental Health Initiatives in 1963.

In 1955 Gruenberg moved to the New York State Psychiatric Institute and, in 1955, became Foundation Fund Professor of Psychiatry at Columbia, the first chair in Psychiatric Epidemiology in the world. From 1968 he also directed the Psychiatric Epidemiology Research Unit at Poughkeepsie

(Hudson River State Hospital) which attracted visitors and collaborators from all over the world.

He was associated with the Columbia Washington Heights studies, but it was his work on the Dutchess County study of comprehensive, continuing and flexible community psychiatric care which became his *raison d'être*. His concept of the Chronic Social Breakdown syndrome was in advance of his time, and his insistence upon the measurement of disability rather than psychopathology anticipated much subsequent work.

In 1975 he was invited to become Professor and Chairman of the Department of Mental Hygiene at Johns Hopkins in succession to Paul Lemkau, and he remained there until his retirement in 1981. He worked on the Epidemiological Catchment Area study, and in collaboration with his old friend Mort Kramer and Cille Kennedy on studies of disability published *The Failures of Success* (1977).

After retirement he continued to work and in 1986 published his *Vaccination against Brain Syndromes. The campaign against measles and rubella* and to the end he worked on his book on epidemiology and to offer critical advice by telephone to friends around the world.

What is truly remarkable is that all this occurred against a series of disasters which would have destroyed a lesser man. In 1963 at the height of his Dutchess County work he was involved in a road traffic accident in which he suffered serious injuries destroying the architecture of his face and causing considerable brain damage. Despite this, he resumed work from his hospital bed defying intermittent delirium and his physical injuries.

Shortly after his appointment to Johns Hopkins he recovered from elective spinal surgery to find that he was totally paraplegic. Those who remember him in his motorised wheelchair, charging through London or New York or dominating the conference platform in Reykjavic or Copenhagen, will testify to his inability to accept disability in himself.