

Days of shame, Montreal, 1934

Peter Wilton

Next June will mark the 70th anniversary of the first medical strike to take place in a Canadian hospital. But far from being something to celebrate as a step forward for physicians' rights, those 4 days in 1934 have come to be known simply as the "days of shame."

The strike, which lasted from June 15 to 18, 1934, was triggered by the appointment of Dr. Sam Rabinovitch as senior intern at Montreal's Notre-Dame Hospital. It had nothing to do with his qualifications. In fact, he had graduated at the top of his class at the Université de Montréal and he was from a medical family — 4 of his older brothers were already doctors.

So what was the problem?

Sam Rabinovitch was Jewish, Notre-Dame was Catholic, and his appointment, which was to take effect June 15, 1934, would make him the first Jew to hold a staff position at a French-Canadian hospital.

As the date approached, instigators among the interns at Notre-Dame started to protest the fact that a "Hebrew" was joining the staff, and they circulated a petition demanding that the appointment be revoked. To its credit, the hospital administration did not budge, and at midnight June 14, all Notre-Dame interns walked off the job. They refused to provide care to anyone, including emergency patients.

By June 17, the strike had expanded to include interns at 4 other Montreal hospitals, and nurses were threatening to join the protest. There was even a possibility that it would move beyond the hospital and develop into a general boycott of Jewish businesses and the Jewish community in general.

On June 18, at 4 pm, Rabinovitch formally resigned from his position at Notre-Dame. His letter of resignation was published in many of Montreal's newspapers: "In view of the serious and dangerous conditions to which the patients of the Notre-Dame and other hospitals have been ex-

posed because of the refusal of a number of the interns to take orders from their superiors, and [because of] the embarrassment of the various boards of Notre-Dame and other hospitals, I feel it my duty as a physician to tender my resignation as intern to your hospital.

"... I bemoan the fact that so many French-Canadian physicians, namely [new] graduates, should have ignored the first duty of their oath which they have so recently taken, and am glad of the fact that my resignation will make possible the immediate care that is so badly needed by those poor unfortunates who are today patients in the hospitals affected by the controversy."

Within hours, the interns were back at work. The hospital had threatened to fire them, but they were allowed to continue at their posts.

As for Rabinovitch, he left Montreal for an internship in St. Louis. It was arranged by the administrators at Notre-Dame and, ironically, took him to another Catholic hospital, where he specialized in internal medicine.

Seventy years following those dark days, Rabinovitch still makes his way to his medical clinic each day. Today, at age 94 and through one of life's rich ironies, he is thought to be Canada's oldest practising physician.

When he returned to Montreal to practise in 1940, his patients included both Catholics and Jews. "The patients cared more about my reputation for being a caring and honest doctor than they did about my religion," Rabinovitch explains.

As for that long-ago strike, he sums up his feelings this way: "I bear no ill will toward anybody. The hospital administration was wonderful to me — it was just a few instigators that stirred up all the trouble, and for them it was just the case that I was Jewish and they were Catholics.

"I just did not belong. I suppose in the end that is the frightening thing about hatred ... it is just that simple."

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Courtesy Sam Rabinovitch

Dr. Sam Rabinovitch: "I was Jewish, they were Catholic."