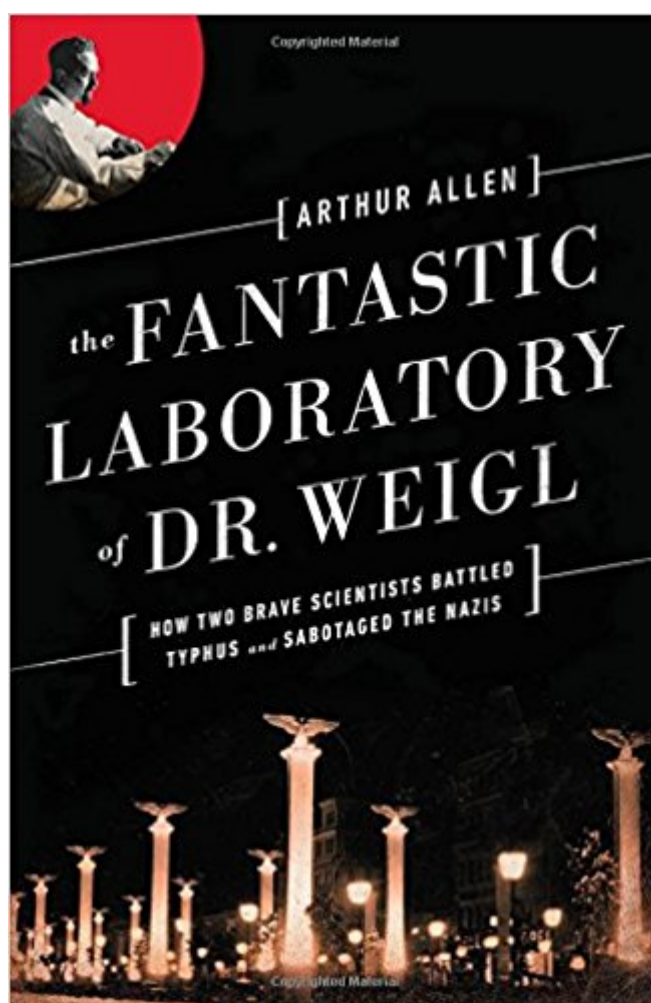


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# The Fantastic Laboratory Of Dr. Weigl: How Two Brave Scientists Battled Typhus And Sabotaged The Nazis



## Synopsis

“Thought-provoking. . . . [Allen] writes without sanctimony and never simplifies the people in his book or the moral issues his story inevitably raises.” —Wall Street Journal

Few diseases are more gruesome than typhus. Transmitted by body lice, it afflicts the dispossessed—refugees, soldiers, and ghettoized peoples—causing hallucinations, terrible headaches, boiling fever, and often death. The disease plagued the German army on the Eastern Front and left the Reich desperate for a vaccine. For this they turned to the brilliant and eccentric Polish zoologist Rudolf Weigl. In the 1920s, Weigl had created the first typhus vaccine using a method as bold as it was dangerous for its use of living human subjects. The astonishing success of Weigl’s techniques attracted the attention and admiration of the world—giving him cover during the Nazi’s violent occupation of Lviv. His lab soon flourished as a hotbed of resistance. Weigl hired otherwise doomed mathematicians, writers, doctors, and other thinkers, protecting them from atrocity. The team engaged in a sabotage campaign by sending illegal doses of the vaccine into the Polish ghettos while shipping gallons of the weakened serum to the Wehrmacht. Among the scientists saved by Weigl, who was a Christian, was a gifted Jewish immunologist named Ludwik Fleck. Condemned to Buchenwald and pressured to re-create the typhus vaccine under the direction of a sadistic Nazi doctor, Erwin Ding-Schuler, Fleck had to make an awful choice between his scientific ideals or the truth of his conscience. In risking his life to carry out a dramatic subterfuge to vaccinate the camp’s most endangered prisoners, Fleck performed an act of great heroism. Drawing on extensive research and interviews with survivors, Arthur Allen tells the harrowing story of two brave scientists—a Christian and a Jew—who put their expertise to the best possible use, at the highest personal danger. 35 illustrations

## Book Information

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Arthur Allen has written for the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, the *Associated Press*, *Science*, and *Slate*. His books include *Vaccine: The Controversial Story of Medicine's Greatest Lifesaver*. He lives in Washington, where he writes about health for Politico.

The Nazi ideology of "Geomedizin"-that illness was as irrefutable and inevitable result of culture-had a significance for the Jews and other peoples in Eastern Europe. The louse, carrier of typhus, was a symbol of the Jew :a filthy, parasitic, blood-sucking disease element which had penetrated the German nation long ago. If so, according to Julius Streicher, the infamous editor of 'Der Sturmer', the Jew as a bacillus and a plague is not a human being but rather an enemy, a criminal

and a disease carrier, thus he must be eliminated. In addition, Hitler and his bunch of criminals were afraid that typhus might be a serious hindrance which could stay in the way of achieving their dream of mastering Europe. Because the disease plagued the Nazi troops in Eastern Europe, the Nazis were desperately looking for a solution. For this they turned to Rudolf Weigl, the Polish scientist who had a world reputation thanks to the fact that it was he who succeeded in creating a vaccine which was effective against the disease. In February 1940, no less a figure than Nikita Khrushchev visited Weigl at his laboratory, offering him a job at the Soviet Academy of Medicine in Moscow. Weigl declined. After the departure of the Russians from Lwow in 1941, the city where Weigl was working in, the city became a "Hobbeian theater, every man for himself under a ruthless occupant, the Nazis. Typhus was rampant there, and Weigl even considered leaving the city, but eventually decided to stay. It is estimated that at least 3000 people were working for his institute, which became a tool of deceiving the Nazis and a shelter for many victims of the Nazis. The tens of millions of lice used in the vaccine during the war descended from a cross between lice gathered from the clothing of Russians in Austrian POW camps during WW1, and an Ethiopian variety that Weigl had obtained in Addis Ababa. Weigl employed doomed scientists, writers, doctors and others and thus saved their lives. In addition, he and his workers shipped tons of a weakened serum to the Wehrmacht. Among those saved was another scientist, the Jewish immunologist Ludwick Fleck, who was sent to Buchenwald. Fleck was forced to create and re-create a typhus vaccine under the direction of Erwin Ding, who was called "a Dummkopf who earned a dissertation only on the basis of his services for the party". Being so, Fleck and his colleagues produced two types of the vaccine: one that had no value and was perfectly harmless, and went to the front; and a second type, in very small quantities, that was efficacious and was used in special cases for the comrades who worked at Buchenwald. All this continued until March 1945. Weigl died in 1957 of a heart attack, while Fleck immigrated to Israel. The book is based on many new and untapped documents as well as many interviews with some relevant persons and is a good read, original and well written, although somehow in a dry language. All in all, I recommend it very much.

We always hear that disease kills more soldiers than bullets, and the king of battlefield diseases was typhus, passed along by body lice. Weigl was a Pole of German descent. Fleck was an imprisoned Jewish scientist. Both were working on vaccines for typhus. The book describes the work they did on vaccines for the Nazis, and how they risked their lives to save those interned in the Nazi Ghettos and camps - primarily Buchenwald and Auschwitz. And we learn how Fleck fooled the Nazis by producing a vaccine he knew did nothing, while at the same time making a real vaccine for

laboratory workers and prisoners. As well, the experiments done by Weigl and Fleck initiated the post war discussion and codification of how human trials should be conducted. This book, as one would expect, is full of sharp edges. The descriptions of the camps and conditions, as well as the Nazi regime in general, are shocking, detailed, and graphic.

I had shielded myself my whole life from any more detail of the holocaust than I had to have, because it is so painful. This book allowed me to bear witness to the attitudes and events that led up to the holocaust in a way that made it bearable, even rewarding to know about. Typhus. Even though I'm a nurse, I had NO idea that this dramatic disease existed and was spread by human body lice! Hatred, fear & inhumane policies that came from them literally exacerbated the occurrence and spread of the very disease they were afraid of. It was revealing to read the attitudes and the rhetoric regarding Poles, Jews and Gypsies because they sound eerily familiar to today's anti-poor, anti-refugee & anti-immigrant rhetoric. I learned about Ludwig Fleck who had a shrewed mind for how science works and was ahead of his time. There is irony that is not lost on me that a vaccine could have an effect on the outcome of a world war - both in terms of providing false vaccine to Nazi troops which failed to protect them from loss of lives, as well as providing real vaccines to those held captive in slums and camps (and to people who were tending to the sick in those areas). With today's anti-vaccine beliefs, this reality is a hard hitting example of what vaccines really do. It was hard at times to follow the stories in the book because it jumped around to talk about different people, and to some extent also jumped around in time, plus there are a lot of names! But it was not bad enough that I couldn't follow nor did it diminish my appreciation for larger story being told. Truly Amazing book.

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