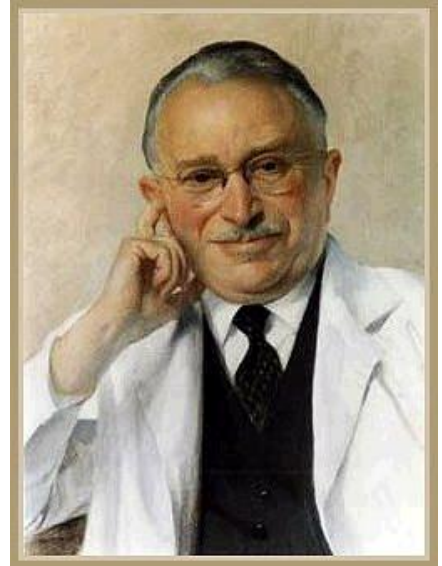


# Sir Ludwig Guttmann (1899-1980)

## Biography



### Life in Germany

Ludwig Guttmann was born on the 3rd of July 1899 in Tost, then Germany. When he was three years old, his family moved from the little village of Tost to Königshütte, a town with a large foundry in a coal-mining district. After finishing school, Guttmann served as a volunteer in the local hospital, where a strapping young coalminer with a fracture of the spine was his first encounter with paraplegia in 1917. When Guttmann began to write up patient details as usual, he was told: "Don't bother, he'll be dead in a few weeks." And so it was. After five weeks, urinary infections and massive pressure sores led to fatal sepsis. Guttmann remembered that patient for the rest of his life.

From 1919 until 1924, Guttmann went on to study medicine in Freiburg. He became active in a Jewish fraternity, which gradually evolved into a centre of physical training and sport, to acquire body strength, skills, confidence and self-esteem so that "nobody needed to be ashamed of being a Jew". After graduating from medical school, he started to work as a doctor in the hospital of Breslau. Due to an open position in the neurological department of the distinguished professor Otfried Foerster, Guttmann worked as a neurosurgeon from 1928 and in 1929 became Foerster's assistant. In 1930, he was also made lecturer in Breslau University.

In 1933, it was prohibited for Jews to practice medicine in public hospitals. As a result, Guttmann was fired, but immediately took over as the director of the neurological and neurosurgical department of the Breslau Jewish hospital. After Hitler's rise to power, the position of Germans with Jewish origin was getting more and more difficult. Guttmann himself believed that Nazism would not last for long, so he became president of the Jewish Medical Community and exposed himself to danger by helping refugees and patients. In the wake of the November pogrom (Reichskristallnacht) in 1938, Guttmann was summoned by the local Gestapo to justify the presence of 64 patients that were admitted to his hospital during the violent "night of broken glass". He managed to save all but three, who were sent to concentration camps. It was then that he realised that he would have to leave Germany.

### Emigration to England

With the help from CARA, then called the "Society for the Protection of Science and Learning", he arrived in Britain on the 14th March 1939, with his wife, two small children and no money. With the sponsorship of Hugh Cairns, one of the leading neurosurgeons of that period, he was able to start research in Oxford, but was not allowed to practice medicine.

The mortality rate of traumatic paraplegia in British and American Armies during World War I was still very high, reaching 80%. The few survivors carried on living as useless and hopeless cripples, unemployable and unwanted, condemned for the rest of their lives to institutions for incurable patients with no encouragement to return to a meaningful life. Life expectancy was a mere three months following injury. In December 1941, Guttmann presented a review on request of the "Medical Research Council of England", with regards to the way patients suffering from spinal cord injuries were dealt with and rehabilitated. As a result of that presentation, the Medical Research Council of England decided on the creation of a special centre for patients with spinal cord injuries. That decision was also a part of the greater preparation for the planned attack of the Second Front, the spring of 1944, as the number of such patients was anticipated to rise.

### Stoke Mandeville Hospital

In September 1943, the British government commissioned Guttmann as director of a Spinal Injury Centre at Stoke Mandeville Hospital in Aylesbury. Guttmann accepted under the condition that he would be totally independent and that he could apply his philosophy as far as the whole approach to the treatment of those patients was concerned.

The Centre opened on the 1st of February 1944 with 26 beds, which marked the beginning of a new era for spinal injuries patients. Guttman introduced a whole new approach to the way tetraplegic and paraplegic patients were treated, from the initial stages of injury until final resettlement. Guttman's goal was the integration of these patients into society as respectable and useful members despite their high degree of disability. The ever repeated question "Is it really worth while?" was asked by all visitors during the first two years of the Spinal Injury Centre, and is indicative as to how difficult it was to get over century old perceptions and prejudices. The defeatist attitude of the public was significantly expressed by one of Guttman's early patients who said that "one of the most difficult tasks for a paraplegic is to cheer up his visitors".

### **Origins of the Paralympic Games**

One can assume that Guttman's involvement in sports activities during his youth in Germany, as a member of the Jewish fraternity, played an important part in the inclusion of sport in the rehabilitation programme for the spinal injuries patients. Besides sport's therapeutic value as complement to the traditional physiotherapy (in restoring the disabled person's strength, co-ordination, speed and endurance) sports events have a great advantage because of their recreational and psychological value. The aims of sport are to develop self-discipline, self-respect, competitive spirit and comradeship - mental attitudes that are essential for the disabled person's integration into the community.

The team games that Guttman incorporated in the rehabilitation programme soon developed into regular sports activities. Soon more patients from other spinal units all over Great Britain started participating. A sports movement was developed that became known as the Stoke Mandeville Games. The first Games, with 14 ex-servicemen and 2 ex-servicewomen competing in archery on the grass outside the hospital ward, were held on the 28th July 1948, the same day that the London Olympic Games started. The date was not chosen by accident: Guttman wanted his games to have a larger forum on the same scale as the Olympic Games. The annual Stoke Mandeville Games became an international sports event in 1952, when a team of Dutch paraplegic war veterans crossed the channel to participate. Later on, it was decided that the games should be held in the country hosting the Olympic Games.

This happened for the first time in 1960 in Rome right after the Olympic Games. 350 athletes with disabilities, men and women, from 24 countries, participated. There was some surprise when two years prior to the 1968 Olympic Games, the Mexican government backed out of the commitment to host the Paralympics because of technical difficulties. Wanting to keep the tradition going, Sir Ludwig Guttman accepted the invitation of the Israeli government to host the 1968 International Stoke Mandeville Games at Ramat Gan near Tel Aviv. A total of 750 athletes from 29 countries participated.

The term "Paralympic Games" was taken up by the International Olympic Committee in 1984. Since then, the Paralympics have become a worldwide phenomenon, watched and followed by millions. This has achieved a tremendous admiration and understanding of disabled people, especially in countries who were previously denying and hiding disability.

### **Guttman's legacy**

Guttman directed the National Spinal Injuries Centre for 22 years. When he retired from his clinical work in 1966, the Centre had increased to 200 beds. The same year, Guttman was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II., and received other honours worldwide. Sir Ludwig Guttman died of heart failure in 1980. Today, Guttman is internationally recognised as a pioneer in the field of rehabilitation of spinal injury patients. Since 1948, he gave council to many governments in matters of paraplegic rehabilitation and he promoted the creation of many Paraplegic Centres. The Stoke Mandeville Centre became an example for 40 other rehabilitation centres around the world. In 1966, the first Paraplegic Centre in a German University in Heidelberg was set up to bear the name "Ludwig Guttman's home". Similarly, the spinal centre in Barcelona is known as the Guttman Centre. Several organisations continue to promote Guttman's vision in the treatment of disability. However, his most prominent legacy is without doubt the global population of paralysed athletes, just as Guttman's son Dennis told the participants of the 1980 Stoke Mandeville Games: "You are my father's memorial."