

Dr. Perry Brickman, 1932-2025: A Life With Lessons for the Dental Profession

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History resonates with ethical lessons for both the present and future. The more one delves into the past, previously untold or forgotten true stories can provide a roadmap for the future. The amazing life of Dr. Perry Brickman is just one example of an individual who refused to permit prejudice and discrimination to go unchecked, thereby elevating the dental profession. By setting an example to speak out against injustice, Dr. Brickman's voice is one of many to chart an ethical course for current and future dentists. Part of his inspirational story is told here.

Quotas and Dental Education

The rise of the Third Reich leading to the Second World War led to many unspeakable atrocities. The German and Austrian medical and dental professions during this era were willing perpetrators of crimes against humanity.^{1,2} Although much has been written about the crimes of the medical profession, the lesser known history of the involvement of the dental profession is beginning to emerge in the literature. Nazi dentists were directly involved in concentration camp selections, and prisoner dentists who survived were forced to remove gold from the mouths of murdered victims. Gold from the dead was needed to fund Germany's war effort and promote the Nazi economy and ideology.³ The horrific details of the removal of gold teeth from executed victims at concentration camps like Birkenau and Auschwitz by prisoner dentists such as Paul Katz, Franz Feldman, and Benjamin Jacobs are well documented.^{3,4}

The forced migration of many refugee dentists following the Second World War was not welcomed by the dental profession in the United States. Dental and medical schools developed quotas for admission. Instead of being based on an individual's qualifications, the quota system was based on the percentage of that group in the US population.⁵ Dental schools, state dental boards, and

national dental examiners were also concerned about the influx of refugee dentists causing excess competition for already established American dentists. European dentists were generally considered less technically proficient than US dentists; however, academic dentist-scientists from prestigious Austrian and German institutions were deemed world leaders in research on the biological basis for oral diseases. Thus, the most elite dentist-scientists from Europe, such as Balint Orban, Harry Sicher, Harold Gottlieb, and Joseph Weinmann were able to secure faculty positions in some dental schools and would go on to significantly impact dental education in the US.^{6,7}

For the prisoner dentists who survived this era and were able to emigrate, their lives after the war were fraught with discrimination. The aforementioned Benjamin Jacobs, a dentist at the Auschwitz concentration camp, survived the horrors of having to extract teeth from the dead, a death march, and the sinking of a prisoner ship that was torpedoed. He emigrated to the United States in 1949 and applied to dental school and was rejected, being told by the school's administration that as a "foreign dentist" the GI Bill passed by Congress gave preferential admission for US soldiers returning from the war.⁴

Dr. Perry Brickman

Having long been an active academic oral and maxillofacial surgeon from New York, I was familiar with Dr. Norman Trieger, Chair of Dentistry at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx. He was a great teacher and I recall attending a presentation he delivered on antisemitism that had occurred at Emory University School of Dentistry in Atlanta during the 1940s and 1950s. In the lecture, Norman described a true story, which I had forgotten about—until January 27, 2025. On that day I attended an International Holocaust Remembrance Day program near my home in Denver, Colorado, and was chatting with several individuals sitting near me. When they heard I was an oral and maxillofacial surgeon, they informed me about a book they said I needed to read titled, "Extracted – Unmasking Rampant Antisemitism in America's Higher Education."⁸ The author was S. Perry Brickman, DDS, an oral and maxillofacial surgeon who retired in 2005 and whose 43-year career was marked by excellence in patient care and leadership in the Atlanta community as well as in national and international organizations. I purchased a used copy of the book on Amazon (rather than wait a long time for a new book). When the used book arrived a few days later I was astonished to find notes by the author in this signed copy. More remarkable was

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that a sticky note had the e-mail address and telephone number of Perry Brickman's son.

"Extracted" is a memoir that recounts the shame Perry Brickman experienced in 1952 after he was unceremoniously dismissed from Emory University dental school despite his excellent grades. Dr. Brickman describes the letter of dismissal from Dean John Buhler, which cited "broad academic failure," as totally false and having a devastating effect on his immigrant parents. There was no reasonable explanation for the dismissal, and he lived with the shameful memory of this demoralizing experience throughout his life as he proceeded to successfully complete his dental education at the University of Tennessee, followed by completion of oral and maxillofacial surgery training. Dr. Brickman progressed with his brilliant career and became a leader in his community for decades, although he continued to harbor a deep and personally painful secret.⁸

After retiring, in 2006 Dr. Brickman stumbled upon an exhibit that demonstrated gross antisemitism in Emory University's dental school between 1948-1958, with a failure/repeat coursework rate of 65% for Jewish students, compared to 15% for non-Jewish students. During the tenure of Dean Buhler's administration, Emory's dental school's application form included only three categories for prospective students to indicate their race: Other, Jew, Caucasian. There were no other categories included, so if an applicant was Black, Hispanic, Asian, etc, there was no point in applying. Brickman indicates that in the South in 1945, "racial quotas were absolutely not an issue... Black students were absolutely not accepted" to most of the elite university dental schools.⁸

Decades passed and at age 74, after having seen the evidence of the gross discrimination he and others experienced, Dr. Brickman was determined to thoroughly investigate the truth behind the history that had haunted him throughout his life. His determination led to the discovery that he was not alone, and thus he contacted and interviewed many of his former classmates who also had been scarred by the antisemitism at Emory's dental school. Many of his Jewish colleagues were either not accepted, dismissed, or harassed by the school administration and faculty throughout their dental school years. Brickman recalls that one of his classmates was brought into Dean Buhler's office at the end of the first year and was asked, "Why do you Jews want to go into dentistry?... You don't have it in the hands... You need to go into other professions." The repetition of the Dean's outrageous lie became contagious and was repeated by faculty and other dental students. Despite tremendous religious discrimination and harassment, the student persevered, graduated from Emory, and went on to a superlative dental career.⁸

Quotas for admission to medical and dental schools with discriminatory practices were common in the 20th century. From the 1850s onward there was a significant influx of immigrants to the United States from China, Germany, Ireland, Russia, Italy, and other countries. This resulted in a second generation that wanted to live the "American dream" with many desiring a career in medicine and dentistry. The rise of organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party further fueled discrimination against those who were not considered part of the

"superior Anglo-Saxon culture" or "mainstream America."⁵ Thus, immigrants and those from non-white races were subjected to tremendous discrimination, a pattern that continues today.

Medical and dental schools promoted a quota system even after the Second World War. In 1945 Dr. Harlan Horner, secretary of the Council on Dental Education of the American Dental Association urged adoption of a quota policy based on racial origins. Dr. Horner's report recommended racial and religious quotas for admission to dental school to correct "racial and geographical" imbalances. Columbia University School of Dental and Oral Surgery and New York University Dental College were specifically mentioned as having a "student body... made up overwhelmingly of one racial strain and is not even a cross-section of the various racial groups to be found in Greater New York." This information appeared in the 1945 *New York Times* article, "Bias Against Jews in Dentistry Seen."⁹ The discriminatory practices that prevailed during this era were not exclusive to Emory University and included many medical and dental schools throughout the United States. Emory's dental school closed its undergraduate program in 1988 and its postgraduate program in 1990.

Dr. Brickman continued his pursuit of the truth after 2006, doing extensive archival research, which included corresponding with and interviewing former students who had been victims of discrimination and harassment. By digging up the past he was able to obtain the personal stories of these individuals who had been unknowing victims of antisemitism and how it affected their lives. Dr. Brickman's research and determination ultimately led to a significant volume of documentary evidence, which he courageously brought to the attention of Emory University officials. Ultimately, Dr. Perry Brickman was able to influence the university to announce an official public apology for its previous antisemitic policies. In 2012 a special ceremony was held at Emory, with University President James Wagner delivering a public apology. A *New York Times* article dated October 7, 2012, informed the public of Emory's official apology.¹⁰ Many of those dentists who had been targets of antisemitism attended, coming from all parts of the country with their families. Dr. Norman Trieger, my former colleague, was in attendance.⁸ As a senior college student at Emory he had been rejected for admission to the dental school. Norman was accepted at Columbia but decided to go to Harvard, and his illustrious career as an academic oral and maxillofacial surgeon is well known.

Epilogue

After reading "Extracted," I opened up my used copy of the book and contacted Perry Brickman's son on March 8, 2025. It was incredible that Perry had written his son's phone number in my book. I found out that Dr. Perry Brickman had passed away on January 26, 2025. It was the following day, January 27, that I was at the International Holocaust Remembrance Day and serendipitously first found out about him, a fellow oral and maxillofacial surgeon, and his book from people I met for the first time.

I told Perry's son that after reading the book and researching his life story, I was a changed person because his Dad had taught me so much. The lessons I learned will stay with me forever and should

