

## Edward Barsky and the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee

*Edward K. Barsky* was born in New York on June 6, 1895, the son of Dr. Joseph Barsky, a prominent New York physician and a founder of Beth Israel Hospital. One of a family of six children, he attended public elementary school, graduated from Townsend Harris High School and received his college degree from City College of New York. Following the example of his father and two of his brothers, Barsky pursued a career in medicine receiving his formal education at Columbia University of Physicians and Surgeons and subsequently conducting post-graduate study abroad in Vienna, Berlin, and Paris. Beginning in 1919 he served a two-year internship at Beth Israel Hospital where he subsequently advanced through the positions of Visiting Staff, Assistant Adjunct Surgeon, and Adjunct Surgeon before assuming the position of Associate Surgeon in 1934. In November 1935, Barsky became a member of the Communist Party.

With the outbreak civil war in Spain in 1936, Barsky joined with a group of concerned New York physicians to establish the American Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy (AMB) -- an adjunct organization to the North America Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, later known as the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. The AMB arranged for the shipment of ambulances and other medical equipment and supplies, and in January 1937 sent a fully outfitted medical team of doctors, nurses, and technicians to Spain with Barsky at the helm. Additional medical personnel soon followed and under Barsky's command, base hospitals and convalescent homes were set up in schools and monasteries. Emergency units were established on the front lines in ambulances, makeshift tents, and a mobile medical hospital outfitted with a battery-powered operating room. By the following year 117 American doctors, nurses, and ambulance drivers had volunteered to serve in Spain. Barsky returned briefly to the United States in 1937 to conduct a national speaking tour, securing additional funds and supplies for the AMB. With his returned to Spain, he assumed charge of the Sanitary Services of the International Brigade, overseeing hundreds of international medical volunteers—a position he held until the withdrawal of the foreign forces in January 1939.

Back in the United States Barsky resumed his work at Beth Israel Hospital. He married Vita Lauter, a graduate of the University of Wisconsin, and the couple had one child -- a daughter named Angela. In the wake of the war in Spain, Barsky turned his attention to securing relief for Spanish exiles who were living in deplorable conditions in French refugee camps, and Republican prisoners in Spain. In 1941 Barsky played a key role in the formation of the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee (JAFRC), an organization dedicated to aiding Spanish refugees and lobbying the U.S. leadership on behalf of the deposed Republican government. With Barsky as chairman, the organization raised closed to \$400,000 in its first two years of operation. By 1945, however, the JAFRC's progressive agenda attracted the hostile attention of the House on Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Barsky, Executive Secretary Helen R. Bryan, and Executive Board members of JAFRC were subpoenaed to appear before the committee, surrender financial records, and turn over the names of contributors and recipients of aid. After refusing to comply with HUAC demands, Barsky and entire board of JAFRC were charged with contempt of Congress and convicted in June 1947.

Three years of appeals that challenged the constitutionality of the HUAC hearings ended in 1950 when the Supreme Court refused to review the convictions. The board members, including novelist Howard Fast, were sentenced to three months in prison, and Barsky, as the JAFRC's chairman, was sentenced to six months in the Federal Penitentiary in Petersburg, Virginia and fined \$500. Following his release, the New York State Board of Regents moved to censure Barsky and—citing his conviction and subsequent imprisonment—suspended his medical license. Although he received the unstinting support of his medical colleagues who filed an *Amici Curiae*



on his behalf, in 1954, after four years of appeals, the Supreme Court upheld a six-month suspension of his license. Writing in a dissenting opinion, Judge William O. Douglas asserted, "When a doctor cannot save lives in America because he is opposed to Franco in Spain, it is time to call a halt and look critically at the neurosis that has possessed us."

Barsky remained committed to progressive causes throughout his life. In 1952 he worked on behalf of the American Labor Party and its candidate, Vincent Hallihan, who was chief counsel for Harry Bridges and at the time of the election was serving a six months sentence for contempt of congress. During the 1960s, Barsky was active with the Medical Committee for Human Rights, which provided emergency medical services for civil rights and peace movement workers in the South. He was also affiliated with the New York labor movement, working for many years as a security plan panel physician for District Council 65. In 1967, the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade marked their 30th anniversary with a tribute honoring Barsky's achievements on behalf the Spanish Republic. Barsky continued his professional relationship with Beth Israel Hospital throughout the remainder of his life, serving as consulting surgeon in his later years. On February 11, 1975, Edward Barsky died at the age of 78. - Biography courtesy of Tamiment Library, NYU.

## BARSKY, 10 OTHERS IMPRISONED APART

### Anti-Fascist Committee Group, Sentenced for Contempt, Sent to Six Federal Institutions

By LEWIS WOOD

Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES.

WASHINGTON, July 6—Dr. Edward K. Barsky, Howard Fast, the novelist, and nine other members of the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee have now been scattered through six Federal prisons.

Sentenced here June 7 for contempt of Congress for refusing to give information to the House Committee on Un-American Activities, the eleven have started serving time in different institutions.

There have been theories that the Government considered it the best policy to split the prisoners, but officials deny that this was a controlling factor. On the contrary, it was stated, the transfer to various Federal penitentiaries was based on where they would be best suited, utilized "and adjusted," and, after all, where the Government believed it proper for them to be. All are from New York City.

It is possible that the ten Hollywood writers, directors and producers, recently sentenced also for contempt of Congress, also may soon be separated. However, as they may submit appeals, their disposition is yet a question. All ten are now in the District of Columbia jail.

#### Barsky Put in Penitentiary

Of the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee members, Dr. Barsky, the chairman, has been sent to the Federal Reformatory at Petersburg, Va. Mr. Fast is in the Federal prison camp at Mill Point, W. Va., along with Lyman R. Bradley.

Dr. Jacob Auslander is in the Federal Correctional Institution at Danbury, Conn. Dr. Louis Miller and Manuel Magana are held at Federal detention headquarters in New York City.

The three women members of the committee, Mrs. Marjorie Chodorov, Mrs. Ruth Leider and Mrs. Charlotte Stern, have been taken to the Federal Reformatory at Alderson, W. Va. Harry M. Justiz and James Lustig, last of the eleven, are imprisoned at the Federal Correctional Institution at Ashland, Ky.

When sentenced here by Federal Judge Richmond B. Keech, a month ago, the prisoners were removed by United States marshals to the District Jail. Dr. Barsky was sentenced to serve six months and pay \$500. The rest received three months each, and a \$500 fine.

#### First Convicted 3 Years Ago

The men and women were first convicted more than three years ago, for declining to give records of their organization to the House committee. Eventually the Supreme Court rejected their pleas for an upset of this result.

Their organization has been denounced by the Department of Justice, and the House committee, as a subversive movement and a Communist front. They, however, said that its primary purpose was to help "liberal" refugees from the Spanish civil war.

They asserted that they were victims of a Federal Government attempt to aid Fascist Spain in the "cold war." Pickets protesting their convictions paraded past the White House with placards.

**The New York Times**

Published: July 7, 1950

Copyright © The New York Times