

Cicely Saunders describes her encounter in 1947 with David Tasma, the patient who inspired her ideas of hospice care

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Tape 1, Side 1 — Transcript pages 2-3

CICELY SAUNDERS: In the first ward I took over, there was a patient -- this by now is 1947 - there was a young Pole, a Polish Jew originally from Warsaw, though not from the uprising in the ghetto [January-May 1943], he'd left before then -- aged 40, with an inoperable cancer. And I knew he had no relatives and very few friends. I followed him up in outpatient; so when he collapsed a few months later, his landlady got in touch with me while he was waiting to go to hospital and I went to see him, and then I followed him and visited him about twenty-five times during the two months that he was dying in a very busy surgical ward. And he was David Tasma, and he is really the founder of the modern hospice movement.

When David died [February 25, 1948], having quietly come back to the faith of his fathers, but not seen a rabbi or anything, he made me his executor and left me this legacy. He said, "I'll be a window in your home", and it turned out to be five hundred pounds. So that's why we have a commitment from the beginning to openness, openness to the world, openness of course to patients and their families, but openness among ourselves, and I didn't realize all of that to begin with, I just had the rather symbolic picture of a window.

But two other things he said, or one [thing] he said and one I knew about him, were equally important, sort of pillars of Hospice, and the first was, "I only want what is in your mind and in your heart." He wanted me to say something to comfort him and I was repeating Psalms, which I knew by heart; and then I said, "Well, shall I read something to you?" and that's how he used that phrase. But thinking about it afterwards, I realized or began to realize that it could mean everything we could offer of the mind, and that would mean research and constant inquiry and constant learning and increase in understanding, but it had to be given with the friendship of the heart. And then when he finally died, I had an absolute assurance -- keen evangelical Christian as I was at that time -- he's safe, it's all right, he had freedom of the spirit to find his own way, and I've never worried about anybody as to which way they found the end of their journey if they went safely. I could commit them in inner peace. And so the openness, the mind and heart and the freedom of the spirit, were built in hospice [the hospice concept] in 1948, and then it took me nineteen years to build the home around the window.

JOHN LIEBESKIND: How did this man know so much? How did he have this appreciation? Was he himself a physician?

SAUNDERS: No, he was working as a waiter. His grandfather had been a rabbi, but he was, as he said, "I'm only an ordinary fellow." But he had a sensitivity -- he told me one or two books that he'd read, which were rather surprising -- and he had a sensitivity and that -- We discussed what would have helped him more than the very busy ward he was in, excellent though his ward sister was. But it was a fifty bed ward; it was huge, and she was certainly busy, and that's why he said, "I'll be a window in your home;" the idea of a home came out of conversations together. But I mean, he was obviously -- I mean, that's a very poetical thing to say, "I'll be a window." He was special, David. I was very fond of him.

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