

## The Polio Pioneer Dr. Jonas Salk and the Polio Vaccine

### A Book Review

By Pamela Sergey

Both Linda Elovitz Marshall and Jonas Salk describe themselves as being curious, lovers of the written word, and embracing a desire to make the world a better place.

Marshall's timely and captivating *The Polio Pioneer: Dr. Jonas Salk and the Polio Vaccine*, with sensitive illustrations by Lisa Anchin, recounts the story of Dr. Salk's determination to produce a safe polio vaccine during the heights of the 1940s and 50s polio pandemic in the US. The vaccine was tested in massive field trials involving close to two million schoolchildren known as "polio pioneers".

*The Polio Pioneer* would appeal to today's curious early-elementary child who seeks to understand the complexity of viruses, the time-consuming process of creating a vaccine, and the importance of getting vaccinated.

When Jonas Salk (1914-1995) was a young boy, his family attended Armistice Day parades in New York City to celebrate the return of American soldiers at the end of WWI. One parade honoring the New York 27<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, included hundreds of cars carrying wounded soldiers. It was also the year of the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic which caused over 650,000 deaths in the US, and only a short two years after 2,000 died of polio in New York City, mostly children. These events had enormous effects on Salk. From a young age, he strongly believed in the Jewish doctrine of *tikkun olam* ("repairing the world" for future generations) and credited his Jewish ancestry with influencing his career and life. He graduated from Townsend High School for gifted students and entered the College of the City of New York at sixteen to study law. At some point he changed his mind and began to pursue medicine. After graduating from the College of Medicine of New York University in 1939, Salk went on to help develop an influenza (flu) vaccine, laying the groundwork for his work on the future polio vaccine. He spent his last years searching for an AIDS vaccine at his Salk Institute in La Jolla, CA.

At the head of a narrow ribbon of water in the courtyard of the Salk Institute is inscribed Salk's life philosophy:

*Hope lies in dreams, in imagination and in the courage of those  
who dare to make dreams into reality.*

Linda Elovitz Marshall began working on *The Polio Pioneer* in 2016, long before coronavirus was an everyday word. When I asked her why she wanted to write a children's book on polio, she replied: "Some years ago, I realized that polio was - to my children - as distant to them as diphtheria is to me. I cannot comprehend diphtheria nor can I comprehend the fear it must have created. Because I remember polio and because I'm so grateful to the vaccine, I wanted to share my memory of polio and of the relief brought by the vaccine. It may be hard to believe,

continued . . . .



Illustration by Lisa Anchin  
Source: The Polio Pioneer

considering what we’re going through now, that back in 2016 I was thinking "*if we don’t share these memories with young people, young people will soon take good health for granted . . . Covid-19 changed all that.*"

Marshall continues: “I remembered how much polio scared me when I was a child. My mother took my brother and me from our home in the Boston area to a suburb of Hartford where my grandparents lived and where, supposedly, there was less polio. I was only four or five at the time, but it made a big impression on me. When the vaccine came out, Dr. Salk became my hero. He was such a hero to me and to my husband (a family physician) that we named our oldest son, Jonah.”

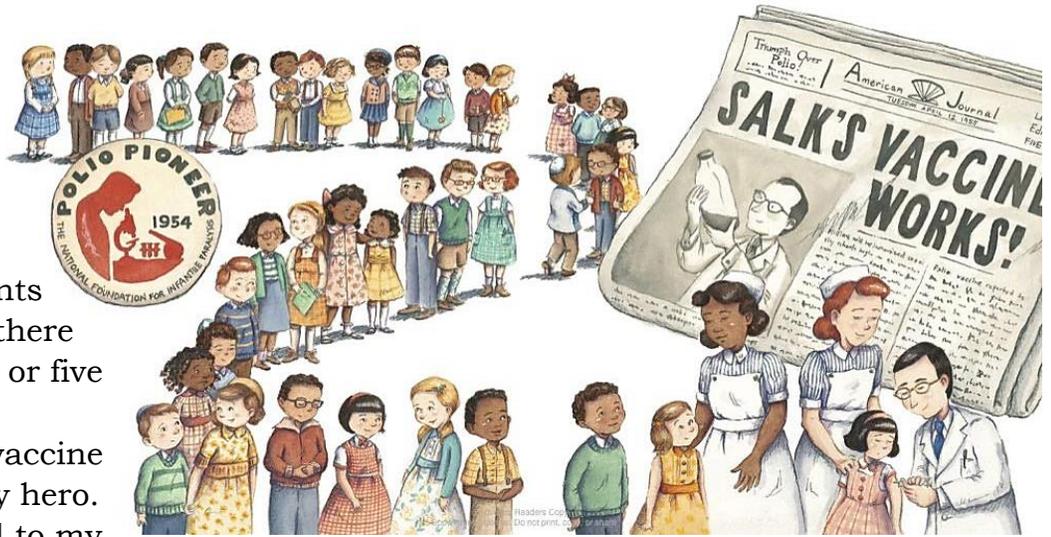


Illustration by Lisa Anchin Source: The Polio Pioneer by Linda Elovitz Marshall

Salk’s vaccine quickly became a standard part of childhood immunizations in the US. Today, polio has been eliminated throughout much of the world; on their website, the CDC states “Four regions of the world are certified polio free—the Americas, Europe, South East Asia and the Western Pacific. Only three polio-endemic countries (countries that have had uninterrupted transmission of wild poliovirus) remain - Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Pakistan.”

There can be no greater praise for Dr. Jonas Salk and his medical success than to hear 21<sup>st</sup> century children ask, “What is polio?”

Pamela Sergey



[Linda Marshall](#), author of The Polio Pioneer – Jonas Salk and the Polio Vaccine receiving her COVID-19 Vaccine.

**Sources:**

Pamela Sergey interview with [Linda Elovitz Marshall](#), January, 2021; [CDC](#) (Center for Disease Control and Prevention) website