

*Runaway populations
and nuclear threat, says the
developer of the
polio vaccine, present
radically new
evolutionary pressures
for humankind*

INTERVIEW

JONAS SALK

The memory remains vivid. I am an eight-year-old boy at summer camp in Minnesota. Suddenly trouble, difficult to comprehend. Campers are plucked away abruptly. Soon a favorite uncle stands before me, requesting that my trunk be packed quickly. It is to be my first ride in a small airplane, and my awe for this strong, heroic uncle—once a champion gymnast, now a copilot—soars. The explanation is brief: polio. What that means is left to the imagination. The somber tone in which the word is uttered is the only clue.

Quarantine follows. I spend more than a month with my hardy seventy-seven-year-old grandfather in a log cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. The time is filled with tasks, the taking of large round pills the size of jawbreakers, and the curious experience of seeing my parents occasionally, and only at a distance, when they come to deliver provisions to the old Scotsman and to take away my dirty laundry—no doubt to boil it in lye.

Later, when quarantine is over and no disease has incubated, it

all seems frightfully dramatic—some sort of thrilling tale to be embellished at school. Still, the summers that follow remain a time of indistinct danger. Indistinct, that is, until two years later, when I am told that this same favorite uncle had gone for a summertime swim, got a chill, and contracted polio. Several years after that I see him again—once so tall and athletic, now bent and twisted, lurching forward on two canes as he labors in his garden.

These stories must bore Dr. Jonas Salk. No doubt they are delivered to him constantly as a kind of thanks and must, after a time, have a certain sameness to them. His achievement in developing the polio vaccine in 1953 remains the hallmark for all medical breakthroughs. Recently, for example, industrialist Armand Hammer offered a \$1 million prize to the scientist who could achieve a cure for cancer similar in effect to Dr. Salk's preventive for polio.

The Salk Institute for Biological Studies, in La Jolla, California, is itself a contender for the Hammer prize. But the institute—founded by its namesake in 1963—is devoted not only to cancer research