Anatomical Science at University of Vienna 1938-45

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60 years after the *Anschluss* (annexation) of Austria to the German Reich in March, 1938, Austria is still confronted by unaddressed questions about its Nazi past. After the fall of the National Socialist regime these questions were ignored or suppressed and for decades there was little discussion about events that occurred between 1938 and 1945 at the Medical Faculty of the University of Vienna.^{1,2} Investigations were launched only in response to initiatives from abroad.^{3–6}

For the past 15 years, American medical professors have voiced misgivings over the possible misuse of bodies of Holocaust victims for the illustrations in the world-famous anatomical atlas *Topographical Human Anatomy* by Eduard Pernkopf.⁷ These critics suggest that it is reasonable to assume that Pernkopf (Figure 1), an enthusiastic supporter of Nazi policies, used bodies of people executed at the Vienna *Landesgericht* (assize court) in the preparation of his atlas illustrations. In particular, the concern was raised whether corpses of concentration camp victims had been used as models (Figure 2). Suspensions of underlying unethical practices are also based on the observation that in the first editions of the atlas the signatures of the illustrators Erich Lepier, Franz Batke, and Karl Endtresser display swastikas and the double lightning bolt insignia of the *Schutzstaffel*, or SS.

In 1995, individual American and Canadian medical professors, as well as Yad Vashem, (The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority), urged the Austrian universities to undertake a thorough investigation into the origins of the anatomical specimens displayed in university

departments up to the present day. A research commission was founded and the project was started in April 1997.

The commission's task was confined to investigations referring to the Medical Faculty of the University of Vienna, as well as to other Viennese institutions such as the Museum of Natural History, the Federal Museum of Pathological Anatomy, the Municipal Psychiatric Hospital at Baumgartner Höhe, and the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Clinical Neurobiology. The commission discovered war-time connections between the department of anatomy of the University of Vienna and Am Spiegelgrund, which was the psychiatric hospital of the city of Vienna, the site of the "euthanasia" of retarded and handicapped children under the Nazi regime.⁸ The Medical Faculties of the Universities of Graz and Innsbruck were not included because these faculties have to initiate research in their own right.

Anatomical practices at Vienna University

Since the introduction of anatomical dissection in Vienna in 1404 it was common practice to use the bodies of executed prisoners—indeed, until 1742 this was the sole

Figure 1: Eduard Pernkopf lecturing as dean at the Department of Anatomy, University of Vienna, April 6, 1938; Used with permission of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (Austrian National Library, Vienna, Austria).

Figure 2: Illustrations from Pernkopf's anatomical atlas. Head and neck image credit: Medical University of Vienna, MUW- Josephinum. Leg image credit: Medical University of Vienna, MUW-Andruck-3361I-Seite 1.

source of corpses for dissection purposes.⁹⁻¹¹ Gerard van Swieten, personal medical adviser to Empress Maria Theresia, then gave instructions that, additionally, the bodies

of paupers, who had died in hospital were to be made available for anatomical dissection.

Hence, Nazi anatomical practices were easily “legalised” against this background and, based on a decree of Feb 18, 1939, all bodies of executed prisoners were sent to the department of anatomy of the nearest university, for research and teaching purposes. These bodies were used in dissection courses for students, as well as for the preparation of specimens for lectures, anatomical collections, and the illustrations for Pernkopf's anatomical atlas.

The cadaver entry register, the most important source for the registration of bodies assigned to the department of anatomy—which would have provided clues about the origin of these bodies and where they were assigned—is missing. The research commission assumed that the register was destroyed in the air raid of Feb 7, 1945. Hence, all information on bodies delivered to the department had to be reconstructed in a study of the death certificates in the files at the municipal cemetery offices. These certificates showed the person's name, date of birth, date and time of death, as well as the cause of death. In the case of executed persons the cause of death was entered as “executed”, and the reverse side contained remarks referring to assignment, namely “anatomy cadaver.” Certificates of patients who had died of natural causes in hospital and whose corpses were also transferred to anatomy department were also marked. Sometimes the death certificates had hand-written notes regarding the suitability or otherwise of the cadaver for specific anatomical purposes and in some cases also the name of the anatomist at whose disposal the cadaver was placed.

1377 bodies of executed citizens, including eight of Jewish origin, were assigned to the anatomy department as well as 3964 people who had died of natural causes, mostly in hospitals, the relatives of whom could not afford burial. Most of the bodies were used in research and teaching, although some were declared “unusable.”

Most of the 1377 executed people were guillotined at the Vienna assize court; some of them were shot by the Gestapo at a rifle range situated on the outskirts of Vienna (Kagran). These 1377 bodies are solely those for which delivery to the department of anatomy was confirmed in writing on the death certificates from the municipal cemetery offices. The total number of people executed under the National Socialist regime could not be established because all the sources used for research—including the death certificates at the Vienna municipal cemetery offices, the lists from the Vienna assize court archives, the documentary archives of the Austrian

resistance and the German army information office in Berlin—was incomplete. Hence, the true number of executed citizens must be higher than 1377.

The names of the victims, as well as the dates of execution and the reasons for the sentences, were documented. Most people were sentenced to death for political reasons. More than half refer to crimes of resistance and high treason, in Nazi parlance. Petty crimes such as pick pocketing, black-marketeering, the unauthorized slaughter of animals or listening to enemy broadcasts also carried capital punishment. Of the eight victims of Jewish origin, identified as such on the basis of the prison chaplain's report, seven bodies were delivered to the department of anatomy, but the assignment was not noted on the death certificates; the remaining victim was handed over to his family for burial. It has been questioned whether bodies from concentration camps, in particular Mauthausen, were also used. No evidence was found that bodies from Mauthausen or the affiliated Gusen camp had been brought to the department of anatomy of the University of Vienna.¹²⁻¹⁷ The investigative team at the University believe that it is unlikely that bodies of victims from concentration camps were used by the department of anatomy.

A further group of cadavers delivered to the department of anatomy consisted of fetuses and stillborn infants, many of which showed signs of congenital syphilis. The investigating team could find no evidence that forced abortions took place, nor that any executed women were pregnant, but it cannot be ruled out. Between 1938 and 1945 altogether about 7000 bodies of children were delivered, but the exact figure is not relevant to this report because these corpses cannot be considered Nazi victims. According to the death certificates these cadavers were used mainly in dissection courses.

Investigations of anatomical preparations

Investigation into the collection of anatomical preparations of the department of anatomy was difficult because a large part of the collection and its associated documentation appeared to have been destroyed in the aforementioned air raid. Hence, as far as the objects in the anatomical collections are concerned, it was not possible to match the personal data of deceased or executed persons found in the death certificates with the displayed objects since these are kept anonymously. Many specimens exhibited in the anatomical collection are not dated, nor do they display the name of the person who prepared the object. Nonetheless, in the course of the investigations it was possible to gauge the data of some of these preparations on the basis of specific characteristics such as the mode of pre-preparation, the

mode of conservation, and the mounting. But the origins of 97 specimens remain unknown and, thus, a National Socialist provenance cannot be ruled out with respect to these specimens.

In the course of the research, all 64 clinical and nonclinical departments of the medical faculty of the University of Vienna were requested to report on any anatomical and pathological collections in their possession. Most of them do not have any such collections, but the following departments own specimens that had been taken from the bodies of Nazi victims, or were of doubtful origin. The department of histology and embryology was found to have 98 specimens fixed in formaldehyde, which, according to their labeling, had definitely originated from people executed at the Vienna assize court. The collection of the department of neurology included six specimens preserved in formaldehyde, as well as histological sections and paraffin blocks, all of which had been given to the department by Heinrich Gross between 1953 and 1957. These specimens dated back to 1942-44 and originated from children murdered under the infamous Nazi T4 "euthanasia" program at the psychiatric institution Am Spiegelgrund. The unearthing of this collection was reported to the relevant judicial authorities. Gross was brought to trial on March 21, 2000, but proceedings were suspended after half an hour because it appeared Gross had dementia.

The Institute for the History of Medicine possessed two specimens preserved in formaldehyde, one skeleton, one limb, and about 100 histological sections, all of unknown origin; these had been transferred from other clinical departments when the premises of the old Vienna General Hospital were vacated in the early 1990s. Finally, the department of forensic medicine was found to own the skull of Wilhelm Zehner, general of the infantry and former secretary of state of the Austrian army, who was either murdered by the Gestapo, or committed suicide on being arrested by the Gestapo on the night of April 10, 1938. The above-mentioned specimens have now been removed from the respective collections and will soon be buried in a grave of honour provided by the City of Vienna.

Pernkopf and his anatomy atlas

A further important task of the commission was research into the origins of models for the illustrations of Pernkopf's *Topographical Human Anatomy*, a work that is still consulted worldwide today.

An extensive biographical background to the Pernkopf anatomical atlas, both with respect to the author's academic

career and National Socialist functions, has been published by Malina.^{18,19} Eduard Pernkopf was born in 1888 in Rapottenstein in lower Austria and graduated with an MD from Vienna University in 1912. In 1933 he became head of the second department of anatomy. At the same time he became a member of the Nazi party and an "illegal" member of the SA storm troopers, paving the way for his appointment in 1938 as dean of the medical faculty. In 1943 he achieved the highest possible university position on becoming rector, and office he held until May 1945, when he was stripped of this honor and dismissed from his position as head of the anatomy department. Apart from scientific papers in the fields of general anatomy, embryology and teratology, Pernkopf published an article on National Socialism and Science in 1938 and brought out the first two volumes of the anatomy atlas in 1937 and 1941.

Pernkopf's academic career came to an end with the defeat of the Third Reich and he was imprisoned in 1945 at the Marcus W. Orr Camp in Glasenbach, near Salzburg. After 2 years of imprisonment, Pernkopf achieved revision of his status as an "incriminated person" to that of a "lesser incriminated" person and, following rapid official "denazification," was allowed to return to Vienna. Although never reinstated in an official university position, the dean's office allotted Pernkopf two rooms in the department of neurology, where he continued to work on his anatomical atlas until his death in 1955.

With respect to the signatures of the artists Erich Lepier, Karl Endtresser, and Franz Batke, who painted the illustrations for the Pernkopf atlas, it is undisputed that Lepier repeatedly included a swastika in his signature, in keeping with his well-known affinity towards the Nazi regime. Karl Endtresser is accused of having written the double s in his name in the style of the SS rune, but in the opinion of the investigative team his manner of signing the double s in a flattened form cannot necessarily be interpreted as Nazi symbolism and occurs only three times in the atlas. On the other hand, Franz Batke, who is accused of having written the number 44 like the SS double lightning bolt rune, was not a Nazi party member and contemporaries stated on interview that he had not sympathized with National Socialist regime. His handwriting is typical of the Old German Script that was still in common usage at that time.²¹ The accusation that some of the illustrations in the anatomical atlas might have been based on executed persons, in particular those of Jewish origin, can neither be confirmed nor negated. Of all the 791 illustrations in Pernkopf's anatomical atlas, it can be stated categorically that roughly half were not done during the years of the Nazi regime - many of them predate 1937. However, 41 paintings were in fact signed with dates

referring to the National Socialist period between 1938 and 1945 and it must be assumed that the models probably came from the group of 1377 executed victims referred to earlier. The remaining approximately 350 illustrations could not be dated and it is possible that some of them were likewise reproduced from Nazi victims. However, many illustrations were painted during the post-war decades, indeed right up to the 1980s when the final volume of the atlas was published.

The suspicion that some illustrations may have been modeled on bodies from Jewish concentration camp victims, based on an appearance of a shaven head, cachexia, or circumcision, could not be substantiated by the commission. With the possible exception of the seven executed Jewish victims referred to earlier, the commission found no evidence that any of the pictures were based on Jewish models (it must be pointed out that the anatomical preparation procedure causes shrinkage of the prepuce, mimicking circumcision).

Discussion

The team of investigators was aware that research into the origin of anatomical preparations more than half a century after the end of World War II would be fraught with difficulties because of the time elapsed and the fact that the Institute of Anatomy had received a direct hit during a bombing raid shortly before the end of the war that destroyed some of the most relevant documents. Consequently, the study was modeled after the only comparable study by the University of Tübingen in Germany, completed in 1990, which pursued similar objectives. Parallel to the aims of the German investigators, we wanted to search, identify, and exclude any anatomical preparations of doubtful origin in order to guarantee that no bodily remains of victims of Nazi terror would be in use for any type of teaching, or on display in museum collections, on the premises of the medical faculty. In accordance with the ideas elaborated by Johanan Bein from Yad Vashem, in his letter to the then rector Alfred Ebenbauer, remains of any victims of the Nazi regime, irrespective of race, nationality, or ethnicity were to be addressed in this search. As it turned out, our investigations proved to be extraordinary difficult due to the above reasons but, eventually, yielded results which, in retrospect, fully justified the endeavor - there were indeed remnants of victims to be found and there was a lack of ethnic sensitivity on the part of the faculty in this regard that needed to be pointed out to the public and corrected. By the same token, the lack of interest of the medical establishment in the use of bodily remains of human beings needs to be put up for discussion.

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