

The Role of Homoeopathy in Nazi Germany – A Historical Expertise (as at June 2008)

Professor Dr Robert Jütte, Director of the Institute for the History of Medicine of the Robert Bosch Foundation, Straussweg 17, D-70194 Germany, e-mail: robert.juette@igm-bosch.de

Introduction

Critics of homoeopathy still regard it as blemished because it was supported by leading representatives of the Nazi regime insinuating that there must have been some degree of ideological consensus. This surely is a case of historical misrepresentation considering that there were generally more physicians among Nazi party members and SS members than representatives of any other professional category.¹ It also has to be pointed out that **all** the physicians condemned at the Nuremberg doctors' trial for crimes against humanity were representatives of orthodox medicine and that not a single instance of the word 'homoeopathy' can be found in the extensive case records.² Unfounded accusations tend to be long lived which is why the following essay will give a short survey of the historical facts and highlight the role homoeopathy played during Nazi times.

Shared ideology

In October 1933, the leader of the Third Reich's chamber of physicians, Dr Gerhard Wagner (1888-1939), published an appeal in the medical journal *Deutsches Ärzteblatt* calling "all German physicians who engage with biological medicine" to come together. He wrote, among other things, that there were therapies which were not in line with mainstream medicine but still proved successful if not superior to the medicine taught at universities. Little wonder, then, that the editors of the leading homoeopathic journal, which also served as the homoeopathic association's mouthpiece, happily embraced Wagner's appeal and indicated their willingness to cooperate. In an open letter addressed to Hitler, the editor of the *Allgemeine Homöopathische Zeitung*, Hans Wapler MD, emphatically concludes: "There can be no national socialist physician who – if made aware of it – would not recognize the crucial importance that Hitler's political evaluation of the Similia similibus [the homoeopathic 'like cures like' principle – R.J.] has had for Germany."³

Naturopaths and homoeopaths who had struggled as 'outsiders' during the Weimar Republic suddenly found themselves supported by the new regime. During their marginalisation outside pressure had forced them to close ranks in order to ward off attacks from the all powerful orthodox medicine. In 1933, this union of alternative medical approaches broke up. From then on, each of them tried to emphasise their own strength and to benefit from the support promised by the Nazis. They also feared that their own doctrine might suffer from the attempted 'synthesis' of different healing approaches. Some homoeopathic doctors expressed their concern that Hahnemann's doctrine could be adulterated beyond recognition if homoeopathic remedies were to be applied in an undifferentiated and thoughtless way by supporters of the newly favoured "biological medicine".⁴ Others, however, showed less reluctance in this respect and were prepared to accept the "dilution and adulteration of the fundamental homoeopathic principles"⁵ if, in return, the new role of physicians as "health leaders" was recognized.

One and a half years after Wagner's appeal in the *Deutsche Ärzteblatt*, on 25 May 1935, a consortium for a new German medicine ("Reichsarbeitsgemeinschaft für eine Neue Deutsche Heilkunde") was founded in Nuremberg which included organisations such as the German societies for psychotherapy, for balneology and climatology, the German homoeopathic physicians' association, the Kneipp physicians' association, the naturopaths' association, the association of German private sanatoria and the federation of anthroposophic

physicians. The consortium's title was chosen to convey that this was not just any union of different medical approaches, but an entirely new health concept in line with Nazi philosophy. The majority of these associations – with a few exceptions in the movement for naturopathy and life reform – saw themselves as unpolitical.⁶ A certain ideological proximity between these mass movements of medicine critics and Nazi ideology cannot be denied, however, although it only shows one side of its Janus face here: both favoured naturalness, were critical of civilisation and hostile towards science and professionalism. It is therefore not surprising that a number of prominent Nazi officials supported the movement for folk and natural medicines. Hitler's main representative, Rudolf Hess, supported alternative practitioners and acted as patron of the 12th International Homoeopathy Congress which was held in Berlin in 1937. Heinrich Himmler, Reich leader of the SS, was interested in medicinal herbs and an advocate of nutrition reform. Julius Streicher, Nazi district leader and editor of the journal "Der Stürmer" was strongly opposed to immunisation as were many supporters of homoeopathy and naturopathy.

While the "Consortium" was already dissolved at the beginning of 1937, the union of lay-associations continued to exist until 1941. By dissolving the "Consortium" in January 1937, the regime did not necessarily perform a health political u-turn, yet it was obvious that its concept of the much praised medical "synthesis" had changed considerably since the Nazis had come to power. Its aims were no longer to criticise orthodox medicine and strive for equality of status, but to conduct research into homoeopathic and naturopathic procedures for which the "official and often unjustly attacked mainstream medicine provided the safe ground and secure knowledge"⁷, as the Reich's leading physician, Dr Gerhard Wagner, put it in a programmatic contribution. The desired "synthesis" of main stream medicine and naturopathy which remained a rhetorical and conceptual topic even after the beginning of the war, had only occasionally been achieved in practice by the end of the Third Reich, for example in the hospitals for homoeopathy and naturopathy that existed at the time in Berlin, Bremen, Dresden, Gera, Hamburg, Cologne, Munich, Nuremberg, Recklinghausen, Stuttgart and Wuppertal. The real breakthrough never happened in spite of a number of small success stories.

Homoeopaths who were pursued by the Nazis

Unlike in the case of other medical practitioners such as dermatologists and eye specialists, there has been no research to date into the fate of homoeopaths who had to leave the country after 1933 for "racial" or political reasons. Among the victims were well known homoeopaths: Otto Leiser MD (1888-1964) had to emigrate to England via Holland because of his Jewish background. Martin Gumpert MD (1897-1955), author of a popular Hahnemann biography, was forced to emigrate in 1936. The American homoeopath Edward C. Whitmont (1912-1998), who was also interested in psychoanalysis, originally came from Vienna and just managed to finish his medical studies there before he had to flee to the USA in 1938. William Gutman (1900-1991) was also born in Vienna and emigrated to New York in 1938 where he went on to teach homoeopathy at a medical college.

Clinical trials and drug tests

Between 1936 and 1939 drug provings were carried out on behalf of the Reich health authorities in various homoeopathic hospitals. Their "main purpose was to research the reliability of former provings and the validity of the drug pictures that were based on them".⁸ The research team consisted of homoeopath Professor Dr Hanns Rabe (1890-1959), internist Professor Werner Siebert MD (1897-1951) and the professors of pharmacology Gustav Kuschinsky (1904-1992) and Richard Bonsmann (life dates not known). Fritz Donner MD (1896-1979), who practised at the time in the homoeopathy department of the Rudolf

Virchow Hospital in Berlin, was also involved in the programme. Opponents of homoeopathy like to quote from his unprinted report about the provings to show how great an interest the Nazi regime took in homoeopathy on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to prove the lack of evidence for the efficacy of the homoeopathic method. This report is problematic as a source, though, because it was only written about two decades after the end of the Second World War and is strongly subjective. When war broke out in 1939 the provings found an abrupt end and a conclusive report is therefore not available. The original documents which, according to Donner, had survived the war have not yet been found and we must assume them to be lost. For this reason one has to be careful, as Harald Walach quite rightly points out, not to “throw out the baby with the bathwater and see all homoeopathic results as placebo effects”⁹ on the basis of Donner’s report alone.

During the Third Reich clinical trials with homoeopathy were only carried out at the Homoeopathic Hospital in Stuttgart (until 1940), where Alfons Stiegele (1871-1956) was director. Its successor, the ‘Robert-Bosch-Krankenhaus’ was inaugurated in 1940, but no more clinical research was conducted because of the war. It was not until after the end of World War II that individual case studies were published which were meant to serve the “clinical demonstration of homoeopathic medicine”¹⁰.

Human experiments

Until today homoeopathy has been accused of participating in inhumane experiments in concentration camps. In this context the medicinal herb plantation in Dachau – an SS enterprise – is often mentioned, but its main purpose was to grow medicinal herbs in order to become independent of the international market. Its laboratory was also used merely to produce new “drugs and mixtures based on scientific research”.¹¹ The document quoted here does not mention any therapeutic experiments. Peppermint and other teas, spices and medicinal herbs were also grown in the concentration camp in Ravensbrück.¹²

Human experiments were, however, performed at the behest of Himmler with “Schuessler” cell salts, which also belong to the field of homoeopathy, in the hope of finding a German equivalent to penicillin.¹³ In the concentration camp of Dachau another test group, which consisted of prisoners on the phlegmon ward, is also said to have received homoeopathic treatment. The prisoners had been given various herbal tea mixtures following an iris diagnosis conducted by a certain Dr Fialkovski from Poland. Carolin Geidobler, in her studies on human experiments in the Dachau concentration camp, points out that the people in this group had the highest chance of survival, because of the liquids they received, and that they had suffered least.¹⁴ It should also be mentioned that, according to the Austrian farmer Walter Neff (1909-1960) who had been detained at Dachau on the instruction of SS leader Heinrich Himmler, a trial ward had been established there for TB patients to find out if homoeopathy can cure prisoners suffering from lung disease.¹⁵ No further details of these experiments are known.

Conclusion

Homoeopathic physicians found it even harder to come to terms with the past than other doctors.¹⁶ This is true also for other CAM therapies.¹⁷ It was only in the 1980s that the well-established “German Central Association of Homoeopathic Physicians” accepted for its journal an article that critically reflected on the role of homoeopathy in the Third Reich.¹⁸ While a closeness to politics had been desirable before, homoeopathic circles, after the Second World War, steered clear of it. When the *Allgemeine Homöopathische Zeitung* came out again in 1948, the editorial referred to the “unfortunate political circumstances of the

past”. At the same time, it points out that the journal would continue on its course (“unperturbed by any political currents, entirely neutral in the service of a pure and applied science.”¹⁹). The new editors kept shamefacedly quiet, however, about the fact that the editors of this journal, especially under Hans Wapler (1866-1951), had seriously veered off course and straight into Nazi waters. It is this unresolved role of homoeopathy between 1933 and 1945 that still today supplies grist to the mills of its opponents.

¹ A fundamental contribution: Winfried Süß, *Der ‚Volkskörper‘ im Krieg: Gesundheitspolitik, Gesundheitsverhältnisse und Krankenmord im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland 1939-1945*, Munich 2003.

² See Klaus Dörner, Angelika Ebbinghaus, Karsten Linne (eds.), *Der Nürnberger Ärzteprozeß 1946/47. Wortprotokolle, Anklage und Verteidigungsmaterial, Quellen zum Umfeld: Erschließungsband zur Mikrofiche-Edition*, compiled by Karsten Linne. K. G. Saur: Munich 2000.

³ *Allgemeine Homöopathische Zeitung* 181 (1933), p. 317-319, quote on p. 318. Emphasis in original text.

⁴ Cf. Carl Fischer, *Das naturheilkundlich-biologische Denken in der Behandlung der Haut- und Geschlechtskrankheiten*. In: *Hippokrates* 8 (1937), p. 521-526.

⁵ Martin Fassbender, *Naturheilkraft – Naturheilkunst*. In: *Hippokrates* 8 (1937), p. 284-289, quote on p. 285

⁶ Cf. Bertram Karrasch, *Volksheilkundliche Laienverbände im Dritten Reich*. Stuttgart 1998.

⁷ *Neue Wege der Heilkunde*. *Zeitstimmen*. Edited by Kurt Klare. Stuttgart 1937, p. 9

⁸ Fritz Donner, *Bemerkungen zu der Überprüfung der Homöopathie*. Unpublished manuscript, p. 8 (copy in the library of the Institute for the History of Medicine, Robert Bosch Foundation, Sig. H/k/Donn, no date, 5). Also reproduced in Robert Willi, *Homöopathie und Wissenschaftlichkeit*. Georg Wünstel und der Streit im Deutschen Zentralverein von 1969 bis 1974. Essen 2003, p. 129

⁹ Harald Walach, *Die Untersuchung der Homöopathie durch das Reichsgesundheitsamt 1936-1939*. In: *Zeitschrift für Klassische Homöopathie* 34 (1990), p. 252-259, relevant here: p. 257

¹⁰ H. Baumann, *Klinische Demonstrationen zur homöopathischen Arzneimittellehre*. In: *Hippokrates* 18 (1947), p. 320-329. Cf. also Thomas Faltin, *Homöopathie in der Klinik. Die Geschichte der Homöopathie am Stuttgarter Robert-Bosch-Krankenhaus von 1940-1973*. Stuttgart 2002, p. 170

¹¹ Articles of association of January 23, 1939 quoted in Robert Sigel, *Heilkräuterkulturen im KZ. Die Plantage in Dachau*. In: *Dachauer Hefte* 4 (1988), issue 4, p. 164-173, quote on p. 166.

¹² Wolfgang Jacobeit, *Ganzheitlich orientierte Produktionsweisen in der NS-Zeit – Die biologisch-dynamische Wirtschaftsweise in den landwirtschaftlichen Versuchsgütern der SS 1939-1945* (<http://www.lohengrin-verlag.de/jacobeit.htm>, last accessed on August 13, 2007.)

¹³ Cf., among others, Stanislav Zámečnik’s witness report, *Das war Dachau*. Foundation Comité international de Dachau, In: *Dachauer Hefte* 4 (1988), issue 4, p. 128-143, quoted from pp. 138

¹⁴ Carolin Geidobler, *Menschenversuche im KZ Dachau*. Facharbeit aus dem Fach Geschichte. Kollegstufenjahr 2002/2004, p. 14 (<http://www.iivs.de/~iivs8205/res/facharbeitenarchiv/G-Geidobler%20Carolin-Die%20Menschenversuche%20im%20KZ%20Dachau.pdf>, last accessed on August 13, 2007.

¹⁵ <http://members.aol.com/zbdachau/fates/ger/neff.htm>, last accessed on August 13, 2007.)

¹⁶ Norbert Jachertz, *Phasen der „Vergangenheitsbewältigung“ in der deutschen Ärzteschaft nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*. In: Robert Jütte (ed.): *Geschichte der deutschen Ärzteschaft*. Cologne 1996, p. 275-288

¹⁷ See Lars Endrik Sievert, *Naturheilkunde und Medizinethik im Nationalsozialismus*. Mabuse-Verlag: Frankfurt/Main 1996.

¹⁸ Ernst H. Schmeer, *Die travestierte Homöopathie – Mimikry im Dritten Reich*. In: *Allgemeine Homöopathische Zeitung* 234 (1988), p. 10-14.

¹⁹ Heinz Schoeler, [editorial]. In: *Allgemeine Homöopathische Zeitung* 193 (1948), p. 1.

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