

Essay Review

In the Shadow of Sudhoff: German Medical History in the Weimar Republic

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Anne Kristin Oommen-Halbach, *Briefe von Walter von Brunn (1876–1952) an Tibor Győry (1869–1938) aus den Jahren 1924–1937. Ein Beitrag zum Korrespondentennetz Tibor Győrys mit deutschen Medizinhistorikern*, Studien zur Geschichte der Medizingeschichtsschreibung, Band 1, Remscheid, Gardez! Verlag, 2004, pp. 500, €59.90 (hardback 3-89796-146-6).

Karin Geiger, *Der diagnostische Blick. Martin Gumpert als Arzt, Medizinhistoriker und ärztlicher Schriftsteller*, Studien zur Geschichte der Medizingeschichtsschreibung, Band 2, Remscheid, Gardez! Verlag, 2004, pp. 238, €39.90 (hardback 3-89796-145-8).

The historiography of medicine has come into fashion recently with conferences in Holland, Germany, and the USA, some concerned with the theoretical presuppositions of the historian, others with the institutional development of the history of medicine. German scholars have also used it as a way of coming to terms with some of their medical past in the Nazi era and in the immediate post-war years. The appearance of these two, very different volumes in a new series of monographs on the historiography of medicine is thus timely. Although both books focus on the same period and country, the series has a wider geographical and linguistic aim.

The first volume is one of the most fascinating I have read for a long time. It publishes a selection of the letters of Walter von Brunn (1876–1952) to Tibor Győry (1869–1938), along with a substantial introduction and many erudite footnotes identifying characters, books and incidents, and, what is not immediately obvious, supplying extracts from other letters in Győry's collection written by von Brunn and other German historians over almost two decades. The editing is exemplary—the comment that

Königsberg is now in Poland is a rare mistake—and makes this book essential reading for anyone interested in the history of medicine.

Neither man set out to become professional historians of medicine, although von Brunn eventually became a professor of the history of medicine at Leipzig in 1934. Their shared interest, as was entirely typical of the time, developed out of their medical activity, von Brunn as a surgeon, and after losing an arm in the First World War, as an expert on child health at Rostock, and Győry as a factory doctor and for many years a senior administrator in the Hungarian Ministry of Health. History of medicine was for them a fundamental part of medicine, and communicating with fellow doctors an essential role for medical historians.

Győry was a founder member of the German Society for the History of Medicine in 1901, and frequently attended its conferences. He became the confidant of all the leading German historians of the day, and deliberately set out to create an archive from among the hundreds of letters they sent to him. After his death, the archive was presented to the Hungarian Academy of

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Sciences, who later gave it to the Semmelweiss Museum, an appropriate resting place, since Győry himself was most famous as an expert on Semmelweiss. His own side of the correspondence, mainly in Leipzig, was removed by the Russians after the war, and may yet survive in a Russian store.

Győry's plans for his archive appear to have been well known, but that does not seem to have encouraged his correspondents to compose with an eye to posterity. Von Brunn, in particular, writing often late at night after a busy day, seems to have written without thought for the consequences, even when he knew, and was indeed warned, that in the Nazi period his letters were being opened and read, and that some of his comments might be gravely damaging to him and his family. This ostensible immediacy is what makes this correspondence potentially fruitful as a source for historians, and not just medical historians.

It can be read on three different levels. The two men were united by their interest in public health, and wrote to each other about their professional interests. So we have their comments about von Brunn's controversy with Alfred Grotjahn over the health of German schoolchildren, and the general problems of ill-health in communities under the Depression. They discussed the Lübeck scandal over BCG vaccine, how to control scarlet fever, and the long-running debate over the effectiveness of the Friedmann treatment for tuberculosis. One can see also how earlier claims for the importance of public health were taken over by the Nazis, and used for ends far removed from what their initial propounders had envisaged. Von Brunn was a strong believer in eugenics, concerned about the place of the "*Minderwertigen*" in Germany society (the English term "handicapped" does not carry the same connotation of valuelessness), supporting enforced sterilization of the unfit, and Győry shared his views.

Secondly, these letters illustrate the development of German history of medicine as an institutional discipline in the 1920s and 1930s. Karl Sudhoff dominates everything, long after his retirement. A critical review by him can appear to blight a career for years, a failure to

respond to a letter presage disaster. Sudhoff's positivist historiography is the only methodology permitted—indeed, medical history in these pages is something entirely German. Sudhoff's decision to speak in Italian at a meeting of the International Society for the History of Medicine in Rome in 1930, and, still more, the plan by Richard Koch to present his paper in French gives rise to passionate outbursts on the importance of German medical history, a mooted proposal to the German Society that its members, when abroad, should deliver papers only in German, and one good story. When Sudhoff addressed the International Society in London in 1924 in English, at least one member of the audience thought he was talking bad Italian. Contemporary perspectives are at times markedly different from those of today. Henry Sigerist is condemned as a dilettante publicist, because he had forsaken the scholarly traditions of his earliest publications, and gave parties instead of being at his desk. The succession to the Leipzig chair vacated by Sudhoff is a matter for eager speculation—candidates are too old, too young, too fat, morphine addicts, hopeless teachers, or political toadies. Perhaps only Georg Sticker emerges with any credit from these intrigues, and Diepgen reveals his consummate talent for academic politics—not for nothing did Sudhoff call him "the Jesuit", flourishing while others around him floundered. But we are also reminded of a lack of talent—the loss of Sigerist, Ludwig Edelstein, Owsei Temkin and Richard Koch as scholars left a large gap that was hard to fill, and the increasing use of medical history in the Nazi State to justify contemporary politics presented unexpected dangers. Besides, only in Düsseldorf, where Wilhelm Haberling reigned as professor, was there any large number of doctoral candidates, and seminars elsewhere might consist of three or four auditors, including the Department secretary. Papa Sudhoff's legacy was no easy one.

Above all, there is the Jewish question. Both correspondents (like many of their colleagues) held markedly anti-Semitic views. The International Society is peopled by "plutocrats and Jews", and Sudhoff is reviled as a protector of the Jews—hence the surprise when he joined

the Nazi party in 1933. Temkin, Edelstein, and Koch are respected for their scholarship, but Walter Pagel is an “unpleasant” Jew, with philosophical and unintelligible interests. Theodor Meyer-Steineg is throughout a figure of fun, not least because of his attempt to deny his Jewish birth by a claim to be the illegitimate son of a local prince. The casual way in which the Nazi persecution of the Jews is accepted is here striking; most of the Jews deserve what they get, these actions, on the whole, benefit society, and, while one can regret that a distinction was not preserved between those Jews in the country before 1914 and late-comers, this is at best unfortunate. Von Brunn in the 1920s hopes for a unification of Germany with Austria, but only with its properly German parts, Styria, the Tyrol, and, of course, the German minority in the Alto Adige, but definitely not with Vienna, whose lawyers, doctors and journalists are overwhelmingly Jewish.

But the most important contribution made by these letters is the insight they give into the mind of well-educated, upper-middle-class Germans in this period. Both Von Brunn and Győry were strong nationalists, furious at the “Versailles Diktat” that had, in their view, dismembered both their countries, and keen to support “their” minorities in the new lands. Hence, von Brunn’s rejoicing at the restoration of the Saar, and at the overall foreign policy of Hitler that would bring reunification without war. Győry was more sceptical, even in the face of constant reassurance that the German community in Hungary would not be used as a fifth column. One can follow in von Brunn’s letters the weakening resistance of men like him to the rise of the Nazis. Afraid of Bolsheviks (like Sigerist), Freemasons (like George VI, how different from his brother!), and Jews, they looked for a strong conservative government. The Nazis they initially despised on social grounds, certain that Alfred Hugenberg, Franz von Papen and other conservatives would, in turn, bring this lower-class *canaille* to heel. The Nazi seizure of power is viewed with a mixture of hope and disdain—Hitler has an excellent foreign and economic policy, and by the Roehm Putsch has rid the party of its worst elements. The Nazis are

even prepared to seek von Brunn’s help in writing a new School Health Law; its non-implementation is put down to the machinations of local party bosses, unknown to the Führer. Von Brunn’s friendship with leading figures in the Ministry of Health also gave him a certain status, even though he regularly laments the hardships of his own life. But his son joined the SS, but only as a doctor, von Brunn assures Győry, which is no different from his grandfather volunteering to serve in the war of 1870.

The final letters, the last written only two months before Győry’s death, bespeak a recovery of the old middle-class life-style, even though new currency regulations made travel more complicated. But there is also an awareness of the increasingly precarious position of Germany, opposed by France, Italy and England in what both men clearly viewed as a just claim to the restoration of lost lands.

By contrast with this kaleidoscopic view of German history of medicine, the second volume in the series is much more restricted. It tells the story of Martin Gumpert (1897–1955), a Jewish doctor in Berlin, who fled to the USA in 1936, where he embarked on a new career as specialist in geriatrics. His first interest was in dermatology, studying with Alfred Blaschko, whose daughter he married. His strong commitment to socialism and public health led him to create in Berlin a Department of “Social Cosmetics” within the Institute for Dermatology, and to write in 1931 a major survey of medical cosmetics. He was also interested in the history of medicine. His MD thesis dealt with the origins of syphilis, and he achieved commercial success in 1934 with a book on Hahnemann. He followed this up with a selection of short medical biographies, which led to his most popular book, a biography of Henri Dunant. But although there has been recent interest in his ideas on restorative surgery, notably by Sander Gilman, Gumpert is today remembered, if at all, as an expressionist writer and friend of Thomas Mann.

Dr Geiger is a competent scholar, who writes clearly and concisely about Gumpert’s manifold interests. Compared with the recent biography by

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the literary scholar Jutta Ittner, she devotes much more space to his work as a doctor and to his strictly medical publications. She stresses Gumpert's commitment to popularizing medicine and its history, and his optimistic view of human potentiality, despite his dreadful existence in the years immediately following the Nazi takeover, which were indeed "Hell in Paradise", the title of his 1939 German memoir. All this is very useful, and adds to our understanding of Gumpert the writer.

But there is no deep exploration of any single theme. Gumpert's appreciation for Sigerist, as man and historian, contrasts markedly with that of von Brunn noted above, but the parallels between the two men's attitude to historical biography are not explored. We are given a brief account of the conflict between Sudhoff and Iwan Bloch over the European or American origin of syphilis, but very little is said about how Gumpert came to his conclusions, or why historians should turn to his thesis for guidance, if at all. Dr Geiger tells us about the generally positive reaction of reviewers to his medical biographies, which she views as a sort of inner emigration after the loss of his official posts and in part as indirect criticism of the Nazi regime, but she does not explore the manner in which these books were written under severe political and economic constraint. She notes the curious relationship of the doctoral student to his supervisors, but throws no light on Gumpert's medico-historical interests when in the States. Although he toyed with the idea of a career in medical history, nothing is said (or possibly even known) about his membership in local history societies. In part these gaps are the result of a lack of relevant archival sources, but at other times one would have liked a much

more detailed examination of that which does survive.

Gumpert arrived in the United States penniless and effectively unable to speak English, but with great determination and perseverance he became a fluent English speaker and writer, and held a series of important posts at New York Jewish hospitals. His story is rightly held up as exemplifying that of many other Jewish immigrants, but not enough is done to place it in context. One wonders why, for instance, he did not return to plastic surgery, and one would like to have had more about his medical socialism in the McCarthy era. In short, this book is a nicely written thesis that has not processed further in its transfer to publication. The case for Gumpert as worth studying as a doctor, an immigrant and a medical historian, is made out only weakly, and the interaction between his medicine and his literary writings (which is the reason why his name remains familiar today) is examined all too briefly.

Two contrasting judgments on two contrasting books present a nightmare for a reviewer of the new series. The theme of the history of medical history, whether defined in terms of theories, institutions, or individual historians, is an important one, and one that has attracted relatively little attention in the English-speaking world. Who now reads Norman Moore or Kenneth Keele? And who cares? Conversely, the seminal role of Sigerist and Baltimore in the history of medicine in the United States has led to a general neglect of those who went before, and a relatively generous attitude to all that took place in Baltimore. This new series, which has begun with one competent and one outstanding work, should stimulate others to look at their fellow historians of the past with a critical eye.