

PURE Award End of Summer Report

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Supervising Professor: Dr. Frank W. Stahnisch

Introduction

This summer research project has been a special history of medicine/history of neuroscience project, situated in the History of Medicine and Health Care Program (Cumming School of Medicine). Under the guidance of Dr. Frank W. Stahnisch (from July to August, 2018), the project comprised of archival research, literature search, historical database activities, contributions to grant development and grant writing, workshops, and publication activities. While Dr. Stahnisch is a specialized researcher in the history of neuroscience and psychiatry, currently investigating the history and impact of the large-scale forced migration wave of German-speaking émigré neuroscientists and psychiatrists to North America (a previous SSHRC- and CIHR-funded activity leading to the development of a monographic book), my project this summer took on a narrower scope within this research context, which was looking into the biographical life of one individual of this mass emigration. This also ran in parallel with a fledgling project that will hopefully develop throughout the next year, an examination of German-speaking émigré neuroscientists in Western Canada.

In the history of 20th-century science and medicine, the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany to political power in 1933 precipitated a wave of renewed anti-Semitism, which became encoded into the new state with laws such as the “Law for Restoration of the Professional Civil Service.” This infamous law barred “non-Aryans” from working in German universities and state-supported medical institutions. These radical changes prompted many Jewish, socialist, and other oppositional neuroscientists, psychiatrists, and physicians to migrate, often by force, to Canada, the United States, and beyond. While they faced numerous challenges in terms of integrating into their new home countries, these scientists eventually proved to be instrumental to the foundation and growth of key medical and neurological institutions in Canada. Important contributions were made in neurology, geriatric medicine, and psychiatry, among others (including: deep psychology, psychiatric training programs, introduction of electroshock therapy, and foundation of neurogenetics).

The overarching goal of this research project is to uncover the biographical lives of these individuals, and to assess their contributions to North American neurology, psychiatry, and psychology within the broader context of the emigration of refugee academics from Central Europe in the 1930s-1940s. In particular, an examination of the difficulties these émigrés faced from a social, cultural, and professional perspective is crucial to establishing a framework for

studying the effect of the contributions from this group of scientists. In addition, individual biographical accounts provide a “human face” to this consequential period of academic history, which grows beyond a simple “brain drain, brain gain” movement of biomedical academics from one region to the other. The study of these individual accounts also provides case studies for cultural acclimatization and examples of scientific advancement in such a turbulent time.

While the initial research proposal indicated an intent to examine émigré neuroscientists directly affiliated with Canadian neurological research institutes such as the Montreal Neurological Institute (MNI), an early introduction and survey of émigré scientists resulted in an interest in researching the life and contributions of a refugee who was not admitted to Canada, but interned here. Dr. Walter Igersheimer (1917-2012) caught my attention because he was brought to Canada not welcomed as a refugee, but as an “enemy alien” due to the technicality of his German citizenship. His unique experience of his upbringing in three different countries (Germany, the United Kingdom, and Turkey), internment in Canada, exile in Cuba, and academic career in the United States in medicine and psychiatry formed an interesting focus for an individual within the larger context of not only intellectual emigres, but also of the draconian, implicitly anti-Semitic Canadian immigration law of the time. Igersheimer’s case has been overlooked by academic historians, despite the value in studying how such diverse factors can shape the refugee experience, and by extension, the academic contributions made in a new home.

Process

The research project throughout the summer has been largely focused on Dr. Igersheimer, but his case has been one of two main focuses. The other is more broad and ongoing throughout the duration of the research period, being the compilation of a database of German-speaking émigré biomedical researchers, physicians, and psychologists. By sifting through archival databases such as the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL) archives on émigré scientists, and searching for name references in primary documents such as memoirs, immigration documents, and applications, this database is expanded upon with basic information on these individuals. Such information includes dates of birth and death, education, research interests, route of emigration, religion, citizenship, and family, among others. This information is crucial to future projects (including a multi-researcher project submitted to the Andrew W. Mellon subgrant committee at the U of C), which aims at the visualization of this mass migration of academics through mapping and tracing of routes of migration. In addition, this database

becomes useful in quantifying the demographics of this cohort, not only in terms of conventional population demographics (age, religion, etc.), but in career path and streams of research studied.

In compiling a biographical and academic account of Dr. Walter Igersheimer, I first located and read primary sources on him. Drawing upon these sources, which included his autobiographical memoir of internment, *Blatant Injustice* (2005), immigration documents, letters, university documents, and his obituary by Ian Darragh in *The Globe and Mail* (2012), I was able to construct a basic biographical outline, including his pivotal internment experience. In addition to these sources, I also conducted a search, both online and by inquiring archives at institutions he worked and studied at (e.g. Yale University, Massachusetts General Hospital, the Jewish Hospital of Brooklyn), for records of academic research and research papers authored by Igersheimer. The purpose of this search was to develop a record of Igersheimer's contributions to psychiatry and the biomedical sciences. While many of his published papers were found via online databases (such as PubMed®, WorldCat®, and the U of C Libraries and Cultural Resources), many of the institutional archives I had contacted did not respond. However, the one that did, the Yale University Archives, had provided me with a very helpful personnel file (yet I was also informed that the rest of his files were restricted due to privacy law). Secondary sources were also searched for in WorldCat, U of C Libraries and Cultural Resources, and the Mackie Family Collection for the History of the Neurosciences. Drawing upon these sources, I took summarizing notes on the many aspects of his life that would be important with regards to examining his émigré experience in conjunction with his scientific contributions. This forms the basis of an academic article for the *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences*, a peer-reviewed journal for which my supervisor, Dr. Stahnisch, is an editor-in-chief.

Results

As a result of this archival research, I have been able to compile sufficient primary sources regarding Dr. Igersheimer, the internment experience, and the greater contextual history of the German-speaking émigré academics. By compiling all of these sources together, I now have a cohesive account of Dr. Igersheimer's personal and professional life, both of which are crucial to understanding his experience in internment and forced migration. From this investigation (including personal correspondence with author and editor Ian Darragh, who knew Dr. Igersheimer as a close family friend), I have found in this specific case study a fascinating story and historical account of one of the largely overlooked aspects of World War II, namely the

internment of “enemy aliens” in Canada, along with an example of a contributive émigré academic. The information from this material is used for a manuscript submission to the *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences*, known as a “Neurognostics” article, where the author(s) begin by giving a short description of an individual, followed by varying questions on the identity and work of the aforementioned scientist. This question column is followed up by the answer column later in the journal, which answers the questions previously presented. The manuscript resulting from this historical investigation, tentatively titled, “From Interned Refugee to Neuropathologist to Psychiatrist”, will be sent for review by the editorial board, with the editing help of Dr. Stahnisch. If this article is accepted for publication, then it will be my first published (peer-reviewed) academic article.

What I Learned

From this research experience, I have been able to learn much more about the process of historical research (having previously focused on History in the International Baccalaureate): I had to employ critical thinking skills in evaluating sources, especially primary accounts which could have been coloured by subjective experience. In these cases, I attempted to corroborate authors’ claims with other sources where possible. This process of historiography is not only valuable for academic research of a historical nature, but the skills of critical evaluation and corroboration are useful for a wide variety of settings, such as also in neuroscience classes or fact-checking. In addition, I had learned how to fully utilize the resources of the University’s Libraries and Cultural Resources. The online database and physical collections were invaluable for this kind of research, and with the help of library staff, I had developed more efficient methods of searching for, locating, and organizing library materials for research purposes.

More generally, I had learned that the process of writing the history of science is an interdisciplinary pursuit. Not only do the standard methods of historical research apply, but in investigating scientific developments a background understanding of the underlying theoretical concepts is important to developing a more complete view of the subject matter. In addition, fields such as data science and computer science come into play with more modern methods of historical investigations; the development of the digital émigré database, for instance.

Acknowledgements

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References

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