

The German Physicians Who Had a Pact with the Devil

By Theodore E. Haas



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A founding member of the Frederick Torch Club in 1994, he served as President twice, has written 11 Torch papers, and is at work on the 12th to be given in September. He and his wife, Norine, were honored to receive the Silver Award for service to the Frederick Torch Club at the same time as the Club received Club of the Year Award for Region 3. Both subsequently received the Gold Torch award.

"The German Physicians Who Had a Pact with the Devil" was given on November 28, 2016 at the Frederick Club and on January 3, 2017 at the Westminster, Maryland Club, co-founded a decade ago by Ted and George Du Bois, also a Frederick Club member. He may be reached at tnhaas@comcast.net.

I am a descendant of one of three Haas brothers who arrived in Philadelphia from the Rhineland in 1742. I studied German language and literature in high school and college, and often listened to the counsel of my great-grandmother who spoke to me in Pennsylvania German. Frederick, Maryland, where I reside, was the 18th century home of German immigrants, whose culture helped to shape the early days of this region. This is a heritage I am proud of, naturally. As all historically-informed persons know, it also has a darker side.

I have been to Germany. I visited Buchenwald, the concentration camp where 56,000 human beings became victims of the Nazis. I visited Berlin, stood on the site where books were burned, and took in the Holocaust Museum where the truth is told about this crime on humanity. I also visited the Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, the German Resistance Memorial Center, which tells the truth about the German resistance movement that fought the Nazis.

In the aftermath of the war, along with the justly famous Marshall Plan, our State Department created other constructive programs to nurture a new democracy in Germany. I, along with other American students, was challenged

to build a new friendship with German students our own age. In 1947, while studying at Muhlenberg College with professors of German language and culture, I said "yes" to this peacemaking venture and received a letter from 18-year-old Johannes Hildebrandt that linked us as "brothers" working for a better world. He had pleaded with the American office charged with this venture for such a friendship: "If youth could reign the world, there'd not be any war. Youth are of good will when there's no Goebbels and other men to incite them. It is a blissful work you do." Our pen pal friendship worked, and is working still 70 years later.

We have enjoyed a numbers of visits with Johannes and his wife, Ingeborg, who have three adult children: Friedhelm, a physician/scientist; Ulrike, married to the son of a Wehrmacht senior officer who was one of the conspirators in the July 1944 assassination attempt on Hitler; and Christoph, a pastor like his father.

Friedhelm married a pediatrician, Sabine; both young doctors came to Yale University for two years of graduate education in medical science and practice. Friedhelm became a pioneering researcher, first at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and later at

Harvard. Sabine became for a time a professor of anatomy, a vocation she took seriously, teaching future doctors to respect bodies used in dissection as the human beings they once were—a principle she took all the more seriously given her knowledge of what some German anatomists had done in the war years, and of their silence about their guilt. She undertook serious research into this painful topic, and that research has culminated in an important book, *The Anatomy of Murder: Ethical Transgressions and Anatomical Science During the Third Reich*. Sabine recognized the need for “confession” from anatomists, her professional specialty. She believed that to hide the reality of what happened would be censoring history, as the Nazis did. What follows is the truth she discovered.

The Pathology of Power

90,000 doctors practiced their profession in Nazi Germany, some afraid to lose their jobs or their lives, many taking the opportunity to explore their science on the many political victims made available to them. In 2012, an official group of physicians issued the Nuremberg Declaration, acknowledging the immoral role of German medicine in support of National Socialism.

Hitler’s obsessive anti-Semitism and interest in a “Pure Race” led him to authorize euthanasia, introduce the 1935 Nuremberg laws “for the protection of German blood” (Hildebrandt 45-46), and “cleanse” university faculties of Jewish researchers. The recruitment of Ernst Nauck to the chair of anatomy

in Freiburg was an example of direct government intervention (Hildebrandt 50). He became a spy there for the SS security service.

Prior to 1939, anatomists of scientific and educational excellence were selected for the most prestigious chairs in Berlin and Munich. From 1939 on, research funding went only to projects serving the war effort (Hildebrandt 53- 55). The new Nazi supervision provided an abundance of bodies for dissection. The Reich Ministry of Justice coordinated distribution of the bodies of executed persons (56), and families were often not able to have the bodies of their loved ones returned for burial.

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The Reich Ministry now controlled the anatomists, expecting all their leaders to be Aryan. (70ff). The leading associations of physicians declared their full support for Hitler. Not all leaders were so acquiescent, however. Heinrich von Eggeling was proud of the *Anatomische Gesellschaft* (“Anatomical Society,” founded 1886) and served as its secretary from 1918 until 1949. He was highly respected, diligent, and a

scientist of great knowledge. With diplomatic skill, he was able to fight the “Germanification” of this international society. Yet other German anatomists kept their commitment to National Socialism. Doctor August Hirt, a follower of its racial ideology (Hildebrandt 80), proposed a new program of making a person’s death part of the research design—possibly killing for anatomical purposes. Dr. Hildebrandt concludes her chapter on the history of the International Organization of Anatomy: “The reality confirms once again science’s close association with and dependence upon the governing politics,” refuting those who believe that “politics is of no concern to anatomists” (86).

Four Facts about Anatomical Science During the Third Reich

1. *Among the German professionals in anatomy, there were victims of the strict Nazi policies.* (Hildebrandt 91ff)

527 anatomists’ careers were disrupted by the new policies. Fifty-one individuals’ careers were ruined because they were Jewish, twelve persons were imprisoned, and five died in concentration camps. Twenty-five young, talented anatomists immigrated, most to the United States.

2. *There were many anatomists who compromised their highest professional ethics in order to remain in their careers.* (Hildebrandt 129ff)

Hans Elias, a multi-talented

scientist, assessed what happened thus: “we have lived through hard times under Hitler; however, we were able to receive fresh bodies of healthy persons, as many as we wanted” (111). There are many individual biographies to illustrate the many ways in which Nazi policies affected the lives of German scientists.

Eduard Pernkopf, Dean of the Medical Faculty at the University of Vienna, thanked Hitler for his “hereditary racial biology.” (The Allies sentenced him to prison in 1945.)

John Paul Kremer had direct access to prisoners in Auschwitz, some of them still living when placed on the autopsy table. He was excited to collect samples of their bodies for his scientific knowledge.

August Hirt was the most notorious anatomist (133). He joined a Nationalistic, anti-Semitic political society. In June 1945, he committed suicide.

Another anatomist who took advantage of National Socialist policy was Hermann Stieve (147ff). Stieve reported in 1945 that he used for his research the bodies of 269 women who had been executed during the Nazi era, ages ranging from 18 to 68 (204). Hundreds more had been used for his dissection course; the students were sworn to secrecy (151). He often referred to the bodies of executed persons as “bodies of criminals”; a majority had been convicted of spying. Families of executed persons were not informed of the date of their death, and they could not claim

their loved ones (217). None of the victims had volunteered their bodies for research, but this did not matter to the National Socialist doctors. Yet Stieve’s scientific work was lasting and often quoted by clinicians as late as 1995.

We should also remember that there were “discreet dissenters,” whose dissent, however discreet, was nonetheless dangerous. Charlotte Pommer was one of them (161ff). Born in Berlin in 1914, she studied medicine there as well, and was licensed as a physician in 1941. She began working for anatomist Stieve, who, some colleagues were convinced, had caused the execution of human beings for use in his studies. On the night of December 22, 1942, she entered the dissection room and was confronted with the bodies of three decapitated women and several men who had been hanged. All were members of a resistance group executed for treason. “After that night,” she later wrote, “I resigned from my position.” Her career, subject to the state, completely changed. She was compelled to work in a State Hospital, and eventually realized that the Gestapo were spying on her. She tried to help the prisoners in the hospital, but was frustrated and took part in “resistance” activities. Her life was in danger—imprisonment followed, but the end of the war freed her from prison. She never returned to the academic pursuits for which she was highly qualified. She survived, “but the price Charlotte Pommer had to pay for her upright moral stance was exceedingly high.” Dr. Hildebrandt made Pommer one of her book’s dedicatees.

3. *We should remember the victims and the use of their bodies for scientific purposes.*

“They all had names, faces, hopes and longings [...]” wrote Julius Fuchik (Hildebrandt 185-86). Dr. Hildebrandt believes these anonymous victims need to have their stories told, that we might remember how they lived and hoped for a future they were denied. We need to recognize their humanity and honor their memory, and to name the iniquities committed against them by members of the scientific community. During the war alone, 429 victims were processed in the Tübingen anatomy center. It is estimated that 35,000 to 40,000 bodies were dissected in the Third Reich (189). In Berlin in 1942, six out of ten were Jews.

Now there is a call in Germany to remember these victims and commemorate them in some special way. They must be identified in an online database that includes their life stories. The University of Vienna has created a “memorial book” for victims employed there.

Dr. Hildebrandt concludes her chapter on this topic by sharing her conviction: “keeping the victims’ lives in our midst by remembering them has to be at the center of all efforts—forgetting them would be the victims’ final annihilation” (219).

4. *The sad truth is that good science can coexist with cruelty.* (Hildebrandt 236)

Most of the National Socialist anatomists had no qualms about

using the bodies of the nation's victims. They saw it as their professional duty and a unique opportunity to use this valuable "asset" (238ff). Medical education and research benefitted. Bodies of those executed were preferred for histological studies because the time of death was known. This use became "a gold standard" for the quality of this science (241). By 1942, the doctors began to experiment with the still living, but "future dead." Dr. Hirt performed coercive medical experiments with mustard gas. Eighty-six Jewish prisoners were murdered in a gas chamber, their bodies then transferred to the anatomical department in Strasbourg (242). 250,000 – 300,000 persons were murdered during the war in the euthanasia program and their brains used for research (245). Disabled children, especially twins, also became victims for autopsy research (246).

Dr. Hildebrandt concludes her history of the pathology of power among medical doctors during the Nazi era with the summation: "Anatomists crossed the boundary from work with the dead to work with the 'future dead.' The science of anatomy itself changed through abuses of the human body in life and death for scientific profit" (249). In his famous history of the Third Reich, William Shirer recorded the extensive medical experiments that went on, noting that the victims were not only Jews, but also Russian prisoners of war, Polish concentration camp inmates, and many women. (Shirer 979) Gypsies were selected for experiments at Dachau and Buchenwald.

Anatomy in Post-War Germany

At war's end, Germany was a country in chaos. Many professionals with university positions were dismissed due to their involvement in Nazi activities. There had also been a crippling "brain drain" in the 1930s. And there was an acute lack of bodies for dissection. So, like the rest of the nation, the anatomists wanted to start anew and forget the Third Reich (Hildebrandt 261).

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Dr. Hildebrandt tells about Ingeborg Lotterle, a medical student who began her studies in 1940 (263). Though disturbed by what she saw and experienced in training, Lotterle kept going. At the end of the war, though still a student, she was solely responsible for an entire ward at a neurological hospital in Berlin. Looking back on her life in the National Socialist period, she concluded: "This was a cruel time that nobody who had not experienced can truly understand" (264). Death was everywhere, justice nowhere.

What became of the anatomists

whose deeds were uncovered? Dr. August Hirt's suicide has been mentioned. Dr. Hermann Stieve was investigated, but managed to escape condemnation for the use of the bodies sent to him by the authorities. The local Berlin press portrayed him and his colleagues as "serious men of science" (269), but discussion about the ethics of these anatomists continued. One of the prominent doctors of the war era, Dr. Robert Herrlinger, leader of the Institute for History of Medicine, wrote a book for the medical education of students in 1946 that was used for the subsequent 40 years. At the time, he said he regretted the research he did on the Nazis' victims.

Another history exposed was that of Dr. Eduard Pernkopf, who as Dean of the Faculty in Vienna was responsible for the removal of all Jewish faculty members and their families. During the war, the storage room for bodies waiting for dissection was full of bodies. Among them were 7,000 fetuses and children. One argument made for accepting this grisly fact was, "...good may derive from evil in providing new doctors with the means to perform better operations" (278ff).

Dr. Hildebrandt clearly is concerned about the world in which we live. She ponders this threat: "Can the daily grind of brutality make a person oblivious to the reality of blatant injustice and violence?" (284). The author of *Crime and Punishment*, Fyodor Dostoevsky, provided the answer to that with this insight: "Man grows used to everything, the scoundrel."

Summing Up and Reforming

What does *The Anatomy of Murder* teach us?

First: Anatomy's knowledge guiding us to health and healing is gained by the dissection of human being who have died.

Second: Disrespect or physical abuse of the body is taboo. Dissecting needs to be done with clinical detachment, while also remembering this body was once a human being enjoying life and loved by others.

Third: Nazi philosophy, politics, and war tempted and pressured German anatomists to violate their ethics and cooperate with the Third Reich—some from fear, others from temptations. The result was criminal sometimes, immoral most of the time, and altogether shameful and inhumane. At the Nuremberg Doctors Trial in 1947, psychiatrist Alice Von Platen-Hallermund realized that atrocities are possible when scientists allow the pursuit of science and their professional career to dominate their thoughts and actions instead of focusing on people. (Hildebrandt 307)

Fourth: Dr. Hildebrandt has found anatomy becoming a model for medical education, the first step toward a humane approach in medical education: "The bodies of the dead matter to the living, even those who died many years ago" (325). She has learned enough about human history and human beings to ask us to "stay vigilant" lest we become guilty again of the

suffering and death of victims for our own evil reasons. In teaching her students about dissection, she sets a caring, moral example of dealing with a valued human being who lived and was loved.

The Faustian Question: A Conclusion

Having studied the life and works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in college for a year with a world renowned Goethe scholar, I believe that great German writer points us towards one major lesson to be learned from the trauma and evil of the Third Reich.

Goethe, a scientist and the Shakespeare of his nation, born in Germany in 1749, thought deeply on human nature and used the meditations of a lifetime to create the drama *Faust*, revealing in it his wisdom and understanding of humankind. The character Faust is intelligent, highly educated, yet tempted by the promises of the Devil to enjoy more—the love of women, for one thing. In his struggle with temptations and the contest between right and wrong, he confesses: "Two souls, alas! Dwell in my breast." There are two Faustus in each of us, one listening to God, one listening to Mephistopheles. In the end, Faust causes suffering and suffers himself...but a pure love saves him. The drama's climax comes as Faust is saved by true love and lifted to "heaven" while angels sing: "Who keeps on striving can be redeemed."

My German professor concluded his biography of Goethe and interpretation of *Faust* by

affirming (in German) that this 19th century genius-poet was really thinking about a person's character and the great effort required by each of us to be true to the Good and not to the Evil. We still say of those who compromise with Evil, telling themselves their ultimate object is Good, that they have made a "Faustian bargain." The physicians who thought they could advance scientific knowledge while collaborating with the atrocities of the Third Reich made a pact with the Devil.

WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED

The author is grateful not only for Sabine Hildebrandt's *The Anatomy of Murder*, listed below, but also for personal conversations with her.

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