

Facing the Guilt and Commemorating the Victims: German Radiology and Radiation Oncology During National Socialism

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Abstract

Whereas the scientific community is aware of atrocities committed by medical doctors like Mengele, the specifics of radiology and radiation oncology during National Socialism remain largely unknown. Starting in 2010, the German Radiology Association and the German Association of Radiation Oncology coordinated a national project looking into original archival material. A national committee convened in 2013 to discuss the project's findings, which were also the subject of a symposium at the University of Tuebingen in 2016 on radiology under National Socialism. The project identified approximately 160 radiologists who were victimized because of their Jewish descent, among them Gustav Bucky (known for the Bucky factor in x-ray diagnostics). Radiologists throughout Germany took part in forced sterilizations. The "Schutzstaffel," commonly known as SS, had a special radiology unit that was established for tuberculosis screening. Radiation was also used for sterilization experiments in the Auschwitz concentration camp with subsequent surgical procedures to enable histological analysis of the irradiated tissue. Reflection on medicine during the Holocaust will be strengthened by specific facts related to the respective medical field. Radiologists were involved in atrocious medical experiments as well as in supporting Nazi policies in Germany. These facts provoke ethical considerations about marginalized patient groups and doctor-patient communication. They also raise questions about "evidence-based" medicine as sole justification for medical procedures. In summary, historical studies will be able to help in the professional identity formation of radiologists gaining awareness to ethical issues of today.

Key Words: National Socialism, Holocaust, ethics, radiation

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INTRODUCTION

Medical doctors have been involved in Nazi policies and the Holocaust more than any other German profession. The reasons for that phenomenon have been discussed extensively [1]. Independent of the exact circumstances and reasons, reflecting on vulnerabilities of the medical profession to support and advance Nazi policies will help to identify ethical risks today.

The "Galilee Declaration," discussed and published by the participants of the Second International Scholars Workshop on Medicine after the Holocaust in 2017, acknowledges that "[p]rofessionals from science, medicine and other healthcare and social science fields played decisive roles in justifying, developing and carrying out some of the most appalling atrocities of the Third Reich" [2]. Most medical professionals are culturally aware of Mengele's

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experiments in Auschwitz [3] and some other frequently discussed atrocities like the sulfonamide experiments in Ravensbrueck [4] or the freezing experiments in Dachau [5,6]. However, the specifics of the history of radiology and radiation oncology have only recently come into focus. In 2010 and 2012, the German Radiology Association (Deutsche Roentgengesellschaft [DRG]) and the German Association of Radiation Oncology (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Radioonkologie [DEGRO]), respectively, started to examine their past.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

During a 2-year research project, the medical historian Gabriele Moser, PhD reviewed available original files of the DRG, the registry of German physicians, as well as other available sources concerning the presented topics. The results were discussed among an interdisciplinary nationwide committee of radiologists and radiation oncologists. The data were presented at the annual meetings of DRG and DEGRO in 2014 and published as a series of articles and an online and traveling exhibition [7-11]. On July 29 and 30, 2016, the University of Tuebingen conducted a symposium on Radiology Under National Socialism, during which the topics of exclusion of Jewish members of DRG in 1938, forced sterilization by x-ray under the “Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring,” the history of a radiological unit of the “Schutzstaffel,” commonly known as SS (“SS-Roentgensturbann”) as well as honorary members of the DRG involved in atrocities and Nazi politics were discussed. An additional focus was the experiments conducted in Auschwitz concerning sterilization by irradiation. The present work summarizes the already published articles [8-11] as well as the symposium and relates to ethical implications of the historic findings.

RESULTS

Approximately 160 physicians active in radiology or radiation therapy were persecuted because of their Jewish descent and were no longer mentioned on the members list of the DRG and the registry of German physicians after 1938 [8]. Table 1 summarizes the knowledge about the fate of those physicians according to Moser [8]. After September 1938, Jewish physicians were no longer allowed to treat “Aryan” Germans and only very few were licensed to practice as physicians for Jewish patients (called “Krankenbehandler”). Even before 1938, Jewish physicians were marked in the registry of German physicians to enable immediate identification and

Table 1. Summary of the fate of Jewish physicians (n = 162) working in the field of radiology or radiation therapy as researched by Gabriele Moser [8]

Fate	n	%
Emigration, survived	75	46.3
Death (ghetto, concentration camp, suicide)	20	12.4
Died in Germany	13	8.0
Unknown	54	33.3

marginalization. Some of the persecuted physicians are known for their scientific contribution to the field. However, their biographies are not widely appreciated and people today are not aware of their persecution, for example, Gustav Bucky (known for the Bucky factor in x-ray diagnostics) [12,13] and Leopold Freund (who had performed the first successful radiotherapy procedure) [14,15]. The 2016 symposium focused on Jewish radiologists who immigrated to Great Britain, among them Ignaz Zollschan [16], who had worked against the idea of racism together with Julian Huxley and was involved in laying the groundwork for the UNESCO Declaration on Race [17].

Based on the internationally recognized scientific movement of eugenics and sterilization laws in different European countries and the United States [18], forced sterilization in Germany was implemented in 1933 with the “Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring” (“Gesetz zur Verhuetung erbkranken Nachwuchses” [GzVeN]). Because surgical sterilization in females was associated with a significant death rate, an amendment of 1936 allowed sterilization with x-rays or intravaginal radium for women aged 38 years or older or, in case of danger to life or health, through a surgical procedure and with the consent of the head of the public health department according to the “Fifth Ordinance pertaining to Implementation of the GzVeN” dated February 25, 1936. Approximately 2% of 360,000 forced sterilizations (ie, 7,200 women) were carried out with radiation techniques [10]. The publication of the amendment in 1936 also contained a list of hospitals and physicians entitled to perform the sterilizations. Academic centers and many renowned radiology professors were among these 111 hospitals and 150 physicians. Costs were covered by the State of Germany. Doctoral theses and articles were published on surgical techniques for forced sterilization and patient characteristics at single centers. Thus, financial benefit, legalization of medical procedures, and even scientifically sound, evidence-based methods are not sufficient to prevent medical misconduct.

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