



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Alfred Pischinger (1899–1983): An Austrian career in anatomy continuing through National Socialism to postwar leadership



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## ABSTRACT

Despite intensified research efforts on the history of anatomy during National Socialism (NS), many aspects of this story still need further investigation. This study explores the life, work and politics of Alfred Pischinger, Chairman of the Institute for Embryology and Histology in Graz from 1936 to 1945, and in Vienna from 1958 to 1970, and is an addition to previous reports on careers in anatomy continuing through the Third Reich to the postwar period.

Pischinger was an illegal NSDAP member in Austria, joined the SA in 1938, served as expert in racial hygiene, and as judge on the Genetic Health High Court of Graz. His research focus was histochemistry, but he became part of a scientific network at the University of Graz, which from 1939 on experimented on the bodies of pregnant women and their fetuses under the leadership of gynecologist Karl Ehrhardt. The researchers were among the many who took actively part in the complete exploitation and physical destruction of those considered to be “the enemy” by the NS regime. After the war, Pischinger received publicity for his work on the “scientific basis” of alternative and holistic approaches of medicine. His NS past and fetal experiments seem to have vanished from public knowledge.

As systematic studies of the influence of the NS period on postwar medical education and the science of anatomy itself are still missing, this critical investigation of Alfred Pischinger's life within the relevant historic background aims to contribute to this body of knowledge.

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**Alfred Pischinger**  
\*1899  
Chair: 1936 – 1945

“I know that he has completely distanced himself from this time, and I hope and wish that he, in awareness of his tragically caused guilt, feels remorse about his error. Knowing his character, I believe it impossible that he committed any conscious abuse of his position, or consciously harmed anyone.”

Professor Dr. Walter Schwarzacher on Alfred Pischinger, 28 November 1945 (StLA LG f Strafsachen Graz Vr 7223/46)

## 1. Introduction

Research on the history of anatomy during National Socialism (NS) has advanced considerably in the last two decades, but great parts of this story remain still unexplored. Among the research desiderata are critical biographies of scholars of anatomy, both those whose careers were disrupted by NS policies, and others who worked within the NS system in Germany. This is also true for Austria, where apart from an investigation of the Anatomical Institute at the University of Vienna (Angetter, 1999; Arias, 2004), a 2015 study by medical historian Herwig Czech has allowed some insight into the situation in Innsbruck and Graz (Czech, 2015), and a comprehensive investigation is under way at Innsbruck University (Prof. Dr. Erich Brenner, personal information). While biographies and obituaries for many of the academics involved in anatomical

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science during the Third Reich have been published in the medical professional literature, these accounts generally neglect any mention of political activities and sometimes render collaborators in NS policies completely unrecognizable (Voswinkel, 2004, p. 266). However, the critical investigation of the biographies and scientific work of such anatomists can contribute significant insights into the history of anatomy in the Third Reich (e.g. Hildebrandt, 2016).

The following study explores the life and work of Alfred Pischinger, Chairman of the Institute for Embryology and Histology in Graz from 1936 to 1945, and is an addition to previous reports on careers continuing through the Third Reich to the postwar period (Hildebrandt, 2013). Pischinger became part of a scientific network at the University of Graz, which from 1939 on experimented on the bodies of pregnant women and their fetuses under the leadership of gynecologist Karl Ehrhardt. Some of these women were forced to undergo eugenic abortions and sterilizations (Czarnowski, 2014). For Pischinger, a 1941 study of human fetuses was an exception from his usual research in histochemistry, but he accepted the planned death of the study “subjects” following potential eugenic abortions as part of his experimental research design. From 1958 on Pischinger served as Chairman of Embryology and Histology at the University of Vienna. He achieved publicity among proponents of alternative and holistic approaches of medicine for his work on “the extracellular matrix and ground regulation” (Pischinger and Heine, 2007). Presented here are the personal, scientific and political aspects of Pischinger’s life within the relevant historic background, which show him as a representative of German and Austrian scientists who held leadership positions before, during, and again after the Third Reich.

## 2. Material

The investigation is based in part on original documents from Austrian archives. Among them are death protocols from the *Stadtarchiv Graz* (municipal archive Graz); hospital documents, court and chamber of physicians’ files from the *Steiermärkisches Landesarchiv* (StLA; state archives of Styria); files from the Federal Archives in Berlin (BA R4901–23524; REM Personalakte Band 1 Pischinger; BA R 73-13476) and files from the Medical Department (*Dekanat der medizinischen Fakultät*) of the *Universitätsarchiv Graz* (UAG, university archive). Another relevant archival source is the collection of letters from the estate of Austrian writer Erna Blaas (1895–1990), which is held at the *Oberösterreichisches Literaturarchiv im StifterHaus* in Linz, Austria. Blaas was a lyricist who fervently supported National Socialism, popular not only during the Third Reich but again after a short professional hiatus in postwar Austria (Klaffenböck, 2010; Pertoll, 2014). She was a cousin of Pischinger’s wife Helene.

In addition, obituaries, birthday addresses, and Pischinger’s original publications from 1924 until the time of his death were evaluated. Any other relevant secondary sources are referenced in the text. It should be noted that at Austrian universities, different from many German ones, the morphological sciences were represented by two institutions, an Institute for Anatomy and an Institute for Embryology and Histology. These were administratively separate entities. German passages were translated by author Sabine Hildebrandt. The translations aim to capture as much as possible of the original meaning in German, and may thus sound somewhat unfamiliar.

## 3. Life and professional career

Alfred Pischinger was born on 15 July, 1899 in Urfahr near Linz in Austria, and died in Vienna on 7 July, 1983. After finishing high school he served in a military medical corps during World War I, from 10 March, 1917 to 29 September, 1918. He began his medical

training in Graz in 1918, where he worked with Hans Rabl, Chairman of the Institute of Embryology and Histology. After receiving his medical degree on 30 November, 1923, Pischinger became Rabl’s assistant. He completed his *Habilitation* (senior thesis) in embryology and histology in 1924 and was promoted to the rank of *Privatdozent* (lecturer) in 1927. In 1936 he succeeded Rabl as head of the institute, a position he held until his dismissal by the British Military in 1945 (Scheiblechner, 2002; Schwarzacher, 1984a,b; StLA LG Vr 7223/46; BA R4901–23524). Pischinger’s teaching activities included histology and embryology, as well as lectures on heredity and racial hygiene (Lichtenegger, 2004). His senior assistant was Dora Boerner-Patzelt, who had worked in the institute since 1915. She became the first woman to receive a *Habilitation* at Graz University, but was dismissed following new legislation in 1935 because she was earning a “second income” for her family in addition to her husband’s. She was reemployed in 1939, when most of her male colleagues were drafted for military service. Pischinger and Boerner-Patzelt collaborated in research and shared the teaching duties (BiographiA, 2014; Pischinger and Boerner-Patzelt, 1929). In addition, several medical students and young physicians served in the institute, many of them women (see Table 1). During World War II Pischinger was exempt from front service because of his professional duties. These included assistance for his colleague Anton Hafferl, Chairman of Anatomy at the University of Graz, in the anatomical dissection course, because all male assistants had left for military service (report Hafferl to NSDDB, quoted in Kernbauer, 2001, p. 56).

Pischinger had married piano teacher Helene Wittmann in the mid-1930s and the couple had three children by 1947 (Silli, 2009; StLA LG f Strafsachen Graz Vr 7223/46, Vernehmung des Beschuldigten, 4 February, 1947). Firstborn Klaus died in infancy (UAG Med Fak 1940/41–587). Information from various sources (see Appendix 1 (Supplementary data)) shows that Klaus had been born on 6 October, 1937, suffered from cerebral damage, and died of pneumonia on 21 May, 1940. The boy’s death played a role in an episode reported by one of Pischinger’s students, Fritz Mankowski. According to Mankowski, Pischinger had “prided himself” during a lecture on having killed his own “brain-damaged” child (Arnold, 1985, p. 163). However, there is no evidence that the child was a victim of the NS “euthanasia” program. The parents loved their son, but did discuss his fate in terms of racial hygienic reasoning; it was very important for them to ascertain that Klaus’ disease was not hereditary, but caused by environmental factors, as they hoped to have more and healthy children (OÖLASH estate Erna Blaas: letter H. Pischinger to Blaas 23 April, 1939).

After the war, from 1948 to 1958, Pischinger worked in private practice in an unnamed “small town” and continued to do research as a guest at various anatomical and other institutes (Schwarzacher, 1984a, p. 802). His postal address remained in Graz (Lutz and Pischinger, 1949; Pischinger, 1954b, p. 611). In 1958 he was appointed to the position of Chairman of Histology and Embryology at the University of Vienna, as successor to Viktor Patzelt, brother of Dora Boerner-Patzelt. Pischinger held this position until his retirement in 1969, turning down offers from the universities in Halle and Rostock, both located in the German Democratic Republic (GDR; Schwarzacher, 1984a, p. 802). The GDR had lost most of its anatomists after the war, and the authorities had trouble recruiting new colleagues from outside (Hildebrandt, 2016, p. 140).

Pischinger’s work on the “scientific basis” of alternative healing approaches brought him prominence in his later career, and he was awarded the *Hufeland-Medaille* by the *Zentralverband der Ärzte für Naturheilverfahren*, the association of physicians for complementary medicine (Klee, 2003, p. 463; Ankündigung, 1967). For several years the *Österreichische Gesellschaft für Akupunktur*, the Austrian society for acupuncture, awarded a “Prof. Dr. Alfred Pischinger Award” for outstanding contributions to the field of alternative

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