A collection of brain sections of “euthanasia” victims: The Series H of Julius Hallervorden

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Abstract

Julius Hallervorden, a distinguished German neuropathologist, admitted on several occasions that he had received some five hundred brains of “euthanasia” victims from the Nazi killing centres for the insane. He investigated the brains in the summer of 1942; however, their traces were subsequently lost. The present study shows, that the Series H, which was part of the Hallervorden collection of brain sections in the Max Planck Institute for Brain Research, comprises the brain sections of the above mentioned five hundred euthanasia victims. The provenance of 105 patients could be reconstructed and 84 are for sure euthanasia victims. Most of them were killed in Bernburg or in Sonnenstein-Pirna. Hallervorden used the brain sections of Series H until 1956 for his studies and never publicly regretted this abuse of the brains of euthanasia victims.

Introduction

Julius Hallervorden (1882–1965) was a distinguished German neuropathologist. From 1907 until 1960 he collected postmortem brain sections of patients suffering from neurological or mental diseases. From the study of these sections he hoped to find the brain defects that underlie mental diseases. During World War II he also collected brain sections of patients who were killed during the Nazi “euthanasia” program. His actions cannot be justified on any ethical or moral grounds, yet Hallervorden never admitted that he was morally culpable.

Hallervorden graduated in medicine in Königsberg in 1909 and received further medical training in Berlin. From 1913 to 1929 he was assistant and later senior physician at the mental hospital of Landsberg/Warthe (now Gorzów Wielkopolski, Poland); in addition to his work at the clinic, he ran a small neuropathological laboratory. Supported by a research fellowship, he came to Munich in 1921, joined the German Research Institute for Psychiatry (adopted in 1954 by the Max Planck Society (MPS) as the Max Planck Institute for Psychiatry), and met there his lifelong colleague and friend Hugo Spatz (1888–1969). Together they discovered a rare neurodegenerative disease characterised by increased quantities of iron in the basal ganglia, subsequently termed Hallervorden-Spatz disease. In 1929 Hallervorden took over the central “Prosektur” of the psychiatric hospitals and asylums of the province of Brandenburg; the post was transferred in 1936 to Potsdam. “Prosektur” was the name used for a mostly state-owned pathological institute or laboratory with the task to remove and examine organs—brains amongst them—of the deceased. In 1937 Hugo Spatz succeeded Oskar Vogt as the director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Brain Research (KWIBR) in Berlin-Buch, and Julius Hallervorden became head of the Department of Histopathology. 1

While at the KWIBR, Hallervorden kept his position as head of the “Prosektur,” which he officially transferred to the KWIBR, and in 1938 he established a branch laboratory at the State Research Centre in the Brandenburg-Görden hospital. 2

The ethical violations committed against the mentally ill during the Nazi regime started as early as January 1, 1934, with the enactment of the “law for the prevention of offspring with hereditary diseases.” On the basis of the law, at least 400,000 persons where forcibly sterilised between 1933 and 1945. The killings of the mentally ill and disabled, the so-called “euthanasia” began in 1939, when patients in all state mental hospitals were formally registered. As a result, 260,000 were killed in Germany and in territories under German occupation by the end of World War II, 4 about 70,000 of them in gas chambers located in six specially equipped killing centres (Bernburg, Brandenburg, Grafeneck, Hadamar, Hartheim, and

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3 H. Faulstich, Hungersterben in der Psychiatrie 1914–1949: Mit einer Topographie der NS-Psychiatrie (Freiburg im Breisgau: Lambertus Verlag, 1998), 582.
Sonnenstein-Pirna). At the beginning of 1940 the killing station in the Brandenburg penitentiary was established. With its 2000 beds, the neighbouring state hospital Brandenburg-Görden served as a collection and transit station for the killing of patients who had been “relocated” from other institutions. Julius Hallervorden as chief of “Prosektor” at the hospital in Brandenburg-Görden was responsible for the postmortem brain extraction and examination. There is no doubt that Hallervorden knew that these brains were those of murdered patients. This did not keep him from collecting the brains for research purposes.

In the spring of 1944, Hallervorden’s Department moved to an interim location in Dillenburg (Hesse). After the end of World War II, in summer 1945, Leo Alexander, an US Army medical investigator, visited and interviewed Hallervorden in Dillenburg to find out about Hallervorden’s involvement in the euthanasia program. In the “Alexander Report,” Hallervorden openly admitted that he had received brains of euthanasia victims from the killing centers.

Hugo Spatz joined the interim location in Dillenburg in 1947. Toward the end of 1949 the departments of Spatz and Hallervorden were transferred to the Max Planck Society as Max Planck Institute for Brain Research (MPIBR) and moved to the University of Giessen Physiological Institute. Hallervorden’s research on developmental disorders, malformations and early childhood diseases in the post–World War II period was also based on brain sections he had collected from euthanasia victims and which had been transferred from Berlin-Buch to Giessen.

A long-time co-worker of Hallervorden, Wilhelm Krücke (1911–1988), became Hallervorden’s successor in 1956 and the MPIBR moved into a new state-of-the-art building in Frankfurt-Niederrad in 1962. Although Hallervorden and Spatz retired in 1956 and 1959, respectively, they continued their scientific work at the institute, first in Giessen and from 1962 until their deaths in Frankfurt-Niederrad. Two Max Planck Departments and the Edinger Institute (the Neurological Institute of Frankfurt University Medical School) shared the new building in Frankfurt-Niederrad. Rolf Hassler (1914–1984) was the director of the new Neurobiological/Neuroanatomical Department and Krücke was the director of the Neuropathological Department and head of the Edinger Institute. In addition, the two emeriti, Hallervorden and Spatz, moved into the new building and transferred their collections of brain sections (microscopic preparations mounted on glass slides) which they had accumulated throughout their scientific lives, from Giessen to Frankfurt, where the brain sections were still stored in 1981.

The Status of the Frankfurt Collections of Brain Sections in 1981

The new MPIBR, built in 1962, was specifically adapted for housing collections of brain sections. On the fourth and fifth floors, where the Krücke Department and the Edinger Institute were located, the corridors were flanked by built-in cabinets for the storage of the microscopic slides (Figure 1). A total of seventy-two cabinets were available (Figure 1A). Each cabinet contained 192 drawers (45 × 50 cm wide, 2 cm high), where the slides were stored (Figure 1B).

Hence, on the fourth and fifth floor, 13,440 drawers were available for the storage of slides. Depending on the sizes of the brain sections (Figure 1B), individual drawers contained between ten and fifty slides. The cabinets were numbered, as were the compartments which contained the drawers. File cards were stored in a register, indicating the number of the cabinet, the number of the drawer and the accession number, name and diagnosis of the patient (Figure 2). The slides were ordered according to the diagnosis of the brain defects of the patients and not according to the dates of death or the accession numbers: the drawers 72–74 of cabinet 540 in Figure 2B, for instance, contained brain sections of patients diagnosed with brain tumors, who died between 1926 and 1941.

The following comparative-anatomical and pathologi-anatomical collections of brain slides were still present in 1981 in the Department of Neuropathology of the MPIBR or the Edinger Institute.

1. The Edinger collection (1902–1918)
2. The collection of the Psychiatric Hospital (Prosektur) of the Frankfurt University Medical School (1925–1970)
3. The collection of Hugo Spatz (1923–1944)
4. The collection of Julius Hallervorden (1907–1960)

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