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We believe that the tortured and tormented of this period have a right to have a piece of our historical knowledge tied to their fate. “Knowledge” is not understood here as an archival possession, but as part of a living consciousness of time that includes the present—and also future!—dangers to our humane positions.

ALEXANDER MITSCHERLICH, 1960

It is a legitimate question whether the crisis of the medical profession and medicine under Hitler—the worst excesses of which were revealed in the Nuremberg Doctors’ Trial—had a healing effect on health care in the modern world.

MICHAEL KATER, 2000

Preface

History does not repeat, but it does instruct

TIMOTHY SNYDER¹

Under the title “Lessons from Auschwitz,” medical and psychology students at the University of Witten/Herdecke presented papers and reflections in Witten, Germany, on November 1, 2019, that deal with issues they had encountered during a medical ethics seminar at the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial in the spring of the same year.² The presentation event was extensively prepared and took place on All Saints’ Day. Elections had also been held in the German state of Thuringia shortly before this event. In the end, 23.4 percent of the votes cast had gone to the Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland, AfD*) party.* Election analyses showed that a relative majority of all Thuringians under sixty years old had voted for them in the Thuringia cities of Weimar, Jena, and Buchenwald. Those under sixty (those born after 1959) apparently had no memory of Buchenwald.

Due to scheduling reasons, Aleida Assmann could not give the requested guest lecture on November 1, 2019. In my substitute

* TRANSLATOR’S NOTE: The Alternative for Germany party (*Alternative für Deutschland, AfD*) is a German nationalist and right-wing, populist political party, known for its opposition to the European Union and immigration. It is often characterized as being on the far right on the political spectrum.

presentation—which I hereby present in elaborated form—I tried to make a larger historical arc and spoke about Primo Levi (1919–1987) and Alexander Mitscherlich (1907–1982). I also spoke about the intentions of Gerhard Kienle (1923–1983) in founding the University of Witten/Herdecke, with its exemplary model course of medical studies, which in its own way was, and remains, committed to the “lessons” of the twentieth century.

In Auschwitz, at the site of the former concentration and extermination camp, our seminars—which have been held there since 2009—focus primarily on the role of German physicians in the Nazi regime and the commemoration of individual victims. Primo Levi survived Auschwitz; he would have turned one hundred in the summer of 2019, but ended his life prematurely in 1987. He suffered increasingly after 1945 from the “lessons of Auschwitz” that were not learned, the social repression of what happened, and the omitted consequences of the European “rupture of civilization.” People remembered him in many places in 2019. Levi never saw himself as a “saint,” but the feast of All Saints has been dedicated precisely to a time in history known for the unknown martyrs of humanity. So, it seemed meaningful to us to include Primo Levi on this day.

In 2019, we also commemorated the writing of *Wissenschaft ohne Menschlichkeit. Medizinische und eugenische Irrwege unter Diktatur, Bürokratie und Krieg* [Science without humanity: Medical and eugenic aberrations under dictatorship, bureaucracy, and war], the famous final report of the Nuremberg Doctors’ Trial (Dec. 9, 1946–July 19, 1947) penned by Alexander Mitscherlich and Fred Mielke. The book was published in Heidelberg by Lambert Schneider Publishing House in 1949, seventy years ago.* In Witten, I presented what Mitscherlich was concerned with in this documentation—as well as its 1947 predecessor, *Das Diktat der Menschenverachtung. Der Nürnberger Ärzteprozess und seine Folgen* [The dictate of

* TRANSLATOR’S NOTE: It was later published in English as “The Death Doctors.”

contempt for humanity: The Nuremberg Doctors' Trial and its consequences], and some associated newspaper articles he wrote after 1945 in which he advocated, at that time and later, the self-reflection of physicians and therapeutically active people. Mitscherlich undertook, in his own way, to draw fundamental "lessons from Auschwitz" for medicine, especially for thinking in medicine, thinking about the human being, about the "image" of human health, illness, and therapy, as well as lessons of medical ethics, in view of sociopolitical dangers that he by no means regarded as finished. It is well known that Mitscherlich's work of documentation and reflection, his critical analyses and proposals, met with great resistance in the late 1940s. They were resisted and marginalized by German physicians, medical professional organizations and faculties. Thus, systematic and meticulous historical research and writing about Nazi medicine in Germany could only begin decades later, after the uproar of the 1968 generation and the emergence of a first "culture of remembrance" in the years following Mitscherlich's and Levi's deaths (1982 and 1987, respectively).

In the third part of my presentation, I tried to show how the founding and opening of the University of Witten/Herdecke in 1983—with its innovative model course of medical studies—is related to the medical and anthropological, as well as social, changes that people like Levi and Mitscherlich helped to prepare through their work. Gerhard Kienle, the central founding figure of the university, had his intellectual point of orientation, unlike Mitscherlich, not in the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud or the medical anthropology of Viktor von Weizsäcker—Mitscherlich's clinical teacher—but, as is well known, in the anthroposophical spiritual science of Rudolf Steiner. Kienle, too, was preoccupied with the question of how a new medical training and methods of treatment could be ideally founded and practically implemented after the incursions of the totalitarian twentieth century and its threats to humanity, especially since he found in Steiner's suggestions innovative ideas for a different, human future.³

Finally, at the end of the presentation, a short discussion dealt with social, medical, and medically ethical challenges of the present. The Freiburg medical ethicist, Giovanni Maio, had recently spoken about these concerns at the University of Witten/Herdecke and at the Herdecke Community Hospital, and had achieved a lasting resonance among the students, as well as the staff of the university and the hospital.

One aim of the presentation was to place the contributions of Levi, von Weizsäcker, Mitscherlich, Kienle, and Maio—which were made almost without reference to each other—in a larger, “dialogical” context of reference, or to show an encompassing arc within which their reflections are given voice and weight by selected quotations. The content-related relationships that exist between these works of commitment, despite different starting points and ideological premises, are clear on closer examination and, in my opinion, of lasting value in the struggle for a real human medicine.

Overall, the event on November 1, 2019, should make visible something of the motives and intentions underlying our seminars in Auschwitz-Birkenau and our educational efforts in Witten/Herdecke. And it should become clear what great importance and continuing relevance are still attached to the questions of history raised in the seminars. “In the medium of memory, one sets goals together in the present for the future” (Aleida Assmann).⁴



My personal thanks for the manifold experiences we have been able to gather in Auschwitz-Birkenau for more than ten years go first and foremost to Dr. phil. Krzysztof Antonczyk, the head of the memorial’s digital archive, and his research assistants, including Halina Jastrebska, Małgorzata Hałat, and Ewa Pasterak.

Next, I would like to thank Diethard Tauschel, who made our Auschwitz seminars, and the associated curriculum on medical ethics in Witten/Herdecke,⁵ possible—as well as all the students who, through their concern, interest, questions, and commitment, give

our excursions and discussions their life to this day. At the end of my text, I quote some of their impressive reflections in and after Auschwitz (see pages 217ff).

Peter Selg

Ita Wegman Institute

Arlesheim, March 2020