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Pleading for Cadavers

Medical Students at the University of Vienna and the Study of Anatomy¹

Abstract

This paper offers a close reading of a memorandum submitted by the medical students at the University of Vienna in January 1924. In the document, the students vividly described a crisis caused by insufficient supply of the so called medical cadavers which disturbed the training of future physicians. In order to solve the crisis effectively, the students pled for introducing new procedures that forced transfer of cadavers of all patients who had passed away either in hospitals, other institutions or private houses who had not been claimed by family members.

Remarkably, the 1924 memorandum underscored not only the urgency of the crisis that required an immediate solution but also the non-partisan character of the appeal, signed by the students of the First and Second Institutes of Anatomy “with no difference of party affiliation”. It underplayed the presence of antisemitism at the University of Vienna and the hostility against visibility of Jewish students at the Medical Department. The paper suggests that the memorandum ought to be understood in the context of the so-called cadaver affair at other universities in Central and Eastern Europe.

In January 1924, medical students at the University of Vienna submitted a joint memorandum to the authorities, stressing a desperate situation at the two Institutes of Anatomy, where teaching had come to a halt. Presented as they put it “in the twelfth hour”, the document lamented a “shortage of cadavers for study purposes [that] reached the form of catastrophe”.² In order to solve the crisis effectively, the students pled for introducing procedures modelled after Italy and Saxony. Such measures would regulate the transfer of cadavers of all patients who had passed away either in hospitals, other institutions or private houses that “had not been claimed for the purpose of burial, as long as the circumstances (such as criminal law) do not forbid it”. Accessible cadavers were to be delivered to anatomical institutes not only in university towns with such institutions *in situ* but also to be transported over distances. Therefore, the memorandum sought to lay out plans for delivering cadavers by wagons and trains and organising temporary storage in large hospitals that would preserve corpses before they would be transported in greater number in order to lower the costs of the procedure.

The students envisioned prisons as an additional institutionalised source of medical cadavers. The Viennese memorandum argued that the corpses of all convicts who died in prisons, at least those, who were responsible for the loss of human life, ought to become the property of the two anatomical institutes. While hoping for a long term

1 Research for this article was made possible by the Senior Fellowship at the Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies, Vienna in the spring and summer of 2014.

2 Austrian State Archives (ÖStA) – Unterricht Allgemein 1848–1940, Universität Wien, Sig 4 Med. - Anatomisches Institut Fasz. 809, 4G, Box 1: 1896–1924. The memorandum can also be found in the Arbeiterkammer für Wien and the University Archives in Vienna.

systemic solution to the problem of an insufficient number of corpses for the training of future physicians, the students also suggested a temporary solution that would immediately alleviate their predicament: an administrative decree allowing for the transport of cadavers over long distances during the cold season without preparation, since “a large segment of the students has been prevented from studying already”. To ensure the financial backing necessary for organising the transfer of cadavers to Institutes of Anatomy, the memorandum argued for a close cooperation of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Affairs with local authorities and the hospitals, and offered guidance of representatives of the Institutes of Anatomy.

In accordance with social practices that had long been established in Vienna with regard to the burial of medical cadavers, the students assured the authorities that “nothing stood in the way of a ritual funeral after completing the study”. Thus using the bodies of the deceased in the Institutes of Anatomy did not preclude carrying out religious funerary rituals, only delayed them. The students hoped that “in the name of humanity that these difficulties could be overcome and false piety will not commit any injustice on the living sick”. The student body acknowledged only what the memorandum called “the technical difficulties of such a law”. It hardly expected any wide spread public unease about the transfer of unclaimed corpses.

The tone of urgency manifest in the document raises questions about the causes of the crisis that affected both Viennese Institutes of Anatomy in the early 1920s. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the Medical Department in Vienna enjoyed considerable fame and international prestige thanks to its access to corpses for teaching purposes. As such, it became an important destination for medical students and physicians from abroad. However, at the turn of the nineteenth century, the faculty suffered from the decline in the number of accessible corpses while the number of medical students increased steadily. Why did it face such a drastic decline in the number of accessible cadavers? What was the broader context of the memorandum and the solutions it proposed? A close reading of the memorandum offers us an insight into a professional crisis as well as a social and political conflict at the University of Vienna and beyond. Therefore, the document needs to be read and interpreted in the context of a changing “culture of death”³ as well as in the context of contemporary Austrian politics, and growing rifts along ethnic and religious lines. In other words, provisions of medical cadavers can only be understood as an instrument in political tensions over the shape of the University, Vienna and the Austrian First Republic.

The memorandum recalled the Viennese medical schools’ glorious past in order to underscore the danger to its very existence unless the authorities restored sufficient provisions of medical cadavers. This crisis in both Institutes of Anatomy needs to be understood in the context of the history of the medical school in Vienna long celebrated for its research, instruction and the abundant provision with dissectible corpses.⁴ Vienna had enjoyed more consistent access to living and dead patient bodies in comparison with other major medical and university centres thanks to the permissive attitudes of the Roman Catholic Church and the stipulations of the abso-

3 See Tatjana Buklijas, Cultures of Death and Politics of Corpse Supply, Anatomy in Vienna 1848–1914, in: *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 82 (2008) 3, 570–607.

4 With the General Hospital founded in 1784, medical faculty in Vienna relied on the sick and dead for their research and training. See Erna Lesky, *The Vienna medical school of the 19th century*, Baltimore 1976; Thomas N. Bonner, *Becoming a Physician: Medical Education in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States, 1750–1945*, New York 1995, 191–192; Daniela Claudia Angetter, *Die Wiener Anatomische Schule*, in: *Wiener Klinische Wochenschrift* 111 (1999) 18, 764–774; Tatjana Buklijas, *Public Anatomies in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, in: *Medicine Studies* (2010) 2, 71–92.

lutist state with regard to public health. Moreover, Vienna revelled in a tradition of collaboration between the authorities and the faculty of the Medical Department in gaining access to cadavers, first in Vienna and then attempting to procure cadavers in other cities as well.⁵

But in 1923, because of the shortage of cadavers, the dean was forced to notify the authorities about the necessary suspension in admitting new students and noted that he would be forced to suspend any further studies of those who had already been enrolled. “This means nothing more than the end of the medical faculty of Vienna, whose reputation as a school of the first rank nobody has disputed.” The memorandum pointed to economic consequences of exit from Vienna of “students from abroad who had abundant amount of foreign currency”. The memorandum concluded with the dramatic proclamation: “With this appeal to the government and the legislative authorities, the student body has taken on the last steps that are available to it. In serious and solemn manner, exhorts the fact that, whether Medical Faculty of Vienna will be a thing of the past, is now placed in their hands.”

Remarkably, the 1924 memorandum underscored not only the urgency of the crisis that required an immediate solution but also the non-partisan character of the appeal, signed by the students of the First and Second Institutes of Anatomy “with no difference of party affiliation”. The document claimed that the student body was united by the uniform agenda of gaining access to dissections in pursuit of knowledge and skills necessary for practicing medicine in the future. Indeed, the memorandum mentioned two categories of students currently enrolled in the Department of Medicine – the local and the foreign ones, but only in the context of losing profits generated by the foreign students who would turn to other university centres.

The memorandum contrasted the number of medical students enrolled in the department with the drastically insufficient number of corpses available for dissections. Statistics concerning dissections illustrated the gap between the needs and the sorry state of affairs. In the fall semester of the 1923/1924 academic year, as many as 1.183 medical students had merely 118 cadavers of adults and children at their disposal, including complete corpses of only seven adults and seven children. The Institutes also received 104 corpses that had been dissected. In comparison, 901 cadavers were put at the Institutes’ disposal during the 1921/1922 academic year. While noting the increase of the student body, the text made no mention of their religious affiliation or ethnicity. Given the tensions at the University of Vienna evident among its students in the aftermath of the First World War and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the memorandum’s silence on that subject is odd.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, the ethnic and religious make-up of the students pursuing medical education at the University of Vienna broadened. As Gary B. Cohen observed the combination of Jewish preferences for medical studies and the high concentration of Austria’s Jewish university students in Vienna resulted in Jews accounting for a majority of the medical students in that city during most of the 1880s.⁶ Simultaneously, students at the University of Vienna, including its Medical Department, had become increasingly polarised and divided by their ethnic and

5 Buklijas writes of “an idiosyncratic anatomical culture”. Buklijas, *Cultures of Death and Politics of Corpse Supply*, 570. See also idem, *The Politics of Fin-de-Siècle Anatomy*, in: Mitchell G. Ash/Jan Surman (ed.), *The Nationalization of Scientific Knowledge in the Habsburg Empire, 1848–1918*, New York 2012, 209–237.

6 See Gary B. Cohen, *Education and Middle-Class Society in Imperial Russia 1848–1918*, West Lafayette, Indiana 1996, 166.

religious backgrounds.⁷ Already by the 1880s, membership of student societies was closed to all but Christian ethnic Germans. In 1903, the by-laws of the Association of German Medical Students (Der Akademische Verein Deutscher Mediziner) limited membership to “German students of Aryan stock”.⁸ Barred from the largest student societies, non-German students formed their own national and professional associations. During the First World War, the number of Jewish students at the University of Vienna increased substantially, especially in the Medical Department, where Jewish students in the 1920/1921 academic year constituted over fifty per cent of the student body.⁹ Given that many of these students came to Vienna from Galicia, Bukovina and Russia, their presence was discussed critically and contested by university administration. An informal *numerus clausus* led to decreasing the number and the percentage of foreign Jewish medical students in the early 1920s.¹⁰ During this period, German nationalist students clashed with socialists and Jews, especially in medical school.¹¹

The memorandum spoke not only to the unity of the student body but also about the support of the medical faculty which “has exhausted all measures through the Dean and two heads of the Institutes of Anatomy with the relevant authorities but their efforts have been negative so far”. The memorandum made no reference to the long-standing tradition of tension between two Institutes of Anatomy. Viennese anatomy became increasingly divided both in the field of science and politics since the 1880s, since the appointments of Carl Toldt (1840–1920) to the head of the Second Institute of Anatomy in 1884 and of Emil Zuckerkandl (1849–1910) to the head of the First Institute of Anatomy in 1888. In fin-de-siècle Vienna, these two anatomists practised different anatomical disciplinary orientations, while relying on different social networks linked to political views.¹² As Tatjana Buklijas argued convincingly comparing Toldt and Zuckerkandl’s professional interests and networks “research orientations were seen to correspond to positions in university and national politics. Politics and anatomy came together”.¹³

In 1924, the two leading anatomists at the University of Vienna clashed over professional and political differences. Ferdinand Hochstetter (1861–1952) who headed the Second Anatomic Chair since 1908 and Julius Tandler (1869–1936) who ran the First Anatomic Chair since 1910, endorsed different visions of their profession and of medical training. Their perspective on the field of medicine reflected the broader differences at play in virtually every other field in Vienna in the interwar period.¹⁴ In the early twentieth century, about fifty per cent of Viennese doctors were Jewish.

7 See Michael Gehler, Männer in Lebensbund. Studentenvereine im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der österreichischen Entwicklungen, in: *Zeitgeschichte* (1994) 2, 45–66.

8 Wiener Stadt- und Landesarchiv, M. Abt. 119, A 32 Gelöschte Vereine, 1924.3748/1924-3748/1924, 203/15/47. “Mitglieder des Vereines können nur Deutsche aus arischer Abstammung sein.”

9 See Birgit Nemeč/Klaus Taschwer, Terror gegen Tandler. Kontext und Chronik der antisemitischen Attacken am I. Anatomischen Institut der Universität Wien, 1910 bis 1933, in: Oliver Rathkolb (ed.), *Der lange Schatten des Antisemitismus. Kritische Auseinandersetzungen mit der Geschichte der Universität Wien im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Wien 2013, 152–153.

10 *Ibid.*, 152, 159 and 165.

11 See *ibid.*

12 “In the medical universe of 1880s Vienna, German nationalism became linked to appreciation for German science and the German model of higher education, while support for the official policies of ethnic and cultural autonomy often went hand in hand with the idea of a distinctively Austrian style of medical studies. [...] Negotiating academic appointments and curriculum alterations with these constraints in mind became a complex matter where disciplinary orientation was perceived as intrinsically political”; Buklijas, *The Politics of Fin-de-Siècle Anatomy*, 211.

13 Buklijas, *The Politics of Fin-de-Siècle Anatomy*, 211; see *ibid.*, 212, 226–228.

14 See Lisa Silverman, *Becoming Austrians. Jews and Culture between the World Wars*, Oxford 2012. See also the catalogue Joachim Riedl (ed.), *Wien, Stadt der Juden. Die Welt der Tante Jolesch*. Wien 2004.

They opened private practices and received hospital jobs, but often faced obstacles in their academic careers.¹⁵ Therefore, Tandler's position as an academic perceived as a Jew was precarious.¹⁶ On the other hand, Hochstetter relied on his German cultural identity in forming professional networks primarily with German anatomists. It also shaped his research projects and university politics.¹⁷

The fact that the memorandum made no distinction between cadavers based on their religious provenience may come as a surprise, given that the lack of Jewish cadavers had been raised as a weapon in political struggles both at the university and beyond as early as 1900. At the beginning of the twentieth century Christian Socials protested against the allegedly inferior position of Christians as far as dissections were concerned. That status was used as a tool in antisemitic propaganda:

“Their attack would not have been possible and, indeed, would not have found some acceptance even within the Jewish medical community had it not been for two sociocultural characteristics. One was the long-standing position of dissection as a keystone of medical training and research. The other was the wide currency of the Enlightenment utilitarian idea that state-provided medical treatment should be paid for with one's own (otherwise useless) dead body.”¹⁸

However, the memorandum made no reference to earlier controversies concerning the perceived privileged position of the Jewish dead, and made little effort to dispel concerns about possible popular dissent with regard to provisions of unclaimed cadavers. In particular, a year before the memorandum the Association of German Medical Students drafted its petition to the Faculty of the Medical Department. It expressed its concern about an insufficient supply of cadavers for dissections for the medical students. Moreover, it pointed to the Jewish Community's dispensation from providing their unclaimed dead. As a result Jewish students pursued medical training “at the expense of the Aryan population”. The organisation saw the solution primarily in demanding that Jews be forced to provide cadavers for medical training. In fact, Jewish medical students would only be given access to the studies pertinent to the number of allocated Jewish corpses.¹⁹

The 1924 memorandum submitted to the authorities by the medical students in Vienna constitutes but a fragment of an on-going conversation between medical faculty and students, and various authorises about the appropriate and efficient transfer and use of cadavers. It suggested a consensus among students and medical faculty who all hoped that the authorities would step in to take responsibility for providing material indispensable for the training of future physicians. The students sought the assistance of the state as a neutral arbiter capable of bringing together all interested parties. The memorandum proposed legal measures that would provide the faculty an effective remedy. The issue of the medical cadavers was discussed by

15 See, Buklijas, *The Politics of Fin-de-Siècle Anatomy*, 228-229.

16 See Archiv der Universität Wien, S 776, Karl Sablik, Julius Tandler – Judentum als Schicksal. See also Mitchell G. Ash, *Jüdische Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftler an der Universität Wien von der Monarchie bis nach 1945. Stand der Forschung und offene Fragen*, in: Rathkolb, *Der lange Schatten des Antisemitismus*, 93-122.

17 Buklijas, *The Politics of Fin-de-Siècle Anatomy*, 224.

18 Buklijas, *Cultures of Death*, 605.

19 Österreichisches Staatsarchiv (further ÖStA), Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv (further AVA), Unterricht, Universität Wien, Sig 4 G, Anatomisches Institut, Faszikel 809, k. 846, The document was dated January 19, 1922, however the Dean of the medical school received it on January 22, 1923.

the *Nationalrat*, the Austrian Parliament.²⁰ The document did not lead to new legal solutions and the Institutes of Anatomy continued to struggle with the sufficient supply of cadavers for dissections.²¹ The authority over the human body was phrased in the document as a matter of reason but also humanistic concern. In contrast to the “false piety” medical students did not concern themselves with matters of religious rites but did not oppose them either.

While presenting the crisis in the Institutes of Anatomy as a condition that could easily be solved with rationalist legal measures, the students insisted such measures would harm none and ensured the future of the Medical Department. It played down political and social conflicts among faculty and students, which increasingly shaped daily encounters of medical students in Vienna. The memorandum indicates a degree of consensus with regard to medical educational and research demands. This may be the reason why the document made no mention of social divisions despite the fact that it was the working class that for the most part provided dissectible corpses to anatomical institutions, and made no mention of race. Indeed, despite their numerous differences, Hochstetter and Tandler collaborated in their attempts to lobby the authorities for new measures ensuring sufficient supply of medical cadavers for their students.²² Moreover, in 1924, police reported that medical students of all sections were planning to organise a demonstration in order to ask authorities for help.²³

What conclusions can we draw from the memorandum and the way it presented the crisis in the Institutes of Anatomy? Certainly, it did not mean that the typical divisions disappeared for good; only that students and faculty were willing to suppress them when other more urgent issues came up. While rooted in the local context, this document offers a window into one of the thorny issues in training physicians at eastern and central European universities in the aftermath of the First World War. Medical schools in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania seem to have struggled with the shortages in supplies of cadavers for studying anatomy and detailed implications of such a distress in letters to authorities.²⁴ Still the attitudes towards and practices surrounding the use of human corpses require further research.

20 See the 19th session of the National Council, on February 20 1924; „Antrag 69/A“ of NR Dr. Ernst Hampel (1885–1964) (from the Grossdeutsche Volkspartei), a former director of a secondary school, concerning „Die schwere Gefährdung der anatomischen Institute“. <http://alex.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/alex?aid=spe&datum=0004&size=50&page=779> (1 April 2014). I would like to thank Dr. Herbert Posch for helping me in locating these references.

21 See Ferdinand Hochstetter, *Abdrosselung der Wissenschaft. Mangel an Lehrbehelfen im Anatomischen Institut*, in: *Neue Freie Presse (Morgenblatt)*, 18 May 1927.

22 See the letter signed by both Tandler and Hochstatter to the Ministry of Education, that was processed via the dean of the Medical Department, ÖStA, AVA, Unterricht, Universität Wien, Sig 4 G, Anatomisches Institut, Faszikel 810, k. 847, 4G, dated in October 13, 1927. The document spelled the doom of the Institutes and the medical training in Vienna unless cadavers were brought from provinces and the authorities supported the matter sufficiently.

23 ÖStA, AVA, Unterricht, Universität Wien, Sig 4 G, Anatomisches Institut, Faszikel 809, k. 846, Polizei Direktion in Wien to the Ministry of Education, 10 March 1924, PR Z IV 388.

24 See Natalia Aleksium, *Jewish Students and Christian Corpses in Interwar Poland: Playing with the Language of Blood Libel*, in: *Jewish History* 26 (2012), 327-342; Claudia Ursuțiu, *Senatori și deputați evrei în Parlamentul României (1919–1931). Între reușită și eșec [Jewish Senators and MPs in the Romanian Parliament (1919–1931). Between Success and Failure]*, Cluj-Napoca 2006, 227-266.

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