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Origins of Medical Genetics



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I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg with the aim of continuing research for a book on the history of medical genetics in the U.S., Britain, Scandinavia, and Germany.

In the aftermath of World War II, eugenics became increasingly disreputable, a victim of its identification with racist and reactionary causes. However, many geneticists and financial patrons of eugenics remained convinced that improving the biological quality of the population was a worthy goal. They thus searched for politically-neutral ways to pursue these objectives. From their efforts — which I planned to document — ultimately emerged the field of medical genetics.

Given their field's roots in the eugenics movement, it is not surprising that the first generation of medical geneticists believed that social interests, including the interests of future generations, should take precedence over those of individuals. During the 1960s, however, the ethos of the field shifted dramatically. Concern for the future of the population was replaced by concern for the future of individual families, as defined by the families themselves. I aimed to document and explain this trend, and also to examine some of its consequences. Finally, I planned to explore various technical and philosophical questions that arise in any consideration of the interests of future generations. Can we calculate benefit and harm? If so, how? Should these calculations figure in policy-making? If so, to what degree?

While at the Kolleg, I intended to focus on the history of medical genetics in Germany. In particular, I wished to explore continuities and dis-

continuities between the Nazi and immediate post-war periods. The last decade has witnessed a veritable flood of books and articles, mostly by German scholars, on the long-neglected topic of medicine, and the allied fields of anthropology and genetics, during the Third Reich. I planned first to catch up on this literature. This I have more-or-less accomplished (with the help of the Kolleg's extraordinarily efficient library staff). However, these studies are only tangentially concerned with the re-establishment of medical genetics in the late 1940s and 1950s. Thus, I also intended to explore the scientific literature from the 1945-1960 period, conduct interviews with geneticists active at this time, and pursue archival research.

Given my focus on the post-war period, the papers of Hans Nachtsheim at the Archiv zur Geschichte der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft were of particular interest. As one of the very few respected geneticists who declined to join the NSDAP, Nachtsheim's aid was frequently solicited by those geneticists who hoped to re-establish their careers. His advice was also sought by others, both in and outside Germany, who were uncertain about the political records of applicants for academic and other positions. I knew from discussions with other scholars, especially John Harwood, that Nachtsheim's extensive correspondence would afford a unique glimpse into geneticists' reactions to Nazism, both during and after the war, and to the occupation.

I was therefore disappointed to find that the larger part of the collection had just been closed. A small amount of material, which originally belonged to Nachtsheim's daughter, may be seen with her permission. The permission was denied in my case, however. A much larger collection was given to the archive by Nachtsheim's student, Friedrich Vogel. It had just been closed in accord with a decision to bring the rules of the Max-Planck-Archiv into conformity with those of the Bundesarchiv. Thus a "Sperrfrist" of 30 years from the date of death of the individual (until the year 2009 in Nachtsheim's case) was now in effect. I was informed that no appeals would be considered, notwithstanding the Bundesarchiv's own policy of granting exceptions where a historical interest is served, the fact that other scholars had already made extensive use of the papers, and the donor's stated wish that the papers be open.

I protested this decision with great vigor, but alas no success. The interventions of a number of my Wissenschaftskolleg colleagues — especially those of Reinhart Koselleck and Gunther Stent — were fortunately more effective. In late July, I was informed that I could see these papers. However, this decision represents an exception to a general rule that will apparently remain in force. Thus scholars intending to work at the Max-

Planck-Archiv should not simply assume that they will have access to all relevant material.

To some extent thwarted in my main task, I devoted much more time to what was originally a subsidiary project on the life and scientific career of the geneticist Nikolai V. Timofeeff-Ressovsky. Timofeeff was sent by the Soviet government in 1925 to work at the Institute for Brain Research in Berlin-Buch — where he remained throughout the war. Arrested by the Russians in 1945, he was sent to a labor camp. Two years later, still a prisoner, he was transferred to a secret facility for atomic weapons research.

While ultimately re-establishing a scientific career in the Soviet Union, where he played the central rôle in keeping genetics alive during the Lysenko period, Timofeeff was never officially rehabilitated. In 1987 the Soviet science writer Daniil Granin published a biography that provoked heated controversy both in the Soviet Union and Germany (where it appeared under the title *Der Genetiker*) — with some viewing Timofeeff as an anti-Fascist hero and victim of Stalinism and others as a Nazi collaborator. However, the crucial question of what he was actually doing during the war, especially in connection with racial hygiene and the German atomic project, remains obscure. I have taken advantage of my year in Berlin to work in many archives in an attempt to answer this question. I have also had the good fortune to meet with a number of people both in East and West Germany who knew Timofeeff personally. In August, I travelled to Moscow to talk with participants in the Soviet controversy. The result will be an article about Timofeeff's career and the debate it has engendered.

My research on Timofeeff's war-related work also spurred an interest in the history and especially the historiography of the German atomic project. German scholars generally accept the Werner Heisenberg – C. F. von Weizsäcker account of the intentions of the German physicists (that they were not working to produce a bomb) while other Europeans and Americans tend to be skeptical. My Kolleg colleague Jürgen Renn and I are planning to write an article that explores the reasons for these conflicting interpretations.

During the year, I gave talks at a number of universities including Oxford, the University of Oslo, and Roskilde University in Denmark. These invitations allowed me to pursue archival research on the history of medical genetics in Britain and Scandinavia, and prompted useful discussions with individuals working along similar lines. I also had fruitful contacts with colleagues at the Institut für Geschichte der Medizin of the Freie Universität Berlin.

In addition to these activities, I finished an article on the Rockefeller

Foundation and the development of behavioral genetics, wrote essays on the concepts of "heterosis" and "fitness" for a projected volume on *Keywords in Evolutionary Biology*, and worked through the philosophical literature on the interests of future generations. The advice of my colleague Annette Baier was especially helpful in respect to the last. Under her guidance, I also learned a great deal about the life and work of David Hume.