

## Letter to the Editor

### Commentary on “First Hand Accounts of Events in the Laboratory of Prof. Eduard Pernkopf” by S.H. Aharinejad and S.W. Carmichael

To the Editor, *Clinical Anatomy*:

In their article, “First hand accounts of events in the laboratory of Prof. Eduard Pernkopf,” S.H. Aharinejad and S.W. Carmichael present interviews with anatomists who had worked directly or indirectly with Eduard Pernkopf before, during, and after the National Socialist (NS) time period in Austria. These interviews provide rare insights into the mindset of anatomists of this generation, as anatomists, like other professionals, were reluctant to comment publicly on the events in their profession during the NS regime (Hildebrandt, 2012a).

The value of these interviews lies less in providing confirmation “that the bodies of executed people, including Jews, were used in the production of the Atlas [...]” (Introduction), as these facts have been thoroughly documented and published in the Vienna Senate Project of the 1990s (Malina, 1997; Muehlberger, 1998; Malina and Spann, 1999; Angetter, 1999, 2000). This study revealed that at least 1,377 bodies of executed persons (guillotined at the Vienna assize court or shot by the Gestapo at a rifle range), including eight of so-called “Jewish origin,” had been delivered to the Vienna anatomical institute.

Rather, the interviews show the participants’ perceptions and recollections of things that happened a long time ago. As such, their memories do not necessarily reflect the facts of what actually happened during that time. The anatomists also had opportunities to learn more about these events since then. All three of them, Krause, Gisel, and Platzer, had been interviewed before by Daniela Angetter for the Senate Project and been asked similar questions. While these interviews had not been published, they are still available in the archives of the Vienna Institute für Zeitgeschichte. At least Gisel had learned from the Vienna project that the bodies of executed persons of so-called “Jewish descent” had been used in Vienna (see his interview here). However, it is unclear whether Gisel differentiated between bodies of the executed delivered from official sites of execution following legal court proceedings and bodies of persons killed in the various camps surrounding Vienna. He spoke of “homosexuals and gypsies among the executed,” groups that certainly

were persecuted by the NS regime and imprisoned in the camp system, but there is no published evidence that they were among the legally executed in Vienna. There is also no indication that bodies from concentration camps were transported to the Vienna anatomy (Malina and Spann, 1999; Angetter, 2000). Krause assumed that bodies of executed “Jews” had been used, but he did not actually work at the institute during NS times, as he had been imprisoned for so-called “racial defilement” and later had to serve as a soldier in a punishment battalion (Hildebrandt, 2012a). So he had no first hand knowledge of events at the anatomical institute from 1938 to 1945. Platzer denied the possibility that Pernkopf used bodies of persons of “Jewish descent,” claiming that this “would be against Hitler’s rules” and that “if he had done so, he would have been sent to a concentration camp.” There is no historical evidence for such an order by Hitler, and while the anatomical use of bodies of so-called “Jews” executed following court trials was rare (Hildebrandt, 2009), it is known that Hermann Stieve did use the bodies of women of the “Baum-Gruppe,” a Jewish resistance group (Zimmermann, 2007). On the other hand, Platzer was correct when he contradicted the interviewer’s assumption that Hitler had placed a special order for the delivery of executed “Jews” to anatomical departments by pointing to the much older traditional legislation concerning the disposal of bodies of the executed (see e.g., for Austria: Buklijas, 2008; for Germany: Noack and Heyll, 2006).

The true value of these interviews lies in the fact that they reveal reflections of contemporary anatomists’ attitude toward governmental authority and

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body procurement in the Third Reich. None of the three anatomists questioned the legality of the distribution of bodies following laws revised by the NS-regime or the legality of the death verdicts. None of them wanted to know where the bodies came from. When asked by the interviewer whether use of bodies of the executed bothered him, Krause answered frankly: "Nobody cared, and why should we care?" and later, "The bodies of executed people, also Jewish people, were delivered to the Institute of Anatomy in Vienna and they were used. So what? I am sure Jewish people were among these bodies, but who should know exactly and how can we estimate numbers?" Confronted with the same question, Platzer answered "Nobody cared," even if he noticed that decapitated bodies were still used after the war (in itself a noteworthy piece of evidence).

Up to now, historians could only speculate about some of the motivations and attitudes that led anatomists during the Third Reich to behave the way they did, or infer them indirectly from contemporary publications (Hildebrandt, 2012c). With these interviews and recently newly revealed documents (Hildebrandt, 2012b), we are confronted with the truth that many anatomists simply did not "care" where the bodies came from. In a world where national and international guidelines for ethical body procurement and treatment for anatomy have only begun to be developed (Bundesärztekammer, 2003; Jones and Whitaker, 2012), the historical example of anatomists in the Third Reich reminds us to "care." To "care" about the provenance of each body and indeed each piece of tissue we work with everyday.

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