The Disenfranchisement of Jewish Physicians in Hamburg during National Socialism

SOURCE DESCRIPTION

Shortly after the National Socialist takeover, the Association of Statutory Health Insurance Physicians [1] and the medical association began compiling lists of those physicians considered “Jewish” or “non-Aryan.” These lists were not public, but were shared with welfare offices, hospitals, and other health care institutions. This undated list was probably printed in 1935 by the Hamburg Association of Statutory Health Insurance Physicians [2]. It lists 150 physicians in Hamburg, Wandsbek, and Altona who were considered “Jewish” according to National Socialist terminology. The medical practices listed are located all over Hamburg, with a concentration in the Jewish quarters Grindel and Harvestehude and also in some streets where medical practices were clustered. For example, a particularly large number of practices was located in the Colonnaden in the city center. These lists represent valuable sources as they not only document the significant share of Jewish physicians in Hamburg’s public health system, but also the medical profession’s unhesitant and early collaboration in their exclusion.

The long Jewish medical tradition in Hamburg

Lists separating the medical profession into “Jews” or “non-Aryans” and “Aryans” would have been unthinkable just three years before this document was written. In the Weimar Republic, Jewish physicians lived and worked alongside their non-Jewish colleagues as registered practitioners, in Hamburg hospitals, and at the university medical faculty. Differences in religious denomination did not matter in the everyday life of the medical profession. Formerly denominational hospitals had become public institutions where both Christian and Jewish patients sought treatment.

By the time the National Socialist regime rose to power, about a quarter of all physicians in Hamburg were Jewish. The list names 150 physicians considered Jews according to National Socialist terminology, which was about 10 percent of Hamburg’s medical profession. It does not list those physicians discriminated against and being deprived of their professional rights due to being considered “half-Jewish” or “a quarter Jewish.” The names of those physicians who emigrated during the initial years of National Socialist rule are missing as well. After universities were opened to Jews in the course of the 18th century, a growing number of Jews had decided to study medicine. While there had already been a long tradition of Jewish medical scholars in Europe, Jews played an increasingly important role in 19th century medicine as the field eventually developed into a profession. The strong presence and expertise of Jews in the medical profession cannot be reduced to a simple formula in order to explain the great number and superior success of Jewish physicians from Antiquity until the Modern Age. One reason for the traditionally strong link between Judaism and the medical profession is to be found in the religious foundations of Judaism. From
the Middle Ages until the Early Modern Age, Jewish physicians were often also rabbis, particularly since the performing of certain religious rites such as circumcision required medical knowledge. The fact that the same person often served as both physician and religious scholar and its implicit link between religion and healing is one of the reasons why physicians and other healing professions enjoyed a high status within Judaism and why the art of healing was considered particularly commendable. Judaism’s traditionally high regard for physicians can be traced back to the many references to the art of healing contained in the Talmud and the Torah. In the Modern Age, one main reason for the especially strong link between Jews and medicine consisted in the opportunity of social integration through the medical profession. With the emancipation movement of the 19th century grew the desire to find a place within the German bourgeoisie. Many traditional bourgeois professions such as the civil service, for example, were not open to Jews. As one of the “free professions,” becoming a physician offered a relatively reliable option for improving one’s social position. At the same time, medicine as a science provided Jews undergoing a process of cultural and religious reorientation with a way to transform religiosity and moral integrity into a new, secularized form of self-conception. Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, had strengthened interest in the natural sciences. Education became an essential part of Jewish identity. The female Jewish physicians on the list belonged among the first and second generation of female physicians in Germany. It was only at the turn of the century that universities began to allow women. Among women who became physicians, there was a higher-than-average number of Jewish women who thus were among the first university educated women. Physiologist Rahel Liebeschütz-Plaut was the first woman to habilitate at Hamburg University’s medical faculty in 1923.

**Disenfranchisement and marginalization**

Once National Socialist rule began in Germany, Jewish physicians were swiftly deprived of their rights. The responsibility medical associations bore for the disenfranchisement of persecuted physicians should not be underestimated since they were in charge of registration and administration. Both the medical associations and the Association of Statutory Health Insurance Physicians [3] adopted racist categorizations such as “non-Aryan” and “Aryan” or “Jewish” and “non-Jewish” in their registers, as becomes evident in the title of this source. In the internal files of these organizations, a Star of David was stamped onto the files of “Jewish physicians.” The disenfranchisement of Jewish physicians after 1933 can be separated into several phases: during the consolidation phase of the National Socialist regime in 1933 / 34, panel doctors [Kassenärzte] and physicians in the civil service who were stigmatized as “non-Aryan” were swiftly excluded from those occupations. The University of Hamburg’s medical school ordered 16 among their teaching staff into retirement due to their “Jewish descent.” This list includes scientists Walter Griesbach, Viktor Kafka, Hermann Josephy, and Walter Kirschbaum, all of them long-standing and merited faculty members. Many of those who had been dismissed worked as registered practitioners for a while, but most of them eventually left Germany. In this early phase, it was especially the younger and less wealthy among the physicians who were particularly affected, thus they emigrated early on. Due to exceptions from the revocation of national health insurance registration, which especially applied to the First World War veterans, the large majority of physicians were initially able to continue practicing and retain their registration. The second phase of marginalization unfolded gradually until 1938 instead of abruptly, as was the case in other professions. The “Nuremberg Laws” passed in 1935 represented another watershed moment. The circumstances of life and work worsened for Jews not only because they were now subjected to racist special legislation, but also
because the NSDAP increasingly sought to separate “Aryan” patients from “non-Aryan” physicians and thus push Jewish physicians out of the market. The compilation and circulation of this “list of Jewish physicians” belongs in this context. Despite increasingly difficult and humiliating conditions, the majority of persecuted physicians were able to continue practicing until the fall of 1938. That year, a new phase of persecution set in; the threat now became existential. Within a year, nearly all Jewish physicians were banned from the profession and excluded from practicing medicine anywhere in Germany. This ultimate “elimination” of persecuted physicians completed their expulsion from the medical profession. It was followed by rapidly escalating violent persecution and expulsion from the country. A large number of male “non-Aryan” physicians were deported to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp during the November Pogrom. During the weeks they spent in “protective custody,” the majority of victims realized that they no longer had a future in Germany. One of the names on the list is that of pediatrician Julius Bauer, who was imprisoned and severely abused in Sachsenhausen until December 1938. After he was released, he first fled to the Netherlands and later to Great Britain. The traumatic events of that fall triggered a wave of emigration during which most of the persecuted physicians left Hamburg for good. The National Socialist leadership permitted a small number of physicians to stay since Jews were no longer allowed to be treated by non-Jewish physicians. They were no longer allowed to call themselves physicians though, but had to use the discrediting title “Krankenbehandler” [practitioners for the sick].

Torn and destroyed biographies

The names and biographies of the physicians listed here reflect the history of Jewish medicine and its destruction after 1933. The very first physician on this list, Julius Adam, founder of Hamburg’s Association of National Health Insurance Physicians[4], personified the generation of Jewish physicians who had established and shaped the city’s medical institutions with their exceptional commitment. Born in the Prussian town of Lissa (today’s Leszno), Adam had opened his practice at Wilhelminenstraße 56 (today’s Hein-Hoyer-Straße) in the neighborhood of St. Pauli in 1888. He became one of the founding members of Hamburg’s Medical association in 1895. He later made it his mission to improve the way physicians were organized within the emerging system of national public health insurance. In 1919, he initiated the founding of the Association of National Health Insurance Physicians of Greater Hamburg [5] and remained on its board until 1925. Having closed his practice in 1935, he tried to emigrate from Germany to the United States. He was arrested following a denunciation and jailed at the Fuhlsbüttel concentration camp for a year. Now 80 years old, he was deported to Theresienstadt in July of 1942, where he perished on October 28, 1942. The hospital Israelitisches Krankenhaus is listed as the address for several physicians on this list, including Ilse Friedheim, Gerhard Gabriel, Ernst-Oskar Friedländer, and Helmut Nathan. This hospital was one of the most important Jewish medical facilities in Germany. It had risen to this status during the time of the Jewish minority’s successful bourgeois assimilation. At the end of the 19th century, it was transformed into a foundation under private law open to patients of all denominations. The hospital was located on Eckernförderstraße, today’s Simon-von-Utrecht-Straße, in the center of the working class, dockland neighborhood of St. Pauli. A number of Jewish physicians worked at the Israeliite hospital after having lost their employment or national health insurance registration in 1933. Thus Arthur Israel, professor of surgery, briefly came to work at Hamburg’s Israeliite hospital after having been relegated from his position at the University of Berlin. For doctors, the hospital became a last remaining opportunity for working in their profession, and for the ever-shrinking Jewish community, it was a last refuge providing medical treatment to
them. In October 1941, deportations from Hamburg to the death camps and ghettos began. The physicians remaining at the hospital had to determine the fitness for transport of those whose names were on the deportation lists. Those physicians who had been unable to save their own lives by emigrating were eventually deported to the ghettos and death camps as well. Of the 38 male and six female physicians deported from Hamburg, only four survived. A few physicians were spared deportation thanks to their non-Jewish spouses or were able to continue practicing as “mixed-bloods” [Mischlinge] until the end of the war. A long and prolific tradition of Jewish physicians in Hamburg had been extinguished for the time being.

Select Bibliography


Notes

[1] Kassenärztliche Vereinigung
[2] Kassenärztliche Vereinigung
[3] Kassenärztliche Vereinigung Deutschlands (KVD)

About the Author

Anna Villiez-Kupisch, Dr. phil., born 1974, is director of the Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Israelitische Töchterschule in Hamburg. Among her research interests are: the history of medicine in colonial times and nazism, history of science, provenance research and the history of the development of anatomic, ethnological and anthropological collections.

Recommended Citation and License Statement


This text is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Non commercial - No Derivatives 4.0 International License. As long as the work is unedited and you give appropriate credit according to the Recommended Citation, you may reuse and redistribute the material in any medium or format for non-commercial purposes.