

Media Review

Bilingual Exhibition *Auf Messers Schneide. Der Chirurg Ferdinand Sauerbruch zwischen Medizin und Mythos* [On a Knife-edge. Surgeon Ferdinand Sauerbruch between Medicine and Myth] (22.3.2019–2.2.2020) + accompanying programme + same titled exhibition catalogue (German), Berlin, Medizinhistorisches Museum der Charité, Germany

This chronological presentation, which was partly occasioned by and in turn informed the TV series *Charité*, charts the meteoric rise and fall of (Ernst) Ferdinand Sauerbruch (1875–1951). He was a mediagenic German surgeon of international repute (inventor of the negative pressure (Sauerbruch) chamber for thoracic surgery, the moveable prosthetic arm and the catalyst behind improved operating room procedures) who became involved in a number of scandals over the course of his illustrious career. The wide ranging set up here also includes his *deconfiture*, which was due to cerebral-sclerosis and resulted in his forced retirement after allegedly having caused iatrogenic injuries. This nevertheless did not prevent Sauerbruch from continuing on in a problematic private medical practice, if we are to believe the controversial biography by historian Jürgen Thorwald.¹

Earlier phases in his life have been the subject of considerable research to date and continue to be so, as evidenced by the ongoing projects of Professor Jens Neudecker and doctors Jens-Carsten Rückert, Judith Hahn and Udo Schagen (Berlin), all of which have been included in the accompanying programme to this exhibition. Sauerbruch is said to have shaped an entire generation, both at home and abroad: professors Alfred Brunner (Zurich), Willi Felix (Berlin successor), Emil Karl Frey (Munich), Hermann Krauß (Freiburg) and Rudolf Nissen (Basel), and possibly even trained some female students, it would seem, although none of these individuals are included in the current exhibition or have been extensively researched (Franziska Boldt, Else Knake, Johanna Hellmann and others).²

Despite being nominated for the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine on no less than sixty-five occasions (1912–51), Sauerbruch was never to be its recipient as his research was evaluated as not Nobel Prize-worthy by the committee on the grounds of an apparent ‘lack of originality’.³ This grandson of a shoemaker and natural born orator went on to produce a call to the world for *Gleichberechtigung* of German science in 1933 and received and accepted Adolf Hitler’s German Art and Science Prize in 1937 at a time when German scholars were forbidden to accept the Nobel Prize.⁴

Sauerbruch occupied professorships in Prussia and Berlin respectively, fulfilled the position of Secret Councilor (1918) in the state of Bavaria and served as a battlefield

¹ J. Bleker and V. Hess (eds), *Die Charité: Geschichte(n) eines Krankenhauses* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2016), 200–3; Jürgen Thorwald, *Die Entlassung: das Ende des Chirurgen Ferdinand Sauerbruch (Vol. 11)* (München: Droemer, 1960).

² Webpages Ärztinnen im Kaiserreich, <https://geschichte.charite.de/aeik/liste.php> [Accessed 11 July 2019].

³ Nils Hansson and Udo Schagen, ‘The Limit of a Strong Lobby: Why Did August Bier and Ferdinand Sauerbruch Never Receive the Nobel Prize?’, *International Journal of Surgery*, 12, 9 (2014), 998–1002.

⁴ E. Ferdinand Sauerbruch, ‘An die Ärzteschaft der Welt’, *Journal of Molecular Medicine*, 12, 39 (1933), 1551; Robert N. Proctor, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine Under the Nazis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

surgeon in World War One.⁵ He rose to the position of surgeon general and *Staatsrat*, obtained the Knight's Cross and acted as a *Forschungsgutachter* [scientific research assessor] for military medicine in the Third Reich.⁶ However, he was also one of the few university professors who publicly spoke out against the NS-‘Euthanasia’ programme T4, was involved in the so-called *Mittwochsgesellschaft*, is said to have helped one Jewish former student (Rudolf Nissen) and one colleague (Hermann Zondek) to escape and re-establish themselves abroad and maintained a personal friendship with Jewish painter Max Liebermann.⁷

It is precisely this alleged ‘ambivalence’ made flesh that the museum curators, Professor Thomas Schnalke and Dr Hahn, set out to illuminate within the context of medical ethics on both a professional and a personal level, centring on the concepts of the ideal doctor in history and the popular imagination. The exhibition thus duly states most of the known facts about his life in vignettes, such as his empty office replete with coat, desk, glasses, the 1922 portrait (Hermann Otto Hoyer) or an audio snippet from his denazification trial (1949), but does not infer clear motives or present his self-defence – which would appear to have run along the lines of most doctors caught in these circumstances – in a readable format or even on an accompanying webpage or in the catalogue in full.⁸

Perhaps more attention should also have been paid to Sauerbruch’s active and passive participation in the unique process of mythmaking surrounding his person(a) – which entailed the production of no less than three medical films, a ghostwritten autobiography, photographic reportages in magazines, regular appearances in newsreels, public lectures and artistic representations during his lifetime and posthumous memorialisation practices such as stamps, a Sauerbruch medal, his memoirs made into a successful film and so on – beyond mere showing and not (always) telling. Possibly the apparently complex posthumous (legal) battles over his lasting memory should have been included as well in order to better paint the ebb and flow of the case presented within the context of the interactive project GeDenkOrt. Charité – Wissenschaft in Verantwortung [Place of Memory Charité – Science and Social Responsibility] aimed at the education of medical staff (https://gedenkort.charite.de/en/about_the_charite_memorial_site/).

Finally, it would have been interesting to have learned what possible mechanisms may have served to protect his personal interests, apparently shaped his denazification trajectory and/or prevented governing bodies from interfering once the iconic doctor, on which the jury is still out, allegedly lost the ability to wield the knife.⁹

⁵ Sanja M. Cheria, Rowan Nicks and Reginald S.A. Lord, ‘Ernst Ferdinand Sauerbruch: Rise and Fall of the Pioneer of Thoracic Surgery’, *World Journal of Surgery*, 25, 8 (2001), 1012–20.

⁶ W.U. Eckart, ‘Ferdinand Sauerbruch (1875–1951) und die Charité’, in S. Schleiermacher and U. Schagen (eds), *Die Charité im Dritten Reich. Zur Dienstbarkeit medizinischer Wissenschaft im Nationalsozialismus* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2008), 189–206; A. Mitscherlich and F. Mielke (eds), *Medizin ohne Menschlichkeit: Dokumente des Nürnberger Ärzteprozesses (Vol. 332)* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Bücherei, 1962); Paul Weindling, *Nazi Medicine and the Nuremberg Trials: From Medical Warcrimes to Informed Consent* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 304 and footnote 43.

⁷ Marc Dewey, Udo Schagen, Wolfgang Eckart and Eva Schönenberger, ‘Ernst Ferdinand Sauerbruch and his Ambiguous Role in the Period of National Socialism’, *Surgical Retrospective in Annals of Surgery*, 224, 2 (August 2006); Christian Hardingham, *Ferdinand Sauerbruch und die Charité: Operationen gegen Hitler* (München: Europa Verlag, 2019).

⁸ Weindling, *op. cit.* (note 6), 304 and footnote 43.

⁹ *Ibid.*; Böhm, B. and Haase, N., *Täterschaft, Strafverfolgung, Schuldentlastung: Ärztebiografien zwischen nationalsozialistischer Gewaltherrschaft und deutscher Nachkriegsgeschichte* (Leipzig: Leipziger Univ.-Verl., 2007); Bleker and Hess, *op. cit.* (note 1), 200–3.

The intricacies of myth (un)making in relation to medical ethics are thus never fully explored or made understandable to the average visitor who cannot read between the lines, does not attend the accompanying programme and/or lacks prior knowledge of the dance on the knife-edge that is medicine. The absence of a proper bibliography in the slim catalogue only serves to amplify this rather unfortunate issue. In doing so, the Charité indeed leaves the visitor with something to ponder and perhaps unwillingly also renders insights into the politics of memory and the enduring power of the myth of the good doctor.

May this innovative exhibition, within walking distance of the Sauerbruch street, auditorium, former operating room and bunker on the hospital grounds be successful in occasioning continuous reflection on medical ethics in general and engendering additional research into victims, perpetrators, bystanders and helpers enmeshed in National Socialist medicine in particular.

Exhibition leaflet: https://www.charite.de/fileadmin/user_upload/microsites/ohne_AZ/sonstige/gedenkort/ausstellung-sauerbruch-2019/Folder-Sauerbruch-Ausstellung-2019.pdf (German/English).

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