

Letter to the Editor

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Dear Editor,

We strongly object to the article by Zeidman et al,¹ which criticizes Hans Berger, the father of electroencephalography, for his alleged “Ties to the Third Reich.” The authors accuse Professor Berger of collaborating with the Nazis and participating in decisions of forced sterilization.

Herbert Jasper, the father of American electroencephalography wrote, “in 1935 . . . I first visited the laboratories of Professor Hans Berger in Jena. This was an unforgettable experience, to be always cherished in the years to come, for I was profoundly impressed by this inspired and inspiring, humble, honest, friendly, distinguished and courageous man. . . . Hitler was just appearing over the horizon in these days, and the fearful dangers of the Nazis was among the many subjects discussed in the intimacy of their beautiful home. . . . We met again in Paris . . . to renew what had become a close personal friendship. Hitler’s war then came between us, and what we had feared together in Jena came to pass. But Hans Berger and his good and faithful wife remained true to the high ideals they had stood for all their life, being heartbroken by what was happening to their country. His resistance to the Nazis cost him his life, but won him the deep admiration and respect of all, as a great human being who cared more for his ideals than for his life. How fortunate to have such a man as the founder of electroencephalography.”² The testimony of an esteemed scholar who knew Hans Berger personally should not be ignored. Berger, removed from his directorship by the Nazis and isolated in Jena during World War II, never knew that he was nominated for the Nobel Prize in medicine six times. There are many psychiatrists and scientists of that period that can be criticized for their professional behavior, such as Karl Brandt, Ernst Rüdin, Hugo Spatz, and others, but the bulk of the evidence and testimony of personal friends does not support such a judgment of Hans Berger.

It is easy to criticize someone’s behavior from nearly a century later, when the balance between personal and group values has evolved, not taking into consideration the accepted thinking of the time or the overwhelming pressures of war. The early 20th century was the heyday of the eugenics movement. In America, nearly half of the states had passed compulsory sterilization laws and forbidden marriage between allegedly degenerate people. One instance of this was *Buck v Bell*,³ which was upheld by the supreme court of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. and others. Berger lived in a culture largely influenced by the ideas of Hegel’s duty

to the state, *Sittlichkeit*, Nietzsche’s amoral *Übermensch*, and Heidegger’s self-fulfilling *Entschlossenheit*. Well-meaning people thought that they were protecting the community from assimilating “degenerate stock,” not too unlike the voluntary genetic screening procedures of today.

One can only wonder what compromises must have to have been made to protect one’s family and patients from the violent thuggery of a tyrannical regime. As the director of a prestigious psychiatric clinic, losing one’s position of influence by overt objection and dissidence may not have been the most effective way to subvert the misguided policy of malevolent powers. It may be that he used his position to save his patients, as Frankfurt psychiatrist, Karl Kleist, quietly did. Perhaps the next generation will criticize us for our complacency to the issues of our time, such as the excessive influence of capitalism in the medical-industrial complex, the explosive growth of for-profit hospitals directed by non-medical administrators, defensive medicine, and the use of psychological science in torture, to name a few.

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3. *Buck v Bell*, 274 US 200 at 207 (1927), 292.

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