

The New York Times**Science****Doctors Question Use Of Nazi's Medical Atlas**

By NICHOLAS WADE
Published: November 26, 1996

A CLASSIC anatomy atlas, famed for the beauty and fine detail of its paintings, has come under attack because of some none too metaphorical skeletons in its past. A letter appearing in tomorrow's issue of *The Journal of the American Medical Association* says that the author of the atlas was a leading Nazi who purged the University of Vienna medical faculty of Jews and that the cadavers portrayed in the paintings "may have been victims of political terror."

The book is known as the "Pernkopf Anatomy," and it is still in use among specialists. Although there have long been rumors of its dubious origins, the evidence now emerging seems not to be widely known to anatomists, despite their general admiration for the book.

An effort to publicize the background of the atlas is being led by Dr. Howard A. Israel, an oral surgeon at Columbia University, and Dr. William E. Seidelman, director of an AIDS unit at the University of Toronto, who wrote the letter to the journal. They want the University of Vienna to inquire into the identity of the cadavers portrayed in the atlas and for the publisher to include in the next edition a historical account of the atlas so readers can then decide whether it is ethical to make use of the material.

Edward B. Hutton, president of Waverly Inc., the American publisher of the atlas, agreed that the University of Vienna should undertake an inquiry into the identity of the cadavers shown in the paintings, and said his company would contribute to its cost. If the cadavers depicted should be found to be from concentration camps, the victims would be commemorated in future editions of the book, Mr. Hutton said.

"But there isn't one shred of evidence to date that the cadavers used in this atlas came from concentration camp victims, and in fact there is circumstantial evidence to the contrary," Mr. Hutton said. Without such a finding, a new preface would not be justified since "we separate the man from his work," he said, referring to the author, Eduard Pernkopf.

Dr. Israel has made an issue of the "Pernkopf Anatomy" atlas because of what he describes as a personal sense of betrayal. He used to pore over the book the night before he performed surgery, using a copy his wife had given him as a medical student. When a colleague one day mentioned the rumor about Pernkopf's Nazi background, Dr. Israel got out the old editions of the atlas from the library of Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, where he works. He was horrified to see that the artists' signatures in several paintings incorporated small swastikas and double-lighting-bolt SS signs. Those Nazi emblems had been airbrushed out of later editions, like the one his wife had given him.

Dr. Israel, who describes himself as "a very ordinary American Jew," said that "from that moment, I went nuts." He explained, "I felt stupid at using the book, that I could possibly have benefited from something that sounded so evil."

Through talking with colleagues and searching the medical literature, Dr. Israel found that others had been aware of Pernkopf's background but had felt that the book's merits made its continued use acceptable. He has therefore raised the issue of the provenance of the cadavers in the atlas, charging that they were probably victims of the Nazi regime and may have been holocaust victims.

Many anatomists have been so dazzled by the beauty of the Pernkopf atlas that they have not peered much into the shadows round its edges. In 1990, a reviewer in *The New England Journal of Medicine* wrote of a new edition that "this outstanding book" was in a "class of its own."

In the same year, a reviewer in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* called it a "classic among atlases" with illustrations that "are truly works of art." Dr. Malcolm H. Hast, the author of that review and an anatomist at the Northwestern University Medical School, said he had not known of the book's background at the time but had heard about it later. "I reviewed it just as a book," he said. "It is one of the most beautiful anatomy books published."

David P. Williams, a professor of medical illustration at Purdue University, said, "I always felt the paintings were absolute masterpieces of anatomical art." Dr. Williams went to Austria to study the historical background of the Pernkopf atlas and its artists. His findings, published in 1988, seem to have received little attention, perhaps because they appeared in a little-known journal and because his appraisal was largely upbeat, even though it contained some startling facts.

Pernkopf, he found, joined the Nazi party in 1933 and the *Sturmabteilung*, or Brown Shirts, a year later. A fervent believer in National Socialism, he was made dean of the University of Vienna medical faculty at the time of Hitler's invasion of Austria in March 1938, and he later became president of the university. After the war, Pernkopf spent three years in an Allied prison camp but was not charged with war crimes. He then returned to the University of Vienna to continue work on his atlas until his death in 1955.

Dr. Williams noted that the four principal artists used by Pernkopf had also been active party members and that one of them, Erich Lepier, had signed his paintings with a swastika for a while. That practice, Dr. Williams wrote in his 1988 article, "helped to develop the most persistent rumor associated with the work," that cadavers of concentration camp victims had been used for dissections during the war.

Dr. Williams believes that this is not the case. During the war, many cadavers used by the Anatomy Institute in Vienna were those of people executed in the Vienna Landesgericht, or district court. Inquiring of Simon Wiesenthal's Documentation Center in Vienna, Dr. Williams received a letter from Mr. Wiesenthal in 1982 saying, "Concerning the identity of the prisoners in the Wiener Landesgericht, I can tell you that these were non-Jewish Austrian patriots, communists and other enemies of the Nazis." Pernkopf had a heavy teaching load because other medical schools had been closed during the war, and he needed many cadavers for the students to dissect. Dr. Williams said it was possible, but not yet proved, that the bodies used as models for the atlas during the war had also come from Landesgericht executions.

Medical schools today use only cadavers that have been willingly donated. But anatomists are aware that their subjects have historically included paupers, criminals and even people specially executed for the scalpel. In Dr. Williams's 1988 article, he focused on the achievement of Pernkopf and his artists in completing their atlas during a 30-year period, and he viewed the project in the context of a distinguished tradition of Viennese medical illustration that had long preceded the Nazis. The work was begun in 1933 and completed, in several volumes, in 1960, five years after Pernkopf's death. (The American edition uses only the paintings, without Pernkopf's text.) Because of the Nazis' treatment of Jews and others, Dr. Williams concluded, Pernkopf's work "will always be controversial and will, unfortunately, never be acknowledged by some as the masterpiece it truly is."

Dr. Israel takes a less sanguine view, saying that the atlas poses a problem if Pernkopf used any victims of the Nazi terror, whether or not they were Jewish. He does, however, believe that some of the victims may have been Jewish because their heads are roughly shaved and a man in one illustration is circumcised. Other anatomists note that cadavers suitable for dissection need to have come from people in good health and are unlikely to have been procured from concentration camps.

The issue of whether the results of Nazi science can ethically be used has come up before, notably in the case of experiments in which people were fatally exposed to extreme cold and to toxic gases. In 1988, the Environmental Protection Agency ordered that Nazi data on human exposure to phosgene gas be excluded from a study the agency had commissioned. Some ethicists argue that all Nazi science should be taboo, while others say the data should be used, but in a way that helps commemorate the victims.

The Pernkopf atlas raises the issue in a different way because, unlike the horrific experiments, it is widely known, used and admired. Mr. Hutton, of Waverly, estimated that thousands of copies had been printed in the 40 years since it was first published. Waverly bought the original publisher, Urban & Schwarzenberg, in 1990.

Dr. Hast, author of the Journal of the American Medical Association review, believes that the book should continue to be used. "If it's good anatomy, you can't throw it away," he said. "I used the book for years before I knew any of this. Should I try to expurgate my mind of the knowledge that I gained from the book?"

Dr. Ernest W. April, an anatomist at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, said Pernkopf's atlas "is a phenomenal book, very complete and thorough and authoritative, and you can't detract from that, regardless of the fact that he might not have been a good person or belonged to the wrong party."

But Dr. Israel no longer uses the Pernkopf volumes. "I have looked at a lot of anatomy textbooks, and these are terrific in terms of the quality of pictures," he said. "But that doesn't mean it's right to use them."

[Home](#) | [Times topics](#) |

[Member Center](#)

[Copyright 2011](#) [The New York Times Company](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#) |

[Index by Keyword](#)

Proposed Use of Nazi Scientific Data. Pozos' Chilling Dilemma. Doctor Robert Pozos is the Director of the Hypothermia Laboratory at the University of Minnesota of Medicine at Duluth. Pozos' plan to republish the Nazi data in the New England Journal of Medicine was flatly vetoed by the Journal's editor, Doctor Arnold Relman. Relman's refusal to publish Nazi data along with Pozos' comments was understandable given the source of the Nazi data and the way it was obtained. Haywards's Equally Chilling Dilemma. This is a list of notable Nazi medical doctors (physicians). When the Nazi government came to power it purged Germany of its 6,000 to 7,000 Jewish doctors. Reportedly more than 7% of all German physicians became members of the Nazi party during World War II, a far higher percentage than the general population. In 1942 more than 38,000 German doctors, half the total number of doctors, had joined the Nazi party. While most of these doctors were physicians, some held doctorates (PhD.'s) in biology. But the question of the medical eponym does not fall into that category. Up for debate was not whether we should keep or discard useful medical information obtained through grossly immoral means. All medical information discovered would still be known. All that was asked is that the result was not named to reward a criminal. As the physicians who wrote the retraction summarized their reasoning: "Medicine is a moral enterprise. Physicians serve to promote the welfare of their patients." Since then, other medical eponyms tied to Nazi crimes have surfaced. The Clara cell, a type of cell lining the airways to the lungs, was named after Max Clara, an "active and outspoken Nazi" who made his discovery using tissues from murdered Third Reich victims. During World War II, Nazi doctors had unfettered access to human beings they could use in medical experiments in any way they chose. In one way, these experiments were just another form of mass torture and murder so our moral judgement of them is clear. But they also pose an uncomfortable moral challenge: what if some of the medical experiments yielded scientifically sound data that could be put to good use? Would it be justifiable to use that knowledge? Using data. It's tempting to deflect the question by saying the data are useless "that the bad behaviour must have produced bad science, so