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Classic Text No. 73

Karl Ludwig Kahlbaum by Dr. Ewald Hecker (1899)

Introduction and translation by

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The chaotic psychiatric nosology of the late nineteenth century needed a strong and new foundation, but when Kahlbaum died in 1899, some German psychiatrists realized that a great opportunity had been missed: his proposal to classify psychiatric disorders according to their course and cross-sectional symptomatology had largely been ignored by the psychiatric establishment. Kahlbaum died in coma diabeticum without the official recognition for his academic achievements that he longed for: the award of the professorship which was granted a few years later to his disciple Ewald Hecker.

Keywords: Hecker; history; Kahlbaum; obituary

Introduction

This obituary by Ewald Hecker¹ (1899), Kahlbaum's friend and disciple, gives an account of his personal life and his contributions to late nineteenth-century psychiatry. It fails however to provide a convincing answer to three questions. First, why was the publication of one of the most thoughtful and thorough classification attempts in psychiatry almost completely ignored by the academic establishment in Germany? Second, why did Kahlbaum publish so little despite clear evidence that he had collected a vast amount of clinical material, which could have supported his classification system? Third, why did he not allow Hecker to publish some of his material after the success of his paper on hebephrenia (Hecker, 1871)?

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One of Kahlbaum's first decisions after graduating and spending a year in the army was to accept a position as second physician at the asylum in Allenberg with Bernhardt as his superior. Hecker alludes to the meanness of the director and to the poor salary. It is a matter of speculation why Kahlbaum chose Allenberg in the first place. Was it the closeness to his parents' home² or for material reasons?³ Kahlbaum, and later Hecker, both tried to humanize the treatment of patients in Allenberg but without success. There seems to be no doubt that the conditions in the asylum of Allenberg were harsh for patients. Progressive psychiatrists like Hecker and Kahlbaum appear to have been shocked but unable to change anything for the better. Wilmanns⁴ said in Hecker's obituary that, even in the absence of the Director who was on sick leave, Hecker's attempts to introduce a more humane treatment was blocked by the nursing staff (Wilmanns, 1924).

Kahlbaum's efforts to establish himself as a lecturer in Königsberg must have been even more frustrating. Travelling from Allenberg to Königsberg proved quite expensive, and Kahlbaum received an additional grant of 200 thalers for two years from the Prussian Culture Minister, but only after numerous applications. Nor was he successful in persuading the Ministry of the importance of teaching medical students in clinical psychiatry: he had no patients for his lectures at Königsberg and his attempts to arrange for the students to travel to Allenberg were ultimately not approved.

Three years after the publication of his *Die Gruppierung* (1863), Kahlbaum decided to accept the offer to become second physician and ultimately Director of the private asylum in Görlitz. At this stage, did he give up his pursuit of an academic career, frustrated by the lack of response of the psychiatric establishment? 'No university appointed him', as Ziehen (1899) wrote in his obituary of Kahlbaum.

Kahlbaum certainly appears to have committed himself with all his time and energy to clinical and managerial work, reforming all aspects of his clinic (including drawing his own sketch for a ceiling fresco symbolizing science for one of the halls). In 1875 the clinic was in very good shape, with a noted reputation and a constant flow of patients. Kahlbaum had just published his monograph on catatonia (1874), and his decision to take a sabbatical year was timely. It is interesting, however, that he used the year to advance his knowledge in pathology, anatomy and microscopy rather than focusing on writing up the clinical treatise which he had promised; in fact, there was a four-year gap between his book on catatonia and his next publications. And he did not allow Hecker to do it for him! It is tempting to speculate that Kahlbaum was jealous of Hecker's success following his publication of hebephrenia (Hecker, 1871), and the fact that the disease form was more and more associated with Hecker's name rather than his. Is this why Kahlbaum repeatedly emphasized that he had coined the name and had given Hecker all his (Kahlbaum's) material to publish. This hypothesis does not seem to fit with the description of Kahlbaum's character as described by Hecker (1899), Neisser (1924) and

Ziehen (1899). They portray him as a stern, hardworking, honest and humble psychiatrist – religious, with some liberal tendencies, an idealist not without a dry sense of humour. All three biographies lament Kahlbaum’s lack of recognition in the world of academia, and the refusal to appoint him to a chair of psychiatry or a university post, or at least award him the title ‘professor’ for his contributions to psychiatry.

We have to conclude that psychiatry was not ready for a ‘modern psychiatrist’⁵ like Kahlbaum and his *Die Gruppierung* in 1863, and nor was it ready in 1899 when he died in coma diabeticum. So psychiatry took the route it took because Kahlbaum was ignored (‘*totgeschwiegen*’ as Ziehen (1899) chillingly remarked) and because, of the two other opposing psychiatric giants of that time who had recognized Kahlbaum’s importance, one died prematurely following a bicycle accident,⁶ thus giving the other⁷ the opportunity to mould psychiatry on his terms for one hundred years to come.

Notes

1. Ewald Hecker (1843–1909): studied medicine in Königsberg; disciple and friend of Kahlbaum and worked as his deputy in Görlitz until he set up his own private asylum in Wiesbaden. For a detailed biography, see Kraam and Berrios, 2002.
2. Lauschke (1979) favours this explanation.
3. Steinberg’s (1999) theory.
4. Karl Willmanns (1873–1945), studied medicine in Bonn, Göttingen and Berlin; assistant physician in Bremen, Bonn (Director, Pelman) and Heidelberg (Kraepelin); 1918 Professor and Director at the clinic for psychiatry and neurology in Heidelberg.
5. Arenz (2001) acknowledges Kahlbaum’s modern understanding of psychiatric disorders and his influence on the Wernicke-Kleist-Leonhard school of psychiatry.
6. Carl Wernicke (1848–1905).
7. Emil Wilhelm Magnus Georg Kraepelin (1856–1926).

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Classic Text No. 73

Karl Ludwig Kahlbaum*

by Dr. Ewald Hecker (1899)¹

On 15th April of this year, senior medical official² Dr. Karl Ludwig Kahlbaum, owner and director of a private clinic in Görlitz, died at the age of 70. We have lost one of the most important of our specialists whose worthy aim was to advance psychiatry scientifically and practically. His reputation and that of his clinic have extended beyond the borders of Germany. His importance as a scientist has gradually gained acceptance as well; his real contributions to psychiatry, however, have only been appreciated by a few, undeservedly according to my opinion. I have had the honour of working and socializing intimately with the deceased over ten years, and was inspired and educated by the richness of his knowledge, his experience and his brilliant mind. I am therefore grateful for having been given the opportunity by this journal's editors to fulfil, with this obituary, a deeply felt debt of gratitude and devotion.

Karl Ludwig Kahlbaum was born near Driesen in Neumark on 28th December 1828. He studied medicine in Königsberg, Würzburg, Leipzig and Berlin. He gained a doctorate with the dissertation: "De avium tractus alimentarii anatomica et histologia nonnulla". He gained his qualifying degree the same year and after a voluntary year as a physician in Berlin enrolled as the second physician and deputy director³ in the East Prussian province asylum. In his scientific endeavours he did not have much encouragement from his superior, but he did not need it anyway. He familiarized himself with this new field with his typical steely diligence.

* [original footnote] Subscribers can obtain a picture of Kahlbaum printed on cardboard only by special request.