

16 The Postwar Years

Tacit amnesty for Nazi doctors and marginalization of the victims

In occupied Germany of the postwar years, the major Nazi war criminals were brought before the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg. Medical war criminals were tried by the US authorities at the Nuremberg Doctors' Trial, among them, the Austrian physician Professor Wilhelm Beiglböck, who was indicted for the Dachau sea-water experiments. In the brief anti-Fascist period that followed Austria's liberation, Nazi perpetrators were persistently prosecuted. Thus, in 1946 the Viennese People's Court pronounced the former head of the Spiegelgrund "children's ward," Dr. Ernst Illing, guilty of assassination and sentenced him to death; Dr. Marianne Türk, who had been under Illing's command, received a ten-year prison sentence. However, in the course of the Cold War and the efforts to reintegrate the former National Socialists into society, criminal prosecution of Nazi medical staff decreased and was finally discontinued altogether. Not only Dr. Heinrich Gross, but also Professor Dr. Hans Bertha, one of the main architects of Nazi euthanasia in Austria (he was a "T4-expert" and director of Steinhof 1944/45), escaped prosecution. While many doctors with a Nazi past continued their professional careers, the victims of Nazi medicine were denied any public recognition or compensation. Eventually, by the early 1990s, a new socio-political climate had come about due to several factors (generational change, the Waldheim affair). This found expression in Federal Chancellor Franz Vranitzky's public acknowledgment in 1991 of Austrians' role as Nazi perpetrators and has had positive consequences for the victims of Nazi persecution. In 1995, the National Council unanimously passed a resolution for the creation of the National Fund of the Republic of Austria for Victims of National Socialism, which for the first time also recognized the victims of Nazi racial hygiene. At the same time, the Opferfürsorgegesetz (Victims Assistance Act) was amended to include persecution by Nazi healthcare and welfare institutions.

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