

Sketches from the history of psychiatry

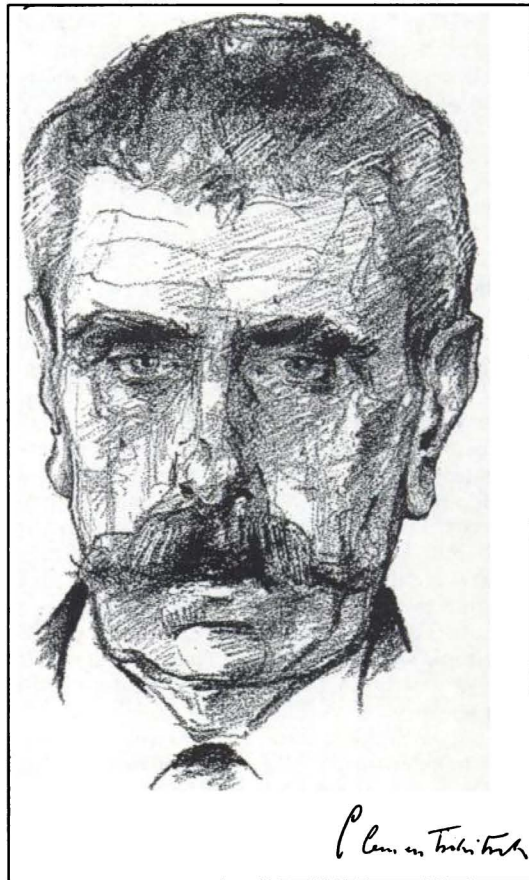
Freud and Wagner-Jauregg: A historiographical study

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It is ironic that of the two greatest Austrian psychiatrists, Freud and Wagner-Jauregg, Freud is now a household name throughout the world, whereas Wagner-Jauregg is hardly known outside German-speaking countries. Yet his work brought him the highest honours not only in his own country and was crowned by the award of the Nobel prize in 1927. The reason for the reversal of their reputations is not far to seek. The Nobel prize was awarded to Wagner-Jauregg for his malaria treatment of general paralysis of the insane (GPI), a severe and fatal form of neurosyphilis, which saved untold thousands of lives. Today GPI is rarely seen because syphilis can now be successfully treated with antibiotics. Wagner-Jauregg also did pioneering work into the relationship between thyroid deficiency and cretinism, which in those days was still in a speculative state, but his name is hardly ever mentioned in this context. He had the misfortune to publish in journals with a more restricted circulation than those in which the results of Schiff's and Kocher's work appeared.

Freud and Wagner-Jauregg were almost exact contemporaries. Freud was born in 1856, Wagner-Jauregg in 1857. They got to know each other during their student days at the University of Vienna. They attended the same courses and for a short time worked together in S. Stricker's Institute for Experimental Pathology. Freud went to work in E. W. R. von Brücke's Institute for Physiology where he remained for nearly six years, during which time he published six papers on neuropathology. He graduated in 1881. Wagner-Jauregg, who graduated in 1880, began work as an assistant at Stricker's Institute the following year. In 1882 both applied for the position of assistant at H. Nothnagel's Clinic for Internal Medicine, but neither got the post. Wagner-Jauregg remained at Stricker's Institute until the end of 1882, whereas Freud who was in financial difficulties followed Brücke's advice to abandon his scientific career. He therefore entered the General Hospital where he worked in several departments, including Theodor Meynert's Psychiatric Clinic and the Department of Nervous Diseases.

In 1884 the paths of Freud and Wagner-Jauregg crossed briefly. They both spent some of their spare time in Stricker's Institute and participated in animal



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experiments investigating the function of glands in relation to the circulatory system. During the same year they also met to settle a priority dispute between Carl Koller and Leopold Königstein, both ophthalmologists. Freud had demonstrated the anaesthetising properties of cocaine to both. Koller and Königstein experimented successfully with its use in eye operations and reported it to the Vienna Medical Society on 17 October 1884. However, Koller had already publicised his results a month earlier at the

Ophthalmological Congress in Heidelberg. Freud recalls in a letter (Freud, 1960) how he and Wagner-Jauregg were called upon to settle the dispute amicably which they did by persuading Königstein to insert a letter in the *Wiener Medizinische Presse* to the effect that he conceded priority to Koller.

In 1885 both Freud and Wagner-Jauregg applied for 'Habilitation', the award of the Dozentur (*Venia legendi*) which entitled them to give lectures at the University in neuropathology. However, in 1883 Wagner-Jauregg had been fortunate in becoming an assistant to Max Leidesdorf, the head of the First Psychiatric Clinic at the Vienna Asylum, where he was reasonably well paid, housed and fed. Freud, on the other hand, was working at the General Hospital at a very low salary and under conditions that compared unfavourably with those of Wagner-Jauregg. However, in 1885 he was awarded a travel grant by the University of Vienna, which he proposed to use to study under Charcot in Paris. Although he could have had six months' leave of absence from the hospital, he chose to resign. He arrived in Paris in October 1885 and attended the Salpêtrière for four months until March 1886. On his return to Vienna in the spring he set up in practice. He also took over a neurological department at the public Institute for Children's Diseases.

On 15 October 1886 Freud presented a paper 'On male hysteria' to the Vienna Medical Society. In it he praised the work of Charcot and the achievements of the French school. The lecture was not received with much enthusiasm and its reception rankled with Freud for the rest of his life. According to Wagner-Jauregg (1950), who was present, "Bamberger and Meynert in the discussion bluntly rejected Freud's statements and thus he fell into disgrace with the Faculty". This may have been the reason why the offer of facilities at Meynert's Clinic, made when Freud began practising, was withdrawn. The arrangement came to an end and Freud complained that he had nowhere to deliver his lectures.

Wagner-Jauregg had been more fortunate because soon after he began work at Leidesdorf's Clinic the first assistant left and he was appointed in his place. At the beginning of the winter semester of 1887/88 Leidesdorf suffered a serious heart attack and Wagner-Jauregg took over his lectures and the running of the Clinic. He thus gained considerable experience in the field and in 1888 successfully applied for the Dozentur in psychiatry. The following year he was called to Graz as head of the Psychiatric Clinic and appointed 'Extraordinary Professor' (Associate Professor). From that moment his career was assured. Four years later he returned to Vienna as full professor and head of the First Psychiatric Clinic.

Although as a Dozent Freud was entitled to give lectures – an opportunity which he made use of – he

was never a regular academic teacher. The titles of 'Extraordinary Professor' awarded to him in 1902 and of Ordinary Professor in 1919 were both purely *titular*, a fact that is omitted in most biographies. Wagner-Jauregg became an 'Extraordinary Professor' in 1889 and a full professor in 1893, only five and nine years respectively after his Habilitation, whereas Freud had to wait 17 years for the one and 34 years for the other and was then only awarded the titles.

Two historians of medicine, J. and R. Gicklhorn, a husband and wife team, investigated the reasons for Freud's slow and essentially unsatisfactory academic career (Gicklhorn, 1960) and contrasted it with that of Wagner-Jauregg, always in the latter's favour, even at times by misrepresenting Wagner-Jauregg's character. They maintained that Freud's lack of success in his academic career was entirely his own fault, in that by refusing to accept the Dozentur in psychiatry Freud damaged his own career and impeded his promotion. K. R. Eissler who took up Freud's case pointed out that this is simply not true, because a Dozentur must be applied for and Freud did not do this (Eissler, 1966). In any case, it is unlikely that Freud would have been successful in an application for Habilitation in psychiatry, since his work and his publications had been on neuroses which at the time were considered a specialised field only marginally related to psychiatry and had received scant attention in contemporary textbooks. That this is the case is shown by a report by Wagner-Jauregg in 1899 to the professorial board on the selection of a candidate for a Chair in which he stated that "Dr Freud is only Dozent for neuropathology and has never really worked in psychiatry".

As far as can be ascertained, the facts regarding Freud's professorships are as follows. The professorial board in 1897 planned to appoint Freud to an extraordinary professorship, a proposal made by H. Nothnagel, Professor of Internal Medicine, and R. von Krafft-Ebing, Professor of Psychiatry. This and other recommendations for promotion were submitted to the Ministry of Education, but none were acceded to, probably for reasons of economy. However, in 1900 all the recommendations except that of Freud were approved. It was not until two patients of Freud's, Frau Elise Gomperz and Baroness Marie Ferstel, intervened and Nothnagel and Krafft-Ebing repeated their recommendations that the *title* of Extraordinary Professor was granted to Freud.

J. Gicklhorn suggests that the title of Ordinary Professor which Freud received in 1919 was due to Wagner-Jauregg's initiative. It is true that Wagner-Jauregg wrote a favourable but somewhat lukewarm report on Freud's achievements. Clearly he did not wish to obstruct Freud's promotion and, although formally supporting it, he found difficulty in saying much in favour of Freud. Freud's theories, he wrote,

even if they were not going to be upheld, contained many ingenious and valuable observations, not merely hypotheses, so that whether or not one agreed with them recognition of Freud's work should not be denied.

In discussing the reasons for Freud's slow rate of progress up the academic ladder, the Gicklhorns claimed that Freud was preoccupied with, and greedy for, money and accused him of neglecting his duties as a teacher and of not caring about his academic career. That Freud was preoccupied with money is surely not surprising in view of his financial position during his student days and early career. R. W. Clark (1980) mentions that on one occasion shortly after his marriage he had found it necessary to pawn his gold watch. The accusation that Freud neglected his duties as a teacher and did not care about his academic career also seems to be without foundation. The Gicklhorns claimed that for a number of semesters Freud announced lectures but did not give them. Yet in his report on Freud in 1896, Krafft-Ebing wrote that since 1886 (for 20 semesters) Freud had lectured, with rare interruptions, first on brain anatomy, then on nervous diseases in children and on the major neuroses.

It is strange that the Gicklhorns thought it necessary to blacken Freud's character, in order, as Eissler puts it, to whitewash the University. His fate and treatment are typical of those that often befall an innovator with extremely unorthodox views. It must also be remembered that, although Wagner-Jauregg made a remarkable discovery, he kept within the bounds of orthodox psychiatry. Furthermore, he belonged to that favoured class of patricians whose path is always easier than that of the son of a poor Jewish immigrant family however great his genius.

The last time Freud's and Wagner-Jauregg's paths crossed was an unhappy occasion when Freud had been called as a witness to testify to a Commission, appointed to investigate derelictions of military duty, before which Wagner-Jauregg stood indicted in 1920. The records of the proceedings have been studied and essential parts of them have been published with critical comments by K. R. Eissler (1979). Accusations had been brought against a number of physicians, including severe damage through electrotherapy, solitary confinement and unpleasant medication, particularly the electrotherapy used at Wagner-Jauregg's Clinic. The principal expert witness on the first day of the proceedings was Freud. J. Gicklhorn claimed that Freud made accusations against Wagner-Jauregg that are quite incomprehensible.

Although the tension during the hearing emerges from the records of the proceedings, reading the accounts does not suggest that Freud said anything against Wagner-Jauregg. He seems indeed to have been at pains to stress that there could be no question of dereliction of duty on the part of Wagner-Jauregg. Nevertheless, it is clear from Wagner-Jauregg's remarks in his *Memoirs* (1950) that he was deeply hurt and found the proceedings painful. For a man in his position to be accused of inhumanity must have been traumatic and this partly explains his somewhat unjustified comments about Freud's evidence.

On the second day of the hearing evidence was given by a number of psychiatrists who joined in an attack against Freud and psychoanalysis. In a letter Freud complained that these attacks against psychoanalysis showed the hatred the local psychiatrists felt towards him. In the report of the Commission, published in October 1920, Wagner-Jauregg's work was praised and he was entirely exonerated from the accusations that had been levelled against him.

Despite their diametrically opposed scientific views and their very different backgrounds, it seems that Freud and Wagner-Jauregg had very friendly feelings for each other and used the familiar 'Du' in their correspondence. Letters of congratulations exchanged on their birthdays, even after the Commission sittings, bear this out.

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