The controversial Third Reich history of Hans Creutzfeldt: was he a supporter or just another adept of the “hand washing policy”?

A controversa história do terceiro reich de Hans Creutzfeldt: seria ele um apoiador ou apenas outro adepto da “política de lavagem das mãos”?

Paulo Eduardo Mestrinelli CARRILHO¹, Ricardo NITRINI²

INTRODUCTION

Walther Spielmeyer first used the term Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD) because two German neuropathologists had previously described the disease. Alfons Maria Jakob described a series of six patients with spasticity and progressive dementia associated with neural degeneration in the early 1920s, as did Hans Gerhardt Creutzfeldt (Figure 1), who had independently published the case of a “not so” similar patient. Jakob credited Creutzfeldt for first describing the syndrome, without realizing he had also uncovered the new syndrome. CJD is the usual eponym used, since Creutzfeldt certainly gave the earlier account. But, in view of Jakob’s greatest contribution, many authors reasonably argued that the correct designation should be Jakob-Creutzfeldt disease. One had reported, in his own words, that: “Dr. Creutzfeldt after the II World War (WWII) told me that his case did not bear any resemblance to the cases described by Jakob”. Particularly in Brazil, the use of “Jakob-Creutzfeldt Disease” is common, instead of CJD. It is also probably due to the prominent figure that doctor Jakob represented for Brazil. From May to July 1928, he gave a 20-lecture course in

1Universidade Estadual do Oeste do Paraná, Faculdade de Medicina, Cascavel PR, Brazil.
2Universidade de São Paulo, Faculdade de Medicina, Departamento de Neurologia, São Paulo SP, Brazil.

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Rio de Janeiro on nervous pathology, as well as in São Paulo and Campinas⁶⁻⁷.

Moreover, both Jakob and Creutzfeldt had studied under Alois Alzheimer’s supervision, in different units led by him. Creutzfeldt² in Breslau and Jakob in Munich⁶. In 1913, Creutzfeldt studied the clinical picture and pathological brain changes of a previously unknown disease in a patient at the Breslau University’s Neurology Unit. His publication of a description of this disease in 1920 was considered by some researchers to be the first in the world’s medical literature approximately a year before Jakob published his series⁸. Putting aside the controversy of the CJD name, unequivocally, it is easy to recognize that both authors are important historical figures in Neurology.

Dr. Jakob deceased in 1931, years before the arrival of the Third Reich. Dr. Creutzfeldt, on the other hand, lived throughout the Nazi era. Some data suggest that he was against the ideology⁹⁻¹¹, with clear declarations that he disliked Nazi policies⁹. However, contradictory, he became a Patron Member of Heinrich Himmler’s SS from 1932 to 1933 and had, at least, an ambivalent posture facing Nazism ideology and the Aktion T4 euthanasia program⁹⁻¹³,¹⁴.

**CREUTZFELDT’S BRIEF HISTORY**

Creutzfeldt was born into a medical family in Harburg, a city annexed to Hamburg since 1937, on June 2nd, 1885. In 1903, he was drafted into the German army and was stationed in Kiel⁹. Afterward, he attended the Medicine School of the University of Jena and the University of Rostock, receiving his doctorate in 1909⁹. In the following years until 1912, he sought adventure as a ship’s surgeon, voyaging the Pacific Ocean, taking the opportunity to study local crafts, linguistics, and tropical plants⁹. After returning, he worked at the Neurological Institute in Frankfurt am Main and at the psychiatric-neurological clinics in Breslau, with professor Alzheimer, and then in Kiel, after in Berlin, and finally at the Deutsche Forschungsanstalt für Psychiatrie in Munich⁹.

During World War I (WWI), he was a German naval medical officer. He was deployed as a reserve medical officer and survived the sinking of the auxiliary cruiser SMS Greif (Figure 2). After being captured, he was repatriated and served in the Imperial Navy until the end of the war in 1918⁹.

After WWI, Creutzfeldt worked with Spielmeyer in Munich and with Siemerling in Kiel². He moved to the Charité Hospital in Berlin and, after 14 years, he returned to Kiel in 1938 to become Emeritus Professor and Director of the Psychiatric and Neurological Division⁹,¹⁰. Then, 1939 arrived and WWII began.

**THE AMBIVALENT RELATIONSHIP WITH NAZISM**

During the years spent in Berlin and his subsequent time in Kiel, Creutzfeldt adopted a reserved but not completely hostile attitude to Nazism⁹. He was a registered candidate for the National Socialist German Doctors’ Association, a paying member of the SS and Deputy Medical Assessor at the Berlin High Court of Hereditary Health⁹. However, he was one of just two members of Kiel’s school of medicine who did not join the Nazi Party¹⁰. He was politically inconspicuous, with no emotional attachment to the ideology⁹,¹³. He also did not categorically reject compulsory sterilization in the reports he was required to produce and accepted that chronically ill patients who were unavoidably transferred to state hospitals for long-term treatment faced the threat of being sent to death camps for Aktion T⁴,¹⁴,¹⁵ (Chart 1). During WWII, as a Clinic Director in Kiel, of 605 patients transferred from Kiel, 135 were deported and 65 of these are known to have been murdered (the true figure is likely to be over 100)⁹. Nevertheless, Creutzfeldt claimed that he was “a decided opponent of the murder of the psychiatrically ill”⁹,¹⁰,¹⁴ and one psychiatrist once declared that he was known to have attacked “euthanasia” during his lectures¹⁰, declaring that “They are murderers!”
The Aktion T4 operation was a postwar name for mass murder by involuntary euthanasia in Nazi Germany. The name T4 is an abbreviation of Tiergartenstraße 4, a street address of the Chancellery department set up in early 1940, in the Berlin borough of Tiergarten, which recruited and paid personnel associated with T4. Certain German physicians were authorized to select patients “deemed incurably sick, after most critical medical examination” and then administer them a “merciful death.” “Merciful killings” referred to the systematic extermination of certain groups including the mentally ill, aged, disabled, and others. It was an Euthanasia Program, part of the Nazis’ attempt to preserve the purity of the master race — in order to create a superior group of “Aryans,” the Nazis needed to destroy all those with racial defects. By the end of 1940, almost 27,000 Germans had been killed as part of the program; by August 1941, more than 35,000 more had been exterminated. Aktion T4 was officially closed down on September 1, 1941, due to growing public pressure, including a sermon delivered by Bishop Clemens Galen in Muenster on August 3rd. However, the Nazis secretly continued their “merciful killings” all the way up to the end of the war.

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Heyde, was employed as a medical reviewer at the court. Interestingly, Creutzfeldt did not proceed any further when his letter initially failed to start an investigation into Heyde’s case. One year after, doctor Creutzfeldt retired and, on December 30th, 1964, he died at the age of 80, after a long-lasting disease.

His luck was that some Nazis thought him very eccentric or even “a little mad.” However, it was not consistent with his lack of energy in the prevention of such murders. Another event, which reinforced this idea, occurred when he put a great effort into reversing the conviction of a soldier in 1941/1942 who had deserted, which led to an avoidable death sentence. However, worth mentioning, is the fact that, during the war, bombing raids destroyed his home and clinic. Besides, in 1943, a court sentenced his wife, Cläre, to four years in prison for spiteful and malicious remarks against the Third Reich. Noteworthy, his son, Harald, defected from the German navy to join the Dutch underground resistance.

Finally, another ambivalent event occurred years after WWII. In 1955, Creutzfeldt informed the President of the Court in Schleswig Holstein that the Nazi physician, Werner

Source: Wikipedia.

Figure 2. HMS Alcantara engages the German raider Grief on 29 February 1916, in the North Sea. Both ships sank. SS Grief was Creutzfeldt’s warship in World War I (public domain).
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