

## Letter to the Editor<sup>†</sup>

### Ernst Rüdin, a Nazi Psychiatrist and Geneticist

#### To the Editor:

A recent series of articles published in *Neuropsychiatric Genetics*, on the work of Ernst Rüdin, by his daughter Edith Zerbin-Rüdin and by Ken Kendler [Kendler and Zerbin-Rüdin, 1996a,b; Zerbin-Rüdin and Kendler, 1996], clearly was published only after the deliberations that gave rise to the two accompanying editorials [Weber, 1996; Gottesman and Bertelsen, 1996]. The two sides of the debate are, of course, that Rüdin did make contributions to psychiatric genetic epidemiology, but that he did so as a racist and as a legitimizer of Nazism and of the hallmark of Nazism, mass murder for racist purposes. My own opinion is that the three articles on the man's career that studiously ignore his political activism on behalf of racism (is there anything else represented by the euphemism "racial hygiene"?) constitute a whitewash.

Ernst Rüdin was not a scientist who was also a Nazi party member, in the sense that today one might be a scientist who is also a Democrat, with no relation between the two. The ideological justification of Nazism was a racist/eugenicist conception of human genetics which is now universally abhorrent, but it is the one to which Rüdin subscribed. He went into his work with this ideology, perhaps because of it, long before Hitler was a member of the Nazi party. Rüdin's conclusion from his genetic studies was that schizophrenia is a genetic disease, and that forcible sterilization of schizophrenics was the way to protect the (Aryan) race from it. For a perspective on Rüdin's career, in addition to Weber's biographical editorial [Weber, 1996], there is a historical work, translated from the German, by Benno Müller-Hill, *Murderous Science* [Müller-Hill, 1988]. Müller-Hill presents a three-page interview of Edith Zerbin-Rüdin with the author, about her father, at the end of the book (pages 120–123). There, as in private conversation, she acts as apologist and defender of her father, but she is misguided.

The following is from Müller-Hill's book. In 1932, Rüdin became President of the International Federation of Eugenic Organizations. In 1935, he was one of the leaders and signatories of the report of "Workgroup II of the Expert Advisory Council for Population and

Race Policy." During his talk at this meeting, held March 11, 1935, he presented his ideas on "widening the spectrum of diseases necessitating sterilization." He called for compulsory sterilization of, among others, "valueless individuals [Ballastexistenzen], . . . all who were socially inferior psychopaths on account of moral confusion or severe ethical defects . . . [and] . . . the great mass of serious and incorrigible constitutional criminals."

In 1934, he was one of the three authors of the official manual for implementing a law on compulsory sterilization [Gütt et al., 1934]. In this volume, he explains the justification for sterilization of schizophrenics for eugenic purposes. This was the beginning of the chain of events which led to large-scale involuntary sterilization to be carried out on mental patients, and later led to mass murder carried out on the same people, at least until 1941.

In 1937, Rüdin joined the Nazi party. In 1943, he published an editorial, "Zehn Jahre nationalsozialistischer Staat [Ten Years of the National Socialist State]" [Rüdin, 1942]. This is taken from his editorial (quoted in English in Müller-Hill): "The results of our science had earlier attracted much attention (both support and opposition) in national and international circles. Nevertheless, it will always remain the undying, historic achievement of Adolf Hitler and his followers that they dared to take the first trail-blazing and decisive steps towards such brilliant race-hygienic achievement in and for the German people. In so doing, they went beyond the boundaries of purely scientific knowledge. He and his followers were concerned with putting into practice the theories and advances of Nordic race-conceptions . . . the fight against parasitic alien races such as the Jews and the Gypsies . . . and preventing the breeding of those with hereditary diseases and those of inferior stock."

The first of the articles in *Neuropsychiatric Genetics* tries to discuss why "a number of research psychiatrists in the anglophonic world remain uninformed about important details of the extensive continental tradition of psychiatric genetics. . . Why this gap in knowledge? We would suggest two reasons: a language barrier and a rather virulent form of 'presentism'" [Zerbin-Rüdin and Kendler, 1996]. By putting it this way, this article ignores the disrepute into which this discipline fell all over the world for many years, in no small part because of the misuses of science by prominent scientists in the field, such as Ernst Rüdin. It is perhaps too much to expect his daughter to write a

\*Correspondence to: Elliot S. Gershon, M.D., Clinical Neurogenetics Branch 10-3N218, National Institute of Mental Health, Bethesda, MD 20892-1274.

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dispassionate account of his role in the history of genetics in psychiatry. But the article maker claims for doing just that, and in so doing it is covering over the destructive effects of his scientific work, *as he interpreted and applied it*, on human knowledge and on his discipline. The paragraphs referring the reader to other works fail to fulfill the scholarly responsibilities of authors claiming to address the historical role and present reputation of the man and his scientific work.

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**Elliot S. Gershon\***  
Clinical Neurogenetics Branch  
National Institute of Mental Health  
Bethesda, Maryland