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German institute finds brain parts used by Nazis for research during, and after, WWII

Max Planck Institute now trying to determine whether Jews were among those whose organs were abused in gruesome case

BY RAPHAEL AHREN | August 31, 2016, 8:38 pm |

Unburied remnants of brains taken from victims of the Nazi regime during World War II were recently discovered in a German research institute, where they had been experimented on until the 1960s. The Max Planck Institute told The Times of Israel on Wednesday that it was not yet clear whether any brain parts from Jews were among those found, and said it was in the midst of a full investigation into the case.

The gruesome case, reminiscent of the monstrous work of Auschwitz physician Josef Mengele, was widely discussed in the Israeli media Wednesday, after Army Radio [reported](#) (Hebrew) that Jews were among the men and women whose brains were used for research purposes during and long after World War II. But a spokesperson for the Max Planck Institute said the identities of the victims were still unknown.

In Nazi Germany, psychiatric patients and mentally ill people were systematically murdered. Their brains were then sent to a research institute in Berlin. German neuroscientist [Julius Hallervorden](#), an enthusiastic Nazi, worked at the institute from 1938 onwards, and continued working at its successor organization, the Max Planck Institute, until his death in 1965.

In the 1980s, it was discovered that some 700 brain preparations from so-called “euthanasia victims” were still in the collections of the Max Planck Institute for Brain Research in Frankfurt. The organization decided to bury all brain sections prepared between 1939 and 1945, though it was unclear which ones were from murder victims and which ones from people who had died a natural death. In 1990, a memorial for the victims was erected at a Munich cemetery.

In April 2015, an external investigation into the matter showed that some brain parts were not in

fact buried: About 100 microscopic brain preparations from 35 cases dating from the years 1938 to 1967, which had been in the possession of Hallervorden's estate, only reached the institute in 2001. "At that time the controversial nature of the material was apparently not recognized," the institute said in a [press release](#). "Checking and categorization of the sections was indeed performed in the transfer, but the need for action was not recognized."

Senior officials at the Max Planck Institute for Brain Research acknowledged the error. "This new discovery disturbs us profoundly and underlines that, 70 years after the end of the Third Reich, further traces of past atrocities remain to be discovered," they said in a [press release](#) at the time. "We cannot state strongly enough the shame we feel when faced with the actions of scientists at our institute's antecedent during the Third Reich. We commit to exposing this somber history, and will use it to reinforce the teaching and transmission of the ethical prerequisites of scientific endeavors."

This past March, the Max Planck Institute's president ordered a "total review" of all its collections of human specimens. The institute further pledged to establish the identities of the victims "based on the available files and records," a [press release stated](#). "The human specimens discovered as part of the total review should, wherever possible, subsequently be buried with names."

The institute said Wednesday that the process of identifying the victims was ongoing. "This project will take a long time because it is to be linked with detailed research into the victims," the institute's communication chief, Christina Beck, told The Times of Israel. "Only afterwards will we be able to give say to what extent also Jewish patients were victim of the Nazis' euthanasia murders."

So far, only three of the 35 people have been identified as victims of the Nazis' involuntary euthanasia program, known in German as [Aktion T4](#), Beck said. No details about their identities are known, she added.

To facilitate the overall review process, all Max Planck Institutes — there are several branches across Germany — that possess collections of human specimens have been instructed to provide unrestricted access to such collections and all relevant documents and to actively support the committee's work.

A Munich-based medical historian and specialist in psychiatry and psychotherapy, Gerrit Hohendorf, has been tasked to oversee the review process.

"The Max Planck Society has a special ethical responsibility," the institute's president, Martin Stratmann, said in March. "We therefore have to be very responsible in the manner in which we deal with all human specimens and critically question their origins."

