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The Veterinary School of Vienna and the “Third Reich”: Notes about an ongoing project at the University of Veterinary Medicine in Vienna

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■ Summary

The history of the University of Veterinary Medicine, Vienna, during the period of National Socialism still marks a relatively unknown field of research in Austria. This text therefore is intended to inform about a current project. It focuses on several issues that are being discussed from the perspective of the humanities. The state of research and the project's background are discussed as well as the applied theoretical approaches, which are illustrated by two additional biographical examples. Thereby we start from the assumption, that the mutual network of the actors' relationships – their “being connected and intertwined with one another” – is a key to understand historical events between 1938 and 1945. It is less a question of “reconstitution” of science before or after a political upheaval like the “Anschluss”, but rather a question of unbundling and new intertwining of research with the respective political systems (ASH 2004, 76). No less important are questions about those, who were excluded from these networks of

■ Zusammenfassung

Die Tierärztliche Hochschule im Nationalsozialismus. Ein Werkstattbericht zu einem laufenden Projekt an der Veterinärmedizinischen Universität Wien

Die Geschichte der Veterinärmedizinischen Universität Wien während des Nationalsozialismus markiert in Österreich nach wie vor ein relativ unbearbeitetes Forschungsfeld mit vielen offenen Fragen. Der vorliegende Beitrag versteht sich daher als Werkstattbericht eines bis Juli 2018 laufenden FWF-Projekts (P 27042-G15), in dessen Zentrum gleich mehrere Fragestellungen stehen, die nun im Kontext geisteswissenschaftlicher Herangehensweisen vorgestellt und diskutiert werden. Forschungsstand und Entstehungshintergrund des Projekts werden ebenso thematisiert wie die theoretische Ausgangsbasis anhand zweier konkreter Fallbeispiele. Am Beispiel der Reinigungsfrau Maria Zirps als ältestem NSDAP-Mitglied der Tierärztlichen Hochschule, deren Netzwerk über Maximilian Kostner bis zu Rektor Franz Benesch reichte, wird vor allem

deutlich gemacht, dass der universitäre Raum generell als gesellschaftlicher Mikrokosmos zu interpretieren ist, der keineswegs durch einseitige und hierarchische Befehlsstrukturen geprägt ist. Der Mehrwert dieses Zugangs liegt vor allem darin, dass keine wertbeladenen Trennlinien zwischen Wissenschaft, Politik und Individuum gezogen werden, sondern dass das weit wichtigere, wechselseitige Beziehungsgeflecht der AkteureInnen – das „Aufeinanderbezogen- und Ineinanderverschlungensein“ – betrachtet werden kann. D.h. es geht im Zusammenhang dieses Projekts weniger um Fragen der „Selbstbehauptung“ oder „Neukonstituierung“ der Wissenschaft vor oder nach einem politischen Umbruch, sondern vielmehr um Fragen von Entflechtungen und neuer Verflechtungen der Forschung mit den jeweiligen politischen Systemen. Nicht minder bedeutsam sind in diesem Kontext Fragen nach jenen, die keine Teilhabe an diesem Beziehungsgeflecht hatten, bzw. aus diesem zwangsweise ausgeschlossen wurden. Exemplarisch wird in diesem Beitrag daher auf die Biografie des aus Wien stammenden jüdischen

relationships. As an example, this article briefly refers to the biography of the Viennese Jewish veterinary medicine student Wilhelm Marbach, who was expelled from Vienna's Vet School in November 1938, shortly before completing his studies of veterinary medicine. He managed to escape to Shanghai, finally landing in Australia, where he died at the age of 79 years in 1994.

Abkürzungen: AVA = Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv; DAF = Deutsche Arbeitsfront; DVG = Deutsche Veterinärmedizinische Gesellschaft; DÖW = Dokumentationsarchiv des Österreichischen Widerstandes; EAVA = European Association of Veterinary Anatomists; FWF = Fonds zur Förderung der wissenschaftlichen Forschung; HAVUW = Historisches Archiv der Veterinärmedizinischen Universität Wien; ÖSTA = Österreichisches Staatsarchiv; NSDAP = Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei; SA = Sturmabteilung; TiHo = Tierärztliche Hochschule; Vienna's Vet School = Veterinary School of Vienna; WAHVM = World Association for the History of Veterinary Medicine; ZI = (Geschäfts)Zahl

■ From the idea to the research

This short article is based on a presentation held at European Association of Veterinary Anatomists (EAVA) & World Association for the History of Veterinary Medicine (WAHVM) Conference in Vienna in July 2016, introducing our historical research work – a project of the humanities – to the veterinarian scientific public.

Only a few works had been done so far: A first attempt was undertaken in 1997/98, when a young graduate, Petrisa Rinesch, had a short glance at Austrian veterinarians and the “Anschluss” (RINESCH, 1998): Initial point for this first paper was a conference of the *Deutsche Veterinärmedizinische Gesellschaft* (DVG) in Hanover, where a presentation on this topic was held one year before. But what had started with a committed presentation and a short article in a conference volume, ended up in persistent silence again for more than a decade. New efforts to bring the topic on the university's agenda were undertaken only thirteen years later, when the anatomist and veterinary-historian Gerhard Forstenpointner initiated two dissertations, focussing on the university's era of fascism between 1934 and 1945 (FISCHER, 2011; KUEN, 2012). But of course, two doctoral theses could not fill the gap that seventy years of scholarly disregard had left (RETTL, 2016).

It has to be assumed that the topic on veterinary medicine and its involvement in Nazi politics and Nazi agencies came up late in Germany, too. But in contrast to Austria the conference of 1997 did “*not only put National Socialism onto the agenda of historians of this discipline for the first time, but also launched a long-overdue discussion.*” (SCHÄFFER, 1998). Such an impulse failed to appear in Austria. At German universities of veterinary medicine significant work meanwhile has been done since the late 1990ies. Only a few examples can be listed here: LOEWER (1993), BRUMME (1997), SCHIMANSIKI (1997), ORLOB (2003), RIEDEL (2004), MÖLLERS and SCHÄFFER (2005), WEIDENHÖFER (2006), INSENHÖFER (2008). Compared to these scholarly efforts histori-

Veterinärmedizinstudenten Wilhelm Marbach Bezug genommen, der im November 1938 – kurz vor Beendigung seines tierärztlichen Studiums – von der Hochschule vertrieben wurde, mit Glück die Flucht nach Shanghai schaffte und schließlich in Sydney landete.

cal knowledge on Austria's Vet School during National Socialism remained pretty poor.

This became particularly evident when a *festschrift* (DANDLER and HAARMANN, 2015) in celebration of the school's 250th anniversary got into the state of preparation and Austria's public media began to show increasing interest in the topic – especially against the backdrop that other Austrian universities had already cleared their Nazi histories. Nearly all Austrian newspapers reported on the anniversary event and referred to the lack of scientific research in context of the University of Veterinary Medicine.¹ Thus, in the face of the impending activities for the anniversary year 2015 the university's wish for a project that would give a comprehensive idea of what had happened between 1938 and 1945 increased significantly.

By the end of 2014 a team of three historians (Lisa Rettl, Claudia Kuretsidis-Haider and Johannes Laimighofer, who left 2016) could start their work within a FWF financed project (Fonds zur Förderung der wissenschaftlichen Forschung, project number P 27042-G15). Meanwhile numerous archives in Austria and Germany have been visited and a huge database has been created – material that is currently in the course of evaluation and analysis. In autumn 2018 and spring 2019 major results are going to be published in two volumes by the Wallstein Verlag (RETTL, 2018d; RETTL, 2019).

■ Theoretical approach, key aspects and main goals

The final goal is to produce a source-based description of the university, its staff and its students during the era of National Socialism, following various threads that had shaped university's history between 1930 and 1955. The thematic field within this time-period – it covers not less than three different political systems – is wide and densely interwoven: 1) After the end of the first Austrian Republic we face a fascist catholic regime

¹E. g. Der Standard, 22.12.2014 or Die Presse, 10.01.2015.

from 1934–1938, a time, when Nazi Party was forbidden and all their activities were illegal;

2.) 1938, when the Nazis came into power until the Allied defeated them in May 1945;

3.) 1945–1955 a transition period to democracy under the rule of the Allied that ended with the Austrian State Treaty in May 1955.

Within these different political frames we investigate activities, interactions and proceedings of Vienna's Vet School, following numerous questions:

- How did the university as an academic institution operate within various political systems and how did people act and behave within these different totalitarian systems?

- How did they cope with political changes and which arrangements had been made?

- Which and whose networks became relevant?

- Who got which benefits and who didn't benefit from the system at all?

These questions indicate the central topics of the project that focus on various institutional, scientific and biographical issues referring to the TiHo Vienna (Tierärztliche Hochschule Wien).

■ Some facts and figures: notes on the degree of "Nazification"

Whereas the clear focus of the project aims on a qualitative analysis of the historical proceedings, it is nevertheless important to get an idea about Nazi activities in the light of facts and figures. What do we know about the Vet School's human resources and its political attitudes?

Compared with other Viennese universities and colleges, Vienna's Vet School was – although among the three oldest Vet-Schools of Europe (HAARMANN and HÖNEL, 2015) – very small: In December 1945 only 204 persons were working there. Out of this pool of employees – and according to the de-nazification programme of the Allied – 58 persons were officially regarded as "Nazis" (see Fig. 1²). From the perspective of the humanities this number can just be read as broad approximation to historical reality: It refers only to those persons, who had been registered as party-members of the NSDAP and who had either admitted their membership or, otherwise, legal authorities had proofed them to be party-members. Hence, we have to be

NSDAP-Membership in 1945

■ Non-Members of NSDAP ■ Members of NSDAP

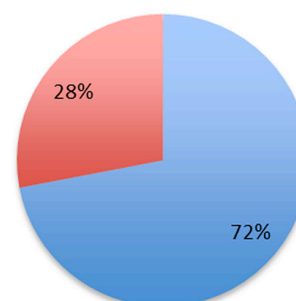


Fig. 1: Staff of Vienna's Veterinary School and proportion of NSDAP members in December 1945: In total the Vet School employed 204 persons – within this number, 58 persons were registered as "Nazis". / Anteil von NSDAP-Parteimitgliedern im Personalstand der Tierärztlichen Hochschule im Dezember 1945: Insgesamt beschäftigte die Tierärztliche Hochschule 204 Personen, wovon 58 Personen als NSDAP-Parteimitglieder registriert waren.

aware of the fact that this number does not reflect the high percentage of all those who participated in Nazi-activities or shared Nazi-ideology without being registered as active members, doubtlessly marking a crucial point for the effectiveness of fascism. So we have to keep in mind that the explanatory power of such figures remains inevitably weak.

Tracing different social groups and hierarchies working at the Vet-School, we can observe a rather low percentage of NSDAP-members among workers and employees (see Fig. 2²). The same is valid for

NSDAP-Membership According to Position of Staff

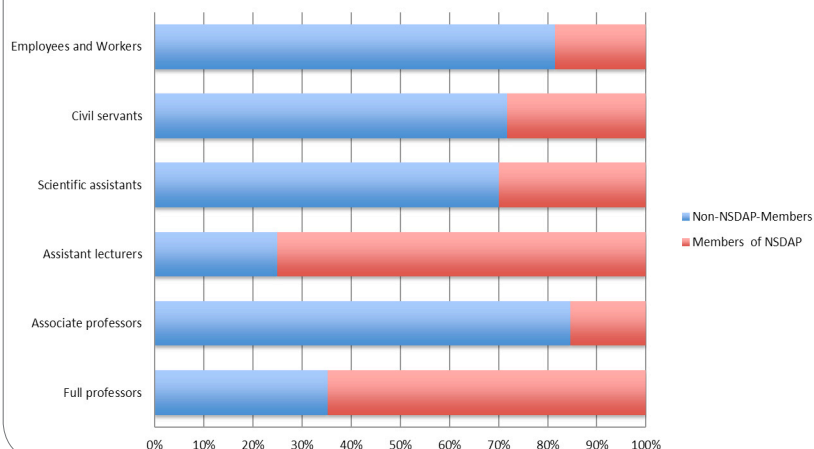


Fig. 2: Proportion of NSDAP-members in different scientific and administrative positions at Vienna's Vet School in 1945. / Anteil an NSDAP-Mitgliedern in unterschiedlichen wissenschaftlichen und administrativen Positionen an der Tierärztlichen Hochschule 1945.

² Figure 1 and 2 are based on files of the rectors's office and its denazification statistics: HAVUW, Rektoratsakt 1165/1946.

the group of associate professors (Außerordentliche Professoren). At the same time it gets evident that among the group of full professors (Ordentliche Professoren) the number of Nazis was significantly high: Among nineteen professors eleven persons were registered as party-members and only six persons were proven non-members. We also know that at least six of the eleven Nazi-professors had entered the party before March 1938, which actually means that half of them had actively supported illegal Nazi-activities between 1933 and 1938 (KURETSIDIS-HAIDER, 2018).

The most intriguing number of Nazis we find among the assistant lecturers (Ordentliche Assistenten). The striking percentage matches a striking group, as these academics were not only crucial for maintaining scientific life, but also represented the veterinarian academic elites after Second World War: It was them who formed most of veterinarian post-war discourses and veterinarian narratives on National Socialism. Taking this into account, the results of Rinesch did not come surprisingly, when she assumed that even in the 1990ies the attitude of Austrian veterinarians towards National Socialism was dominated by the rather positive opinion “that National Socialism sustainably enhanced the status of veterinary medicine.” (RINESCH, 1998).

Similarly relevant for post-war discourses on war and Holocaust were the students. Little statistic material is available, but at least for the year 1938/39 we get a clear impression about the political tendencies of the students: A reliable indicator for their political attitude is provided by their declarations on religious beliefs. Among convinced National Socialists it had become popular to use the idiom „gottgläubig“, literally meaning „believing in god“, instead of the term “catholic”. Whereas in Germany this idiom generally referred to the fact of having left the churches or being undenominational (SCHMITZ-BERING, 2007), in Austria it was primarily used to demonstrate personal identification with the Nazi party. What concerns “god-believing” students, the numbers given in *Vienna’s Yearbook of Statistics* show a clear tendency: Compared with other Viennese universities the proportion of Nazi students using the idiom “gottgläubig”, was strikingly high: With more than fifteen percent the Vet School’s students lead the number of Nazi students³ (see Fig. 3).

Therefore, the qualitative analysis of available source material has revealed so far: Strong activities of the Nazis between the years 1932–1938 are obvious on behalf of the students, the assistant lecturers and the full professors. Additionally, a close interplay

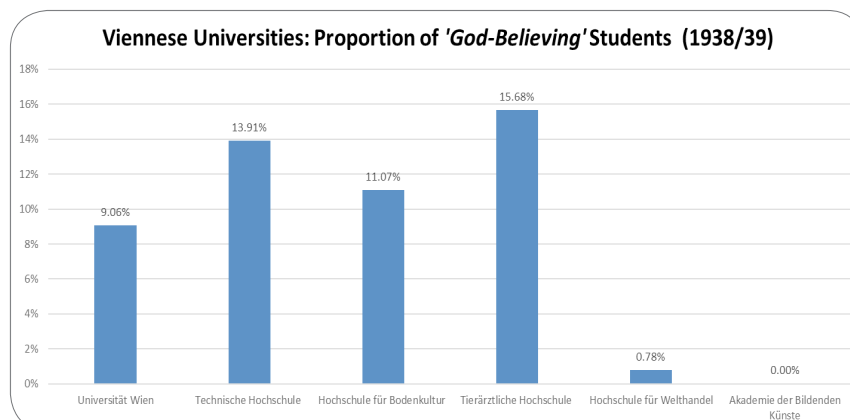


Fig. 3: Proportion of “god-believing” (“gottgläubige”) students at Viennese universities in the year 1938/1939. / Anteil an “gottgläubigen” Studenten an den Wiener Universitäten im Jahr 1938/1939.

between the Nazis of all hierarchical levels, from professor down to the student is discernible and - very important – this worked also vice versa: The activities of the students had enormous influence on the university’s policymaking, too.

It has to be noted that these illegal activities constantly undermined the acting fascist Austrian government and that these activities contributed actively to what we call „Anschluss“ in 1938, when Austria became part of the German Reich. This is an important intermediate result of the project so far, because the few previous works suggest that there seemed to be only little interaction and correlation between scientific staff, Nazi-ideology and war.

Source material also revealed that there existed not only a strong network comprising Nazis of all hierarchies and social levels, but also a close interplay between conservative proponents of the previous fascist catholic regime and the Nazi elites: They shared many political ideas and goals and came to terms with each other strikingly well. This tendency resulted in the noteworthy fact that there were hardly any dismissals for political reasons at Vienna’s Vet School. Significant is the lack of Social Democrats and Communists as well as the lack of Jewish personnel, which most likely indicates that political and racial exclusion from the Vet-School had taken place long before 1938 (RETTL, 2018b, RETTL, 2018c).

Concerning the re-integration of National Socialist segments of the population after 1945 generally it has to be said that this process took place with high speed: In Austria it started with the first elections 1947 and was completed de facto 1955 – de jure two years later with the enactment of the 1957 amnesty law (KURETSIDIS-HAIDER, 2006). This became possible because post-Nazi society and its political elites no longer regarded the activities of individuals as integral components of a murderous regime; instead, active individual participation was considered merely

³STATISTISCHES JAHRBUCH 1939–1942, 380.

necessitated by the war. “The war” emerged as a semantic amalgam referring to anything that happened between 1938 and 1945 (RETTL and PIRKER, 2010), a way of reflecting the past that is obvious also in the Vet School’s *festschrift* of 1968 (SCHREIBER, 1968). This perspective still has implications on policymaking with respect to commemorating the past. The process of (self-)exculpation that emerged in the postwar period brought any effort of multifaceted consideration and critical assessment of the recent past to a standstill – one of the essential reasons why epistemological knowledge of the complex historical interconnections during the Nazi era have had no role in the process of *cultural remembrance* (ASSMANN, 1988) at the Vetmeduni Vienna and why the few Austrian scholarly elaborations seem to function more as apologia than as critical research.

■ The University as political and social microcosm: networks and exclusions.

Two biographical examples

Going beyond the academic elites grants the benefit of a deeper understanding of historical proceedings: It enables us to recognize the university as a microcosm with its own dynamics, where actions, ideas, personal and professional affairs of all social hierarchies are closely interrelated and interwoven. Compared with other studies on university histories an innovative analytical access of this project includes not only the academic elites, but also the administration staff, workers, and students as well, starting from a top down-approach including even the cleaning staff.

A good example for the last mentioned group is Maria Zirps: Born 1901 in Vienna and since 1936 cleaning woman of the former Institute of Histology, Embryologie and Ichthyology⁴, her status might be interpreted as somewhat prominent: She was the Vet School’s earliest party member whose entry to the NSDAP had taken place in January 3rd, 1927.⁵ Her political enthusiasm was awarded with the golden medal of the party⁶ and she was also a candidate for the “Medaille zur Erinnerung an den 13. März 1938”.⁷ At first glance the job of a laundress and cleaning woman seems to be of little importance. But when we think in terms of information and social control – a crucial point in totalitarian systems – it turns out to be an important position: Cleaning desks, rooms, working stations, wardrobes and kitchens of the departments always meant the possibility of gathering information and

news: about the institute’s affairs, about the scientific staff, about the students and about political attitudes.

Not surprisingly Maria Zirps – in the days of the “Anschluss” 37 years old, unmarried and without children – climbed the social ladder rather quickly: Soon she held an important position in the new “Block”-system of the DAF (Deutsche Arbeitsfront), which was headed and managed by the veterinary Maximilian Kostner. As far as spare available data indicates, she assisted Kostner in the organisation of the DAF.

Maximilian Kostner was born in Vienna 1904. He worked as assistant lecturer at the Clinic of Obstetrics, being part of a professional network that led directly to the top level of the university: His head of department and mentor was Rector Franz Benesch. Whereas Benesch became member of the NSDAP pretty late (1941) – a strong sign that membership is only a weak symbol for political power – his assistant Kostner had joined the NSDAP already 1932. Two years later he entered the forbidden SA⁸. Within this network Zirps’ career and personal forthcoming was pushed forward: 1939, only one year after the “Anschluss”, her position had been upgraded from the status of a worker to the status of a civil servant, therefore improving her social status from a cleaning job to a secretarial help (“Amtsgehilfin”) in the privileged position of a clerk for life-time.⁹

This briefly described example of Maria Zirps outlines the practical level of the project’s theoretical approach: most different characters mingle with political aspirations across all social hierarchies and form the university as a holistic system, which might be interpreted as a result of a polycratic network of governmental, social, academic and individual influences. We assume that academic policy-making was conducted by various co-operations as well as by various conflicts among the protagonists. It’s a mix of personal decisions, scientific interests, political aims, individual career aspects, personal hostilities, power relations, hierarchies and networks, which form the base of any institution. (ASH et al. 2010).

To unravel the major relationships, aspirations and aspects that were shaping Vienna’s Vet School and its politics while World War II, belongs to the major tasks of the project.

Likewise important is the question who benefited from the system and who did not. In context of National Socialism it is evident that the crucial point has to be seen in the situation of Jewish academics, employees and students. For Vienna’s Vet-School we have to assume that 1938 we find no Jewish employees at all – neither among the scientific nor among the administration staff: An astonishing discovery, even if we take into

⁴ ÖSTA/AVA, 1686.

⁵ ÖSTA/AVA, 1686.

⁶ HAVUW, Rektoratsakt 1100/1938.

⁷ HAVUW, Rektoratsakt 801/1938.

⁸ HAVUW, Rektoratsakt 711/1940.

⁹ ÖSTA/AVA, 1685.

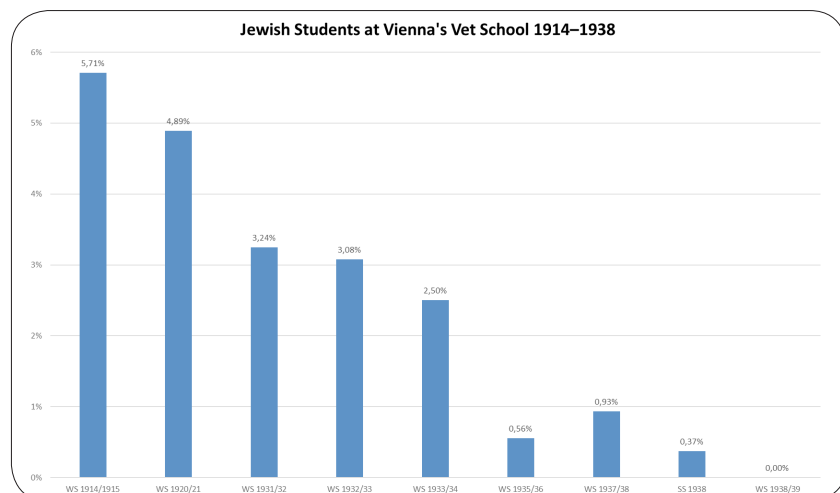


Fig. 4: Proportion of Jewish Students at Vienna's Vet School according Vienna's Yearbook of Statistics. / Anteil an jüdischen Studierenden an der Wiener Tierärztlichen Hochschule, erstellt nach den Angaben im Wiener Jahrbuch für Statistik.

account that the veterinary discipline did not represent a preferred field of Jewish professional interests. But in the light of the fact that in the 1920ies ten percent of Vienna's population was Jewish, it is striking that the Vet School did not employ any person of Jewish origin (RETTL, 2018b, GOLDHAMMER, 1927). Therefore the total lack of Jewish employees on all levels – from academic to administrative positions – marks an important point in terms of Anti-Semitism: It indicates that the year 1938 – generally perceived as a year of cesura – did not represent a significant break at Vienna's Vet School. Instead, it indicates that the Vet School's staffing policy was obviously shaped by a consensual anti-Semitic social praxis, exercised long before Nazis came into power. This effect is also indicated by a statistics on Jewish students (see figure 4), whose number was significantly decreasing since the early 1920ies.¹⁰

The fact that there were only a few Jewish students at Vienna's Vet School not at all means that there were no victims between 1918 and 1945. Against the backdrop of the year 2018 as a year of collectively remembering the "Anschluss" 1938 the project also focuses on the question which conditions Jewish students had faced before 1938 and what happened to them after the "Anschluss". A compilation of biographies is currently being published within a voluminous publication (RETTL, 2018a).

One of these students whose biography is discussed in detail in the above mentioned publication was Wilhelm Marbach: the only remaining Jewish student who was still enrolled in winter semester 1938/39 before finally ejected in November 1938.

Wilhelm Marbach, the youngest of three sons, was born 1915 in Vienna in humble circumstances. His father – a minor official at the local post office of Vienna's second district – died from tuberculosis when Wilhelm

attended the Gymnasium. Like his two elder brothers, Wilhelm grew up in the second district, where his everlasting passion for horses and horse races most likely was fostered by the close vicinity of the Vienna racecourses. Maybe this was also the reason why he decided for veterinary medicine, whereas his eldest brother graduated at the Institute for German Studies of the University of Vienna.

Wilhelm Marbach started his studies at Vienna's Vet School in October 1934 – a time when university life was paralysed after those political events of 1934 that became generally known as *July Putsch*: When Austrian National Socialists tried to take over power and killed the Austrian dictator Engelbert Dollfuss – events that also

touched the Vet School, as some students had been involved into these Nazi riots. Whereas Marbach's early student years were influenced by the suppressive and anti-Semitic atmosphere of the fascist-catholic regime under the government of Kurt Schuschnigg, his life turned into a dramatic struggle of survive since March 1938: After first anti-Semitic pogroms in March that he witnessed in his direct neighbourhood, he tried to finish his studies by the end of the year – an effort that failed: November 9th – today associated with severe pogroms, burning synagogues all over Vienna and the beginnings of the Shoah – marked the date, when rector Franz Benesch sealed Marbach's final ejection from the Vet School.¹¹

This abrupt and involuntary end of his studies – almost near completion – was followed by desperate attempts to escape: In spring 1939 he and his wife Rosa Marbach finally managed to get out of Austria – taking a last minute chance to Shanghai, where he experienced Japanese occupation in the shanty town of Honkou: a hot spot of European refugees in Shanghai. In the following years he got involved in the Chinese civil war on the side of Chiang Kai-Shek against Mao Zedong, which most probably caused his flight to Taiwan by the end of the 1940ies. 1950, after twelve years of flight, violence and war, he finally reached Australia, whereas his mother Elsa Marbach and his brother Herbert did not survive the Shoah. Both had been deported and killed in Riga and Auschwitz.

In exile Marbach was able to finish what he had started in Vienna twenty years ago: At the age of 36 years he enrolled again at the Sydney School of Veterinary Science and finally managed to graduate as veterinary in the year 1954. After the end of his studies he started to work as a veterinary clerk in the Department of Agriculture. During his career he became active on

¹⁰ JAHRBUCH FÜR STATISTIK, 1913–1947.

¹¹ DÖW 60.000/M 384.

various levels: He published several articles in various journals (e.g. MARBACH, 1963, 1967) and became active member of the Australian Veterinary Association of New South Wales. After his retirement he even got into a new business: „Ausrichter Pty Ltd was registered in 1971 and was founded by Dr Wilhelm Marbach, a veterinary surgeon who was primarily interested in the equine industry. (...) Today, the company is a globally successful pharmaceutical company”,¹² the company's former website stated (RETTL, 2018d). Wilhelm Marbach had visited Austria several times, before he died 1994 in Sydney at the age of 79 years.

„Forgetting the extermination is part of the extermination itself,” the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard once said (BAUDRILLARD, 1987). Thus the idea of commemorating those, who were discriminated, pursued and forgotten for over decades is not only a matter of political correctness, but an important task for

any democratic society and their (academic) institutions. This perspective has also entered today's policymaking of the University of Veterinary Medicine in Vienna – a clear indicator that a shift of paradigm has taken place for the recent years: “For our university” – Rector Petra Winter states – “this publication provides an important foundation for a university-wide discussion on the question, how we want to remember our campus past. It is now our responsibility to commemorate the victims and make them visible on our campus. This process is part of the historical awareness, currently rising at the University of Veterinary Medicine Vienna. However this commemoration and memorial finally will take shape: it will be a lasting and symbolic reminder to our university that fascist atrocities and inhuman suffering must never again have a place in our society.” (WINTER, 2018).

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¹²Initially, Ausrichter was the Australian agency for Richter Pharma in Austria that had started as a small pharmacy, servicing the human and veterinary market in the surrounding areas. Today the company is a globally successful pharmaceutical company.

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