

*Exhibition review***The science of demise**

Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race

Curator: Dr. Susan Bachrach

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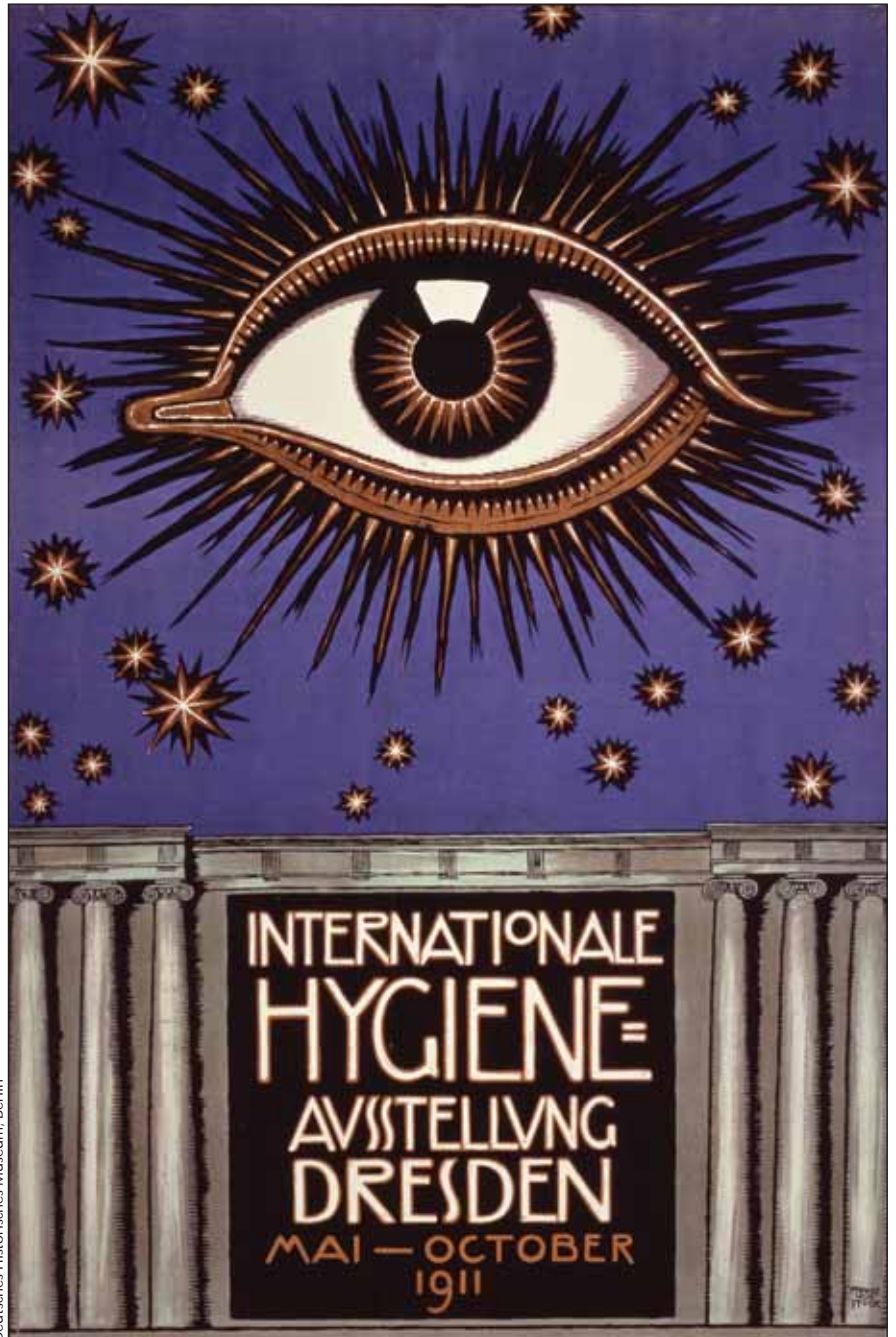
Canadian War Museum June 13–Nov. 11, 2008

The distance from the medical profession's Hippocratic Oath of "do no harm" to a state sanctioned science of demise — "deadly medicine" — is sadly never very far.

This cautionary exhibition chronicles the theory of eugenics from its origins in the early 20th century, until it was embraced and promoted by the National Socialists in Germany in the 1930s, then used to justify mass murder and, ultimately, the Holocaust.

Eugenics — the improvement of human hereditary traits through various forms of intervention — targets the sick, the old, the insane, and the mentally and physically handicapped (for sterilization). The term originated in the early 1930s with Francis Galton, a British scientist, but the exhibit begins with Darwin (although the term "survival of the fittest" in fact originated with Herbert Spencer in 1864) and the beginnings of modern biology.

The German biologist, August Weissmann postulated his theory of unchangeable heredity in 1893. The eugenics movement was founded in 1905, and the first use of the word "gene" dates from 1909. Arthur Ploetz, the founder of the eugenics movement, and the father of "racial hygiene," is listed as a physicist and economist. This combination of professions is worth noting — for the push to apply linear, scientific categories to social and political issues is a major theme throughout this history. These advances led quickly to terms such as "racial hygiene," "dysgenic" and "socially unproductive."



Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin

In Germany, the eugenics movement predated the Nazi era. This 1911 poster promoted the International Hygiene Exhibition at the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden. That exhibition included a display on human heredity and ideas to improve it. The exhibition poster features the Enlightenment's all-seeing eye of God, adapted from the ancient Egyptian "Eye of Ra," symbolizing fitness or health.

Contemporary Nazi propaganda, training films, photos, medical instruments and devices are combined carefully here with installations such as a door from an asylum and a reconstructed waiting room in a sterilization clinic. All these help bring home to us the methodical ruin wrought by such policies.

The exhibit is text-driven and the ideology that this helps us remember is crucial. Phrases such as “race defiler,” and “hereditary endowment,” show that a campaign was underway between “high-grade” citizens and those labelled as “feebleminded.” In 1938, Dr. Paul Joseph Goebbels, Germany’s minister of Enlightenment and Propaganda, stated that “our starting point is not the individual.”

In Germany, Hereditary Health Courts were established to vote on sterilization cases. Each court had 3 judges, 2 of whom were physicians. *The German Physician’s Journal* of July 1933 reported that doctors had joined the Nazi Party earlier and in greater numbers than any other professional group. Some came to be known as “racial scientists.”

These ideas were also being debated outside Germany. The theories legislated by Hitler’s government were considered reasonable and important by scientists in many other countries. The eugenics movement had widespread support in the United States, Scandinavia, France and England. As a member of Parliament, Winston Churchill was a supporter of the British Eugenics Society. Other supporters in England included authors D.H. Lawrence, H.G. Wells and Aldous Huxley.

The original US Holocaust Museum exhibition has been transposed and expanded in this Canadian version, which is fully bilingual and includes a section about Canada. We are reminded that sterilization laws were passed in both Alberta (1928) and British Columbia (1933). Even the venerable Tommy Douglas, father of Canadian medicare, proposed such programs in the 1930s, although later, as Saskatchewan’s minister of health, he rejected 2 reports recommending sterilization.

In fact, the first issue of this journal (CMAJ 1911;1[1]:3-17) features an arti-



This image, which was reproduced in a high school biology textbook by Jakob Graf, illustrates Nazi propaganda on the need to prevent births of the “unfit.” The text reads: “You are sharing the load! A hereditarily ill person costs 50,000 reichsmarks on average up to the age of sixty.”

cle entitled “The Ancient Foundations of Heredity” by A.B. Macallum PhD, Professor of Biochemistry, University of Toronto, in which he states that “Racial degeneration is a disease....”

This is an exhibit that one goes through with head bowed, and rightly so. The archival materials gathered here deserve careful reading, and a person is bowed with shame by the meticulous theory of hatred that amasses under the banners of health and public good.

On the cover of Germany’s *Na-*

tional Health Guardian, 1935, Hitler is shown as the doctor of the “Eternal People” (*Volk*) as he crouches to tell children, “You are my blood.” The culmination of such propaganda and government policies came in October 1939, when Hitler sent a memo to his personal physician, Dr. Karl Brandt, authorizing “mercy deaths” for the “incurable.” The note was backdated to Sept. 1, 1939, to coincide with the invasion of Poland. Tens of thousands of people died in Poland by the sanction of this note; they were “life unworthy of life.”

After this, the medicalization of anti-Semitism was swift. A poster, from Krakow, Poland in 1942, reads: “Jews are lice. They cause typhus.”

The last sections of the exhibit features filmed interviews with survivors, and finally, a reckoning: what became of the doctors who implemented these policies and the scientists who advocated these atrocities? Most are not known to us as monsters. Many continued their research into old age.

It hurts to know, but we owe this memory-work the vigil of our attendance. To not forget is the challenge.

“Who will be able to trust his doctor anymore?” asked Clemens August von Galen, Bishop of Münster, in a public sermon on Aug. 3, 1941. Yet we do.

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Phil Hall’s book of poems, *An Oak Hunch* (Brick Books), was nominated for the Griffin Poetry Prize in 2006.

Further reading

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Weikart R. *From Darwin to Hitler: evolutionary ethics, eugenics, and racism in Germany*. Basingstoke (UK): Palgrave Macmillan; 2004.

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