

## Sex and sin

David Berger

I had always known that my maternal grandfather, a Jew and a society gynaecologist in the swinging Berlin of the 1920s and 1930s, had written a book analysing the roots of sexuality and its position in modern society. But, like his detective novel, *Sperm Type D1*, in which the fetus of a drowned woman is transferred to another woman's womb, I had always presumed that all the copies had been incinerated in the book burnings which characterised the early years of the Third Reich. What a surprise, then, to come across a copy of *Sex and Sin—The Crisis in Sexuality and the Decline of Marriage* by Dr Heinz Schmeidler in my parents' attic.

I picked up the red, cloth backed book and opened it with some trepidation. I had been brought up to regard my grandfather, who I never met, as a man of great intellectual gifts and much larger than life. Overflowing with humour and kindness, he was the darling of the Berlin film and theatre set in those Bohemian years before everything went so horribly wrong.

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His surgery was two floors above the fashionable Café Kranzler in central Berlin and one floor above the offices of the German Stage and Theatre Club. He was also doctor to the Ufa film studios, and it was not long before he was on the closest of terms with such icons as the directors Max Reinhardt and Fritz Kortner and actresses from Marlene Dietrich to Lilli Palmer and Greta Moosheim. My mother still vividly remembers the parties he used to give in his spacious apartment: the stage and film stars doing impromptu turns, her mother dancing an imitation of Felix the Cat on the grand piano (she was thereafter known as Felix until her suicide in Chile in 1943), and people kissing when they weren't even saying hello or goodbye.

Was I now to find out that he was merely a cipher, someone whose reputation had been greatly exaggerated by an understandably nostalgic retrospective on a golden age, someone who had jumped on the liberal, psychoanalytic bandwagon of the times?

I started to read. Thankfully, I was not to be disappointed. I quickly realised that this

was something of worth in its own right; a little dated, perhaps, but the work of a reasonable, openminded, and modern man. Running through it there were unmistakable psychoanalytic influences—every kind of fetishism (he used the word loosely) was deemed to be explicable in terms of early childhood experience—but it was an educated critique of contemporary sexuality and certainly no more partisan than any of today's equivalents. He considered bestiality as abnormal, but spent many pages defending homosexuality as an acceptable, commonplace practice known from ancient times. He antedated Alex Comfort by 40 years in highlighting the eroticism of the smell of sweat and genital secretions and gave a detailed account of the place of "69 (soixante neuf)" in sexual history. Further chapters tackled topics including masturbation (onanism), sexuality in film and dance, the nature of eroticism and sex in art, sex in religion, and women's rights, each of which was further accompanied by shockingly graphic photographs.

By the time I finished it I knew that accounts of him had not been exaggerated, and I was even more regretful that I never met him. His life story was a remarkable one and marks him out as a survivor.

The holder of an Iron Cross, won on the Western Front in the war to end all wars, he left Berlin one morning in 1936 when he received a telephone call from his good friend, Count von Helldorf, the city's police chief. Helldorf was able to give him only an hour's notice of his impending arrest and so he left in the middle of a surgery, kissed my mother goodbye, and made his way to the airport, where he got a flight to London. He received only a three months' visa and in desperation contacted the Egyptian embassy, mentioning the name of a prominent Egyptian politician whom he had treated for venereal disease in Berlin some years before. He was soon living in Cairo, under the patronage of this man who had subsequently risen to great heights.

In Egypt the gynaecologist became a scrap metal merchant and thrived for almost 20 years in the city's cosmopolitan atmosphere, marrying a pretty, young, Greek-Alexandrian Jewess. Then came the Suez crisis, however, and once more he found himself on a plane out of the country, with nothing more than the clothes he stood up in.

His options were limited, but one country which did not interest him was Israel. The story is told of a visit to Palestine before the war, when he overheard two street sweepers at work: "Are we finished, Herr Doktor?" asked the one, "Nein, Herr Professor, I think we

have missed a spot here," replied the other. He decided that the country was not for him. So he went, surprisingly, back to Berlin, where he retook his qualifying exams and became a general practitioner in one of the city's southern suburbs. To the Berlin press this was a heaven sent opportunity to expunge some of its collective guilt and shame and it made much of Dr Schmeidler, who after 20 years of exile had come back to the city he had always regarded as home. He, in his turn, seemed to bear no resentment and practised happily for several years before dying prematurely of lung cancer.

There are several reasons for my writing this brief biography of my grandfather. Certainly, he was an outrageous publicist, tremendous egotist, and inveterate medical writer, and I think it would have given him much guffawing satisfaction to see himself featured in the *BMJ*.

Also, in the present, unforgiving climate towards asylum seekers, I think that it is important to reflect on the lessons of the past. My grandfather made his own luck, but those

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standing in the endless queues for too few visas outside the British and American embassies in Berlin never had the chance to. Similar sentiments have been expressed many times before and will no doubt be expressed many times again, but if the only legacy of those pitiful lines is that we stand by and allow people in similar situations the same fate then we are undeserving of being called a civilised nation.

And finally, like the recent reviewer of an enlightened, pacifist book written in the early 1930s by another German, Jewish doctor,<sup>1</sup> almost all copies of which were subsequently burnt, along with the man himself and his entire family, I refuse to let the Nazis have the last laugh and extinguish all references to his remarkable book.

Oh, and if anyone does come across a copy of *Sperm Type D1* by Dr Heinz Schmeidler, I'd love to know.—DAVID BERGER is a senior house officer in psychiatry in Barnstaple

<sup>1</sup> Van den Dungen P. Dr Emil Flusser: forgotten precursor of the medical peace movement. *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* 1996;12:90-106.