

Erwin Gustav Niessl von Mayendorf (1873–1943)

Holger Steinberg

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Niessl von Mayendorf was born in Brno on 20 July 1873 [2, 9]. Intellectually mentored by his father, vice-chancellor of Brno technical college, and trained at the local grammar school, he studied medicine and philosophy in Berlin and Vienna and obtained a doctorate in both subjects. Niessl von Mayendorf visited Leipzig, probably for the first time, in October 1900, where he applied for an assistantship at the university's psychiatric and neurological hospital. Its director, Paul Flechsig, was to become the young brain researcher's mentor, to whom he eagerly returned in 1908 after studies in Breslau and Halle (with

Carl Wernicke), Munich and Hamburg. Under Flechsig's guidance he qualified as a university lecturer, his second thesis being on amnesia. Unfortunately, as a citizen of the Austrian Hungarian Empire he faced the unsatisfactory situation of not being allowed to practice in Germany until 1913. Hence he primarily undertook research at Flechsig's laboratory for brain anatomy until World War I, when his homeland required his services as a neurologist and chief of the military hospital in Brno. He made an impact at that time with his works on forms of tremors and epilepsy in the army, tactile blindness and amnesia following gunshot wounds, injuries in the parietal area and somatoform disorders such as hysterical paraplegia after gunshots and trembling in front-line soldiers; subsequently these works have been rather neglected by researchers. After the end of World War I, he returned to Leipzig, where Flechsig made him head of the brain research laboratory and he was finally allowed to open his private practice. In pursuit of his scientific ambitions he published a total of more than 120 papers, mostly on brain anatomy, localization of language in the brain [4, 6] or chorea [7], but also on psychiatric issues. This finally led to his appointment in 1925 as associate professor for psychiatry and neurology. Throughout his life he was especially concerned with aphasia [3, 5], in the historiography of which he has not been acknowledged as much as Broca, Wernicke, Marie or Goldstein. One factor may have been a certain neglect of German science by other European countries in that era [8]. A second reason may have been Niessl von Mayendorf's central theory of right-brain language function, according to which most aphasic symptoms were caused by the right brain intervening in case of injuries to the left hemisphere. Recently however, the importance of the right hemisphere in functional reorganisation and compensation after brain

H. Steinberg (✉)
Archiv für Leipziger Psychiatriegeschichte, Universität Leipzig,
Simmelweisstr. 10, 04103 Leipzig, Germany
e-mail: holger.steinberg@uniklinik-leipzig.de

injuries has again come under attention [1], partly through modern imaging methods.

Niessl von Mayendorf's life demonstrates that even scientists who have strived hard to shed light on mental phenomena and who had insight in the interrelation of delusional processes and hypnoses may, unfortunately, fall prey to mass hysteria and the madness of nationalist hubris. Thus in October 1933 he submitted himself to his new Nazi employers by declaring "that in pre-war time I opposed, yes, even fought foreign races and ... sacrificed my career. To a great extent it was the position of power these elements then had in Austria that made me establish a foothold in Germany." It is uncertain whether this statement expressed genuine conviction or was caused by a fear of dismissal. Yet it is indisputable that later in the Nazi years Niessl von Mayendorf was led to a drastically different moral stance. In the spring of 1938 he took part in an international congress of the "Société de Neurologie" in Paris and successfully presented his hypothesis that the corpus callosum consisted of commissural fibres, prompting new ideas about the interactions between the two hemispheres. In his compulsory report to the education minister of the Reich, he characterized the reception he received and his contact with his French colleagues as "as kind as it was honourable." One can imagine that Niessl was well aware of the insubordination such a provocative summary represented, against a background seething with hatred against the arch enemy responsible for the 'disgraceful' Treaty of Versailles. Small wonder, therefore, that the request of Leipzig University's medical faculty to the education minister to renew his lectureship, though

explicitly supported by the Vice Chancellor, was not approved. Niessl von Mayendorf was released from all duties and retired, officially, on the occasion of his 65th birthday in 1937. Although no sources could be traced to support this notion, one can reasonably assume that he shared the fate of many other older professors who were regarded as politically too unreliable to be entrusted with training a new Nazi elite, a procedure followed in several other instances by the education minister. Consequently the Niessl von Mayendorfs spent their last years in financial hardship, leading his widow to have to beg for a pension from the university after her husband's death on 15 July 1943.

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