



More on Asperger's Career: A Reply to Czech

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Published online: 10 June 2019

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Abstract

Czech's claims that my paper abounds with mistranslations, misrepresentations, and factual errors are refuted point-by-point, as is his declaration that the paper contains no relevant or new evidence. Asperger's statements that Franz Hamburger saved him from the Gestapo are reaffirmed and supported with a personal communication from Asperger's daughter, Dr. Maria Asperger Felder. Czech's criticism of anonymous peer reviewers and his call for retraction of my paper are, at best, unconstructive. In light of the current resurgence of authoritarian governments that promote xenophobic and racist ideology in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, it is essential that details about the Nazi euthanasia program continue to be recalled and deliberated, as they are in this exchange. I stand by my paper.

Keywords Am Spiegelgrund · Euthanasia · Hans Asperger · Herwig Czech · Nazi-era Vienna · T4

Text

In a previous paper (Falk 2019), I defended Hans Asperger, the noted Austrian pediatrician who was a pioneer in the field of autism, against claims by Herwig Czech (2018) and Edith Sheffer (2018) that Asperger was complicit in legitimizing Nazi policies and, more specifically, that he referred two girls to the Viennese Am Spiegelgrund facility knowing that they could become victims of the Nazi euthanasia program there. I demonstrated that the timing of the referrals of the girls to Am Spiegelgrund, as well as other circumstances, strongly suggest that Asperger was not aware that children were being murdered there when the referrals were made. In his response to my paper (Czech 2019), Czech questions my conclusion, as well as the judgment of the parties who participated in the peer review process preceding my paper's acceptance. His central claim is that I hopelessly confused Am Spiegelgrund with the Nazi's so-called 'T4' or 'Aktion T4' program: "Throughout her paper, she [Falk] wrongly attributes the Viennese Spiegelgrund facility—where Herta

Schreiber and Elisabeth Schreiber along with hundreds of other children were killed in the so called 'child euthanasia' program—to 'Aktion T4,' the killing of psychiatric patients in six centralized killing centers equipped with gas chambers and crematoria. This severely compromises the entire argument around Hitler's 'halt' to Aktion T4 and... also raises the question of how such a fundamental error could have passed peer review" (Czech 2019, p. 2–3)... "Spiegelgrund was not part of 'Aktion T4'" (Czech 2019, p. 4).

My paper does not discuss the killings at the six centers, let alone "attribute" Am Spiegelgrund to them. It does, however, describe the murders of children at Am Spiegelgrund as part of the T4 program (the term I use rather than 'Aktion T4'). Although some scholars view T4 as independent from the Nazi child euthanasia program, others take a broader perspective, i.e., that "the entire hierarchy of the T4 Program" encompassed the murders of children as well as adults (Crawford 2015, p. 62; see p. 64 for diagram of the T4 hierarchy). Thus, "Operation T4" is described as "the euthanasia program ... that had been carried out by the Nazis between late 1938 and August 1941" (Crawford 2015, p. 59). Similarly, "the children at Spiegelgrund included those selected by T4 categories" (Martens 2004, p. 620) and "Am Spiegelgrund ... was a centre of 'child euthanasia', part of what was later called Aktion T4" (Baron-Cohen 2018, p. 305).

A central point of my paper is that Asperger was not aware of the killings at Am Spiegelgrund, and nothing in Czech's quarrel about my connecting T4 and Am Spiegelgrund

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undermines that argument. Significantly, Czech himself previously recognized the connection between these two facets of the euthanasia program when he observed that “Erwin Jekelius ... became the main organizer of the ‘T4’ killing operation in Vienna. He made sure that local authorities and hospitals cooperated and that the operation ran smoothly. From June 1940 to the end of 1941, Jekelius directed the child killing facility Am Spiegelgrund, where hundreds of disabled children were murdered” (Czech 2018, p. 15).

Hitler’s Halt

Czech states that it was misleading for me to refer to Hitler’s false halt to T4 as “a ‘Nazi public relations ploy’” (Czech 2019, p. 3) and that because “Spiegelgrund was not part of ‘Aktion T4’ ... [it was] not affected by Hitler’s ‘halt’ order” (Czech 2019, p. 4). It is widely acknowledged, however, that Hitler’s order to end the euthanasia program on August 24, 1941 was “issued to stop public outcry” (Crawford 2015, p. 81) because, by then, “there was too much public awareness and outcry over the action” (Hepburn 2014, p. 43). Under these circumstances, the characterization of Hitler’s so-called halt as a ‘public relations ploy’ seems apt (Falk 2019, Appendix 2, p. 19). The reason Am Spiegelgrund was not affected by the halt was not because that institution wasn’t part of the broad T4 program. Rather, it was because “Hitler halted the programme, but this official response to protest was deceptive. The ‘halt’ only applied to killing centres and did not apply to children” (Martin 2013, p. 4).

Czech claims I view the halt “order (or Bishop Galen’s sermon that prompted it) [as] a relevant potential source of information on Spiegelgrund for Asperger (which it was not)” (Czech 2019, p. 3) and that my argument is based on a false premise “that information on the murders started to spread only after the ‘halt’ order” (Czech 2019, p. 3). But the date of Hitler’s halt *is* relevant because one can use it to gauge whether or not the public’s awareness of euthanasia that prompted the halt included the murders of children referred to Am Spiegelgrund from the Kinderklinik, in which case one might buy the claim that Asperger would also have known what was going on there. However, the chronology of the murders of children referred by the Kinderklinik shows that the general public would not have been aware that it was sending children to Am Spiegelgrund for the simple reason that 40 of the 44 known children so referred (Häupl 2006) were not murdered until *after* the pseudo halt (Falk 2019, Table 1). This counters the insinuation that Asperger must have known because of public protests that referring the two Schreiber girls (Herta and Elisabeth) to Am Spiegelgrund would endanger their lives. Clearly, the highly secret T4 murders of children referred from the Kinderklinik to Am

Spiegelgrund had not become public knowledge at the time Asperger made the ‘referrals’ (Falk 2019, Table 1).

But could Asperger have had insider knowledge that children referred to Am Spiegelgrund from the Kinderklinik were being murdered when he referred Herta there and consulted about Elisabeth (see below)? Czech seems to think so when he states that my argument was based on a false premise, “notably that Asperger’s colleagues (including the director Franz Hamburger) were also in the dark regarding Spiegelgrund’s true purpose” (Czech 2019, p. 3). The suggestion that I assumed Hamburger and his colleagues were in the dark is a mischaracterization of the point I actually made, which was that Hamburger and his colleagues would not have been likely to have shared any knowledge of Am Spiegelgrund killings with Asperger: “Given the likelihood that these four deaths would not (yet) have been perceived as likely murders, given the intense secrecy of the nascent T4 program in Austria (Martin 2013), and given that Asperger was a highly observant Catholic who did not belong to the Nazi party ..., it stretches credulity to think that his Nazi boss (Franz Hamburger ...) or colleagues from the departments at the Children’s clinic that made the referrals would have admitted to him that they had begun sending children to Am Spiegelgrund knowing that they might (or would) be murdered” (Falk 2019, pp. 4–5).

Other Matters

Czech criticizes my heavy reliance on online engines to translate articles from German to English and makes a blanket assertion that my paper “abounds with mistranslations, misrepresentations of the content of sources, and basic factual errors” (Czech 2019, p. 1). The accuracy of the translations is what is important, of course, not how they are accomplished. I make it a point to cite the specific pages for all of the material I translate (or quote) so that anyone can check the original sources as, indeed, Czech has done. Below, I address Czech’s specific claims.

Czech specifies two errors in my translation of Asperger’s 1938 paper. The first concerns my translation of “Aus der Heilpädagogischen Abteilung der Wiener Universitäts Kinderklinik (Vorstand: Prof. F. Hamburger)” (conveying where the paper originated) as “From the curative education department of the Vienna University Children’s Hospital (Board: Prof. F. Hamburger)” (Falk 2019, Appendix 1, p. 1). Czech’s objection to this translation is that “Franz Hamburger was not the ‘board’ of the Vienna University Clinic, but its director or chairman” (Czech 2019, p. 2, footnote 1). My translation of “Vorstand” to “Board” (which can also be translated as “Board of Directors”) was literal. In the same footnote, Czech points out that I mistook ‘fördern’ in the original 1938 paper as ‘fordern’ and, thus, erroneously

translated what should have been ‘promote’ to ‘demand.’ Czech is right; the corrected sentence in Appendix 1 should, therefore, read “You know what measures are being taken to prevent the transmission of abnormal genes that in many cases cause hereditary disorders and to promote hereditary health.”¹

In an entry of October 27, 1941 on Elisabeth Schreiber’s medical chart Asperger included the sentence “Am ehestend käme der ‘Spiegelgrund’ in Frage” (Czech 2018, p. 22, Fig. 10), which Czech translated (and continues to translate) as “Spiegelgrund would be the best possibility” (Czech 2018, p. 22; Czech 2019, p. 5). I translated it as “Most likely the ‘Spiegelgrund’ came into question” (Falk 2019, p. 4). I have asked several adults who are fluent in German how they would translate the sentence. One observes “there seems to be a typo with ‘ehestend.’ I have only seen it written as ehestens” and translates it as “Most likely Spiegelgrund would come into question.” (This is very close to my translation but, as Czech notes, I erred in using “came” instead of “would come.”) Another person, who also notes the d in ehestend seems to be a typo, uses ehesten [as does Czech] and translates the sentence as “At the earliest the Spiegelgrund would come in question.” Czech’s statement that “*infrage kommen* means ‘to be an option,’ not ‘to come into question’” (Czech 2019, p. 5) is inconsistent with, not only these translations, but also some offered by translation engines (e.g., DeepL provides alternative translations of *infrage kommen* as “come into question,” “be worth considering,” “be possible,” and “be eligible”). Another person suggests a translation that is less literal but may well capture Asperger’s intended meaning: “‘Spiegelgrund’ seems to be an acceptable choice.” Czech’s inclusion of the superlative ‘best’ in his translation contrasts with the other translations. What is important to keep in mind, however, is that Czech regards this specific entry as evidence that Asperger “was willing to accept the killing of children” (Czech 2018, p. 31). This argument is unpersuasive in light of the fact (discussed above) that euthanasia of children referred to Am Spiegelgrund by the Kinderklinik had barely raised its ugly head when Asperger wrote the entry on Elisabeth’s medical chart (same for Asperger’s referral of Herta Schreiber to that institution) (Falk 2019, Table 1).

Czech asserts that “[Falk] repeatedly refers to ... ‘Asperger’s sustained campaign on behalf of disabled children’ (p. 2) and his ‘advocacy for disabled children’ (p. 6).... This ‘campaign’ is another construction based on a misrepresentation of the sources. It ignores the fact that Asperger in

the quoted passages did not refer to ‘disabled children,’ but to those with ‘mental abnormalities’” (Czech 2019, p. 7). From this, one might think I misquote Asperger by translating what should be ‘children with mental abnormalities’ to ‘disabled children’ on pages 2 and 6 of my paper, which is not the case (nor on any other page, for that matter). Rather, I use the term ‘disabled’ in my own voice to mean “impaired or limited by a physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition” (Merriam-Webster 2019). ‘Disabled’ fairly describes the range of impairments present in Asperger’s various patients and, thus, appropriately refers to them. Indeed, Czech seems to use ‘disabled’ similarly when he notes that “Jekelius directed the child killing facility Am Spiegelgrund, where hundreds of disabled children were murdered” (Czech 2018, p. 15).

My actual discussions and quotations of Asperger’s work (of which there are many) make it clear that he cared for children with ‘mental abnormalities’ as well as other impairments. For example, I note that the range of abilities in Asperger’s patients ‘encompasses all levels of ability from the highly original genius ... down to the most severe contact-disturbed ... mentally retarded individual.... (Asperger 1944, p. 74)’ (Falk 2019, p. 8). Asperger’s concern about mental abnormalities is also explicit in my translation of his 1938 paper, “The mentally abnormal child,” and in my quotations from his numerous papers (Falk 2019, Appendices 1 and 2). The same is true for his ongoing advocacy for disabled children.

Czech states “Any meaningful argument, therefore, must focus on the stance that Asperger took vis-à-vis the ‘hopeless’ cases such as ... Elisabeth Schreiber and Herta Schreiber. Falk’s paper ... completely ignores this entire line of argument.... Tellingly, the one publication by Asperger that specifically refers to the condition he attributed to Herta and Elisabeth, ‘postencephalitic’ brain damage, which he deemed often hopeless, is not mentioned in Falk’s paper” (Czech 2019, pp. 7–8). Czech is, again, mistaken. I, in fact, write that “Asperger and his colleagues’ ‘practical’ work went against the Nazi grain because it circumvented the law for sterilization ... Asperger, for instance, argued that brain damage due to birth injury or encephalitis in early childhood was not hereditary (Asperger 1944, p. 50) and, therefore, not covered by the sterilization law, for example in the case of Theresa B. (Czech 2018, p. 19). (From this perspective, it is noteworthy that his assessments of both Herta Schreiber (Czech 2018, p. 20) and Elisabeth Schreiber (Czech 2018, p. 22) mentioned the likelihood of ‘post-encephalitic’ etiologies” (Falk 2019, p. 10). Contrary to Czech, there isn’t just one publication in which Asperger discussed postencephalitic brain damage; he did so in at least two others (Asperger 1942, p. 356; Asperger 1944, pp. 49–50) that followed a (third) earlier discussion of possible sequela from encephalitis (Asperger 1937, p. 1460).

¹ Dr. Elga Wulfert, whose first language in German, kindly provided advice about my translation of Asperger’s 1938 article. I introduced the error when I did a last-minute check of the sentence in question after she had read and commented on the full translation.

Rather than ignoring “the stance that Asperger took ... [toward] ‘hopeless’ cases” (Czech 2019, p. 8), I discuss Asperger’s concern for children who were too seriously ill to be cared for as outpatients or by their families and point out that he had recommended institutionalization for them since at least 1936 (Asperger 1937). Such referrals were (and still are) a standard medical practice in 20th century Austria and elsewhere (Falk 2019, Appendix 2). (For example, Rosemary Kennedy, the brain-damaged sister of former President John F. Kennedy, was institutionalized in the United States [Larson 2015]). Asperger’s ‘referrals’ of the two Schreiber girls should be seen in this context, rather than viewed as an indication that Asperger “was willing to accept the killing of children as a last resort” (Czech 2018, p. 31).

On April 17, 1942, 6 months after Asperger’s entry on Elisabeth Schreiber’s medical chart, he published that “the more difficult cases can only be done justice through long-term inpatient observation, as is the case in the Curative Education Department of the Children’s Clinic and the ‘Am Spiegelgrund’ Welfare Institution.... We have to stand up for people who are socially at risk” (Asperger 1942, p. 355, translated by DF). As discussed in my paper, it requires great cynicism to think that Asperger would have compared Am Spiegelgrund favorably to his own clinic if he even suspected at the time that children were being murdered at the former (Falk 2019). Because of this, and because of the admission dates of the 44 children who were referred by personnel from the Children’s Kinderklinik to Am Spiegelgrund where they were eventually murdered (Falk 2019, Table 1), I continue to think that Asperger had not learned about the killings at Am Spiegelgrund as of April 17, 1942, let alone by the earlier dates when he ‘referred’ the Schreiber girls.

Czech remains skeptical of Asperger’s statement in 1962 (Asperger 1962) that “he [Hamburger] felt impelled to save me twice from being arrested by the Gestapo with personal commitment and risking considerable danger to himself, although he knew very well that my ideological and political convictions ran counter to his own. I will not forget this!” (Czech 2018, p. 34, translated by Czech). The reason Czech questions Asperger’s veracity is largely because “1962 is the first known mention of the alleged Gestapo episode” (Czech 2018, p. 34). However, as mentioned in my paper, this is not true because Asperger wrote in 1957 that he would “not forget my teacher’s [i.e., Hamburger’s] loyalty, which saved my life and liberty with a commitment that put him at risk, knowing that I did not share his political conviction, prescribed at the time” (Asperger 1957, p. 549, translated by DF). Despite the strong similarities between these remarks (as one can see by comparing them), Czech dismisses the likelihood that they refer to the same incidents because the one from 1957 does not contain “any reference to the

Gestapo” (Czech 2019, p. 7)! In any event, these were not the only times Asperger discussed these episodes of Nazi persecution. Asperger spoke of Hamburger having saved him twice from the Gestapo in a 1974 Austrian Broadcasting Corporation radio interview (Asperger Felder 2008), which the reader may listen to, albeit in German (ORF 1974). Significantly, all five of Asperger’s children recall talks about these incidents around the dinner table, when personal friends or colleagues from the department of Heilpädagogik visited the family (Maria Asperger Felder, personal communication of May 18, 2019).²

Czech states, “she [Falk] even goes so far as to falsely attribute the claim of an ‘investigation by the Gestapo’ to me by combining it (within brackets) with a direct quote from my paper (Falk 2019, p. 5)” (Czech 2019, p. 6). Rather than falsely attributing to Czech the claim that Asperger was investigated by the Gestapo (which would be absurd), my bracketed phrase “investigation by the Gestapo” refers to Czech’s use of “persecution by the Gestapo” in the quoted passage.” Thus, Czech’s passage that is the source for my quote reads: “This investigation in all likelihood constituted the basis for Asperger’s claim, made 24 years later, that he had faced persecution by the Gestapo. Hamburger was certainly in a position to decisively influence the outcome of such a procedure, by vouching for his protégé’s willingness to cooperate with the regime” (Czech 2018, p. 9). My comment that refers to this passage is: “Czech speculates that Hamburger, who was not only Asperger’s mentor but also an active member of the Nazi party, was a likely source for the above investigations: ‘Hamburger was certainly in a position to decisively influence the outcome of such a procedure [investigation by the Gestapo]’ (Czech 2018, p. 9)” (Falk 2019, p. 5).

Regarding the investigation of Asperger by the Nazis, Czech wrote: “Initially, before Asperger had a chance to prove his willingness to adjust to the new political order, the NSDAP was unsure about his loyalty. Immediately following the Anschluss, a preliminary investigation was initiated to decide whether the ‘Decree for the Reorganization of the Austrian Professional Civil Service’ ... which stipulated the dismissal of Jewish and politically undesirable officials ... applied to Asperger” (Czech 2018, p. 8). Although Czech now asserts that “the ‘preliminary investigation’ opened in 1938 was part of a general vetting operation of all public employees” (Czech 2019, p. 6), the fact remains that the Nazis repeatedly investigated Asperger for nearly 3 years after the Anschluss, as documented in eleven official reports (the 10th of which, dated November 9, 1940, was from the

² Dr. Asperger Felder accompanied her personal communication with a statement notarized on May 17, 2019, which provides details about the five children’s recollections.

Vienna Gestapo [Czech 2018, p. 8 and endnote 38³] that are translated and discussed sporadically by Czech and/or Sheffer, and are presented in chronological order in Appendix 2 of my paper (Falk 2019). As discussed above, Hamburger was likely instrumental in Asperger's having weathered the ongoing investigation. Thus, rather than being routine, these numerous reports lend credence to Asperger's published and oral statements (and his children's recollections) that Hamburger saved him from the Gestapo on two occasions. On a related matter, Czech's assertion that "the Nazis ... rewarded him [Asperger] with an academic career" (Czech 2019, p. 7) doesn't ring true. Asperger wasn't rewarded with a career, he *earned* it through years of tenacious, dedicated, and sometimes dangerous work.

Summary and Conclusions

Since my paper does not discuss the murders of psychiatric patients at six centralized killing centers, Czech's claim that, because I discuss Am Spiegelgrund in the context of T4, I attribute Am Spiegelgrund to killings at those centers is, in my view, a totally irrelevant red herring. Nevertheless, I see it as a useful red herring because it prompts discussion about what T4 actually was as well as Am Spiegelgrund's role in it. As detailed above, Czech is wrong when he concludes from my paper that I: (1) believe that certain colleagues of Asperger (e.g., Franz Hamburger) were in the dark regarding euthanasia at Am Spiegelgrund, (2) attribute the claim that Asperger was investigated by the Gestapo to him (i.e., Czech), (3) misuse (or, worse, misquote) the word 'disabled' when describing Asperger's patients, (4) ignore Asperger's discussions of children with 'mental abnormalities' and his stance on 'hopeless' cases, and (5) do not mention, let alone discuss, Asperger's discussions about postencephalitic brain damage.

Czech's allegation that my paper "does not contain a single relevant piece of new evidence" (Czech 2019, p. 1) is also mistaken. As far as I know, Table 1 is the first that tabulates chronologically ordered data for the 44 children referred to Am Spiegelgrund (where they were subsequently murdered) by personnel from the Kinderklinik along with the dates of Am Spiegelgrund's opening and Hitler's false halt to the T4 program (Falk 2019, Table 1). This information sheds new light on Czech's (and Edith Sheffer's) assertions that Asperger must have known about euthanasia at that facility when he made the 'referrals' for the two Schreiber girls. Sheffer's (2018) claim that Asperger's research was 'thin' and that his definition of 'autistic psychopathy' shifted over time is refuted with new material in my paper, which

includes a full translation of Asperger's 1938 paper and the revelation that an unknown boy discussed therein was the same individual as Ernst K. in Asperger's 1944 paper. Calling attention to Asperger's 1957 comment about Hamburger's having "saved [his] life and liberty" is also new and adds weight to his other statements about having been pursued by the Gestapo.

Although Czech shares some of my reservations about Sheffer's assessment of Asperger's scholarship and agrees that there is a case for Asperger having had chronological priority over Leo Kanner, his criticism of the anonymous peer reviewers of my paper (who were quite helpful) and his call for its retraction are, at best, unconstructive. Because of the xenophobic and racist prejudices that shape current political events in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, it is essential that details about Nazism, including the Nazi euthanasia program, continue to be deliberated. I, for one, am grateful to *JADD* for publishing the present back-and-forth discussion, and I stand by my paper.

Acknowledgments Dr. Ruth Pauli (Vienna, Austria), and Barbara H. Weber Yoffee and Dr. Norman Yoffee (Santa Fe, New Mexico) kindly shared their thoughts about how to translate "*Am ehestend käme der 'Spiegelgrund' in Frage.*" Ernst Tatzler, MD (Hinterbrühl, Austria) offered helpful comments on an earlier draft of this reply. I am grateful to Maria Asperger Felder, MD (Zürich, Switzerland) for providing information about her family's recollections regarding Franz Hamburger's role in protecting her father (Hans Asperger) from the Gestapo. Franz Waldhauser, MD (Vienna, Austria) provided publications, documents, discussion, and feedback about the various topics considered in this reply, which I deeply appreciate. The opinions expressed in this reply are solely those of the author.

Author Contribution DF conceived and wrote the article.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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³ This endnote is mislabeled as 37 in Czech's text.

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