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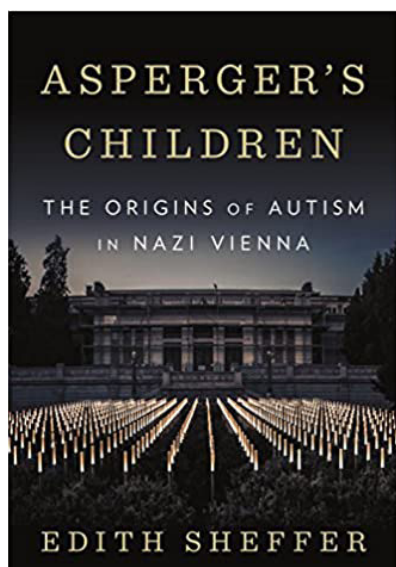
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# Asperger's Grim Legacy

*Asperger's Children: The Origins of Autism in Nazi Vienna* by Edith Sheffer  
(W.W. Norton, 2018)

“Born to see, appointed to watch, sworn to this tower, I enjoy the world.”  
—Johann Goethe, *Faust*



It's always shocking to discover that your personal hero, or at the very least an acclaimed cultural hero who appeared to champion your cause, actually had quite a different set of motives and intentions than those for which he was widely lauded. So it was with a considerable sense of disillusionment that I encountered the stellar historical research by Edith Sheffer in the recent book she wrote on Hans Asperger, whose daughter has said that he often likened himself to Lynceus, the tower warden in Goethe's *Faust*. That Asperger held such a lofty, idealized opinion of himself becomes clear in Sheffer's tome, which delves deeply into the disturbing

origins of the concept of “autistic psychopathy” itself and the pivotal role that Hans Asperger played in categorizing and classifying the neurodiverse individuals—mostly children—who came to his Viennese clinic for help.

In the interest of full disclosure (something that “my kind” are often prone to), I used to have Asperger's syndrome, but I had to give it up for my health. Not only am I not half joking, I'm not joking at all. Part of what enabled me to dispense with all therapeutic labels of any kind was the discovery of Edith Sheffer's *Asperger's Children* (2018), recently reprinted by W.W. Norton. This book is so startling in its historical revelations that it makes me wonder why so few scholars have examined what Sheffer makes plain: Asperger did not resist national socialism and “race hygiene” in Nazi-era Vienna. In fact, it enveloped him, and he played a central role in sending children with cognitive disabilities to the notorious Spiegelgrund facility, where hundreds

were euthanized as part of Aktion T4. As Sheffer diligently chronicles, the doctor has long been seen—usually as a result of his own historical revision—as a brave resister of the Third Reich. Yet his own work was inextricably linked with the rise of Nazism and its deadly programs.

Asperger first encountered Nazi child psychiatry when he traveled from Vienna to Germany in 1934 at the age of 28, where his senior colleagues, mentors, and teachers were just then developing the diagnosis of “social shortcomings” for children whom they claimed lacked appropriate connection to their community, and who were reluctant to join in collective Reich activities such as the Hitler Youth. At first, in 1937, it appeared that Asperger warned against classifying such children, stating that “it is impossible to establish a rigid set of characteristics for a diagnosis” (as cited in Sheffer, 2018, p.81). But only one year later, after the Nazi annexation of Austria in 1938 and the accompanying purge of Asperger’s Jewish and liberal associates from the University of Vienna, he announced that all medicine should be brought into alignment with the principles of National Socialism. He then introduced his doctrinaire diagnosis of social detachment: “autistic psychopathy,” referring to autists as “intelligent automata,” and warning that “less favorable cases” would wander the streets as adults, “grotesque and dilapidated” (as cited in Sheffer, 2018, p. 179).

Asperger’s original paper on autism, published in 1944 at the height of war, provides telling, if distressing, examples of his autocratic assessments of the children in his clinic. One case scrutinized by Sheffer in her astute archaeology of Asperger’s now notorious “Curative Education Clinic” is the young boy named Harro, whose peculiarities of character and expression caused him to stand out from the rest of his peers. Differences such as his, and many others, were becoming more and more objectionable in the Third Reich, and doctors and nurses in Asperger’s wards were working to “develop” the children. As Sheffer puts it, “Asperger held that with proper understanding, love and guidance they could find their place in the organism of the social community” (p. 12).

But Harro was difficult to test, often uncooperative, and unsuccessful in conventional tasks, although in certain skills, most notably mathematics, he demonstrated abilities far beyond his age group, from which he held himself aloof and non-participatory. Asperger concluded, somewhat presumptuously

in Sheffer's estimation, that Harro's real problem was his lack of what he called a "social feeling." It was at this point that Asperger declared him to be an example of autistic psychopathy. But because of his obvious, if severely focused, intelligence, Asperger considered him on the "favorable" end of the autistic "range" (as cited in Sheffer, p. 13). Asperger championed Harro, but as Sheffer so clearly, and often harrowingly, illustrates in her book, his advocacy was selective:

While Asperger did support children he deemed to be teachable, defending their disabilities, he was dismissive about those he believed to be more disabled. Deprecatory pronouncements could be a death sentence in the Third Reich. And in fact, some of Asperger's judgments were death sentences. (13)

Sheffer's thesis argues that it is difficult to reconcile Asperger's role in the child euthanasia program with his well-known support for children with disabilities. She notes:

While he offered intensive and individualized care to children he deemed promising, he prescribed harsh institutionalization and even transfer to Spiegelgrund for children he deemed to have greater disabilities. Files reveal that Asperger participated in Vienna's child killing system on multiple levels. He was close colleagues with leaders in Vienna's child euthanasia system and, through his numerous positions in the Nazi state, send dozens of children to Spiegelgrund children's institutions, where children in Vienna were killed. (16)

What it came down to, in short, was whether patients played well with others, or whether they in fact even acknowledged others at all. This calls into question Asperger's much lauded proclamation that people with differences could still be highly productive, even in some cases making contributions that more neurotypical individuals could never have imagined. Among the many innocent victims of Asperger's lofty tower warden mentality was a girl named Elfriede, who was dramatically contrasted with the doctor's seeming fondness for the boy Harro, perhaps even owing to a patriarchal bias against her gender.

Elfriede became especially troublesome to the clinic when she entered puberty, began menstruation, and started to exhibit heightened sexual traits in addition to her usual disobedience, graphomania, and hard-headed predilection for running away at every opportunity (a trait that strikes us as perfectly natural given the conditions of her incarceration). Sheffer tells us that Elfriede was eventually “deemed ineducatable,” and less than two months later, Asperger transferred her to Spiegelgrund, assigning her to Doctor Illing, “[t]he man in charge of the murders” (p. 155). Such was the fate of those who appeared to display behavioral defects, such as wanting to spend more time alone than in the company of other children or to resist communal cheering activities.

Temple Grandin has proven herself to be a very effective (and affective) ambassador as a key insider, one who has offered a far more inclusive approach to the interpretation of differences. In her many autobiographical and scientific works, she has asked us to look at things and people from multiple perspectives. Dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, agoraphobia, Tourette syndrome, Asperger syndrome, high functioning autism, spectrum disorders, cognitive disabilities, aphasia, bipolar disorder, Williams syndrome, depression, and melancholy: the menu of subtle differences in perception and perspective appears endless, but the central issue is a simple one. Lots of fancy names for discomfiting otherness. But as Grandin so astutely put it in *The Way I See It: A Personal Look at Autism and Asperger's*:

I am different, not less. What would happen if the autism gene was eliminated from the gene pool? You would have a bunch of people standing around in a cave, chatting and socializing and not getting anything done. In an ideal world the scientist should find a method to prevent the most severe forms of autism but allow the milder forms to survive. After all, the really social people did not invent the first stone spear. It was probably invented by an Aspie who chipped away at rocks while the other people socialized around the campfire. Without autism traits we might still be living in caves. (2011, p. 282)

Instead, we've had some spectacularly gifted oddballs often changing the whole definition of reality itself: Albert Einstein, Alan Turing, Nikola Tesla, John Nash, Paul Dirac, Max Planck, Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg, Bobby

Fischer, Bertrand Russell, David Bohm, Georg Cantor, Pythagoras, Philip K. Dick, Erik Satie, Emily Dickinson, Thomas Edison, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Howard Hughes, or David Foster Wallace, to name just a few prominent figures often considered to be autistic. Of course, these are perhaps the lucky ones, the ones who did not happen to encounter Dr. Hans Asperger in Vienna from about 1934 to 1944, when he invented his diagnosis of “autistic psychopathy.” The ones who weren’t sent away from his “curative education” clinic to a special hospital called Spiegelgrund.

Asperger also stands in stark contrast to another founding figure in autism studies: Leo Kanner. Stephen Silberman’s seminal work *Neurotribes* (2015) is instructive in untangling the philosophical differences between the two men. In her *New York Times Review* of *Neurotribes*, Jennifer Senior (2015) notes that the “crucial difference is that Leo Kanner had the fortune to publish his work in Baltimore, while Asperger had the misfortune to publish his in Nazi-controlled Vienna.” Silberman details how in 1937, Kanner, a brilliant child psychiatrist considered the American founder of that science, also hired a Jewish émigré named Georg Frankl, who worked with Asperger in Vienna but was forced to leave to survive. Frankl had been Asperger’s former teacher, and he went on to devise the precursor to today’s notion of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. The historical narrative that emerged was that while Kanner focused on the more severe cases and tried to help them, Asperger mostly focused on higher-functioning patients, though patients of both shared similar traits of social awkwardness; precocious abilities; fascination with regularity; repetitive routines; ritualized personal laws; and compulsively managed schedules.

A key reason for this professional distinction between Kanner and Asperger, however, was also a chilling function of the era: namely, as Senior (2015) explains in her review of *Neurotribes*, “the Nazis, on a mad campaign to purge the land of the feeble-minded or different, were euthanizing institutionalized children with reckless abandon.” By promoting the accomplishments of high functioning autistic patients, Asperger “accidentally gave the impression that autism was a rarefied condition among young geniuses, and not the common syndrome he actually knew it to be.” And he chose to ignore the more severe cases for some very scary reasons indeed: he didn’t think they should live at all.

Though Sheffer does not address other historians or their misconceptions directly, it is clear she knows the vagaries of historical perspective and how time slowly reveals, when we are fortunate, certain adjustments to the historical archive. Beginning in the late 70s and mid 80s, historians painted a saintly picture of Asperger, one which was readily and innocently promoted by other historians, perhaps even because it felt more inspiring to believe it. Thus the myth of Asperger's benevolence was born, and it would be solidified in the post-war period when he gleefully assumed the ever more prestigious positions vacated by his friends and colleagues who had been too enthusiastic in their endorsement of and membership in the official Nazi Party. He died in 1980. He was then, in 1981, further mythologized by a British psychiatrist, Lorna Wing, who selectively transferred some and omitted others of his notions into English, and then further blurred them when he was posthumously "honored" by bestowing his name on the syndrome in 1987.

So too, Asperger's original paper was unavailable in English for decades, and his clinic's records were thought to be destroyed when it was bombed in 1944 (Silberman, 2015). Thus his reputation remained largely intact, though the syndrome that bore his name was eliminated from the latest edition of the DSM-5 (2013) for clinical and practical reasons, not ideological or historical revisionism. More recently, however, scholars have rediscovered archived documents in Germany and Austria, leading to in-depth reconsiderations of Asperger's reputation. Sheffer's historical research on these archives was corroborated by Herwig Czech's (2018) study published in *Molecular Autism*. Like Sheffer, Czech found archival evidence that Asperger referred disabled children, often merely those whom he believed could not learn to be friendly or fit in, to the horrors of Spiegelgrund, where hundreds were either drugged, starved, or gassed to death—all part of the Third Reich's child euthanasia program, an attempt to create a more "pure" society by eliminating those it considered a "burden" to the national identity and culture.

Asperger still has his defenders, even in the aftermath of *Asperger's Children* and the *Molecular Autism* study. When the *New York Times* reported on the Czech's findings (Yeginsu, 2018), for instance, one reader commented that "Asperger did his best to keep as many children as he could. We're all victims of circumstance, and the fact is that he contributed more to the education

and understanding of autism than any of you people.” This surprised me, as I suspect that Asperger acted cautiously and strategically, as Sheffer has suggested, knowing that after the storm was over, his Nazi colleagues would be disbarred from medicine and become *personae non gratae*, to be written out of history or even jailed. And that’s exactly what happened to many of them, and Asperger filled their vacant spots voraciously, as a result of his affinity for and practice of the same eugenicist philosophy, but absent their embarrassing party affiliations. This allowed him to engage in a post-war self-whitewashing of great skill, actually writing his own bizarre beliefs out of his personal history.

Carol Povey, director of the London-based National Autistic Society, told the *New York Times* that “No one with a diagnosis of Asperger’s Syndrome should feel in any way tainted by this very troubling history” (as cited in Yeginsu, 2018). Easy for her to say. I tend to agree more with Sheffer, who recommended in a 2018 editorial that “We should stop saying Asperger. It’s one way to honor those children killed in his name as well as those still labeled with it.” And as someone who used to carry his name as an ironic badge of honor, that suits me just fine.

This brings me to the conclusion of my present book review, which comes in the form of a mandate: please read *Asperger’s Children* if you have any family member with the so-called syndrome, or if you know a friend, co-worker, or some other individual who refuses to look you in the eye or shake hands. They may also talk incessantly about only one subject, about which they seem to possess a distressing amount of detailed information. Most importantly, read it before you ever make a negative criticism or pass judgment on anyone else who happens to think or act differently from the way you do, especially if they happen to make you uncomfortable to be around them because of how uncomfortable you seem to make them.

It’s not your fault, and it’s not theirs either, mostly it’s his fault, the good doctor, and Sheffer explains how and why.

–Donald Brackett



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