

BY PETER H. KOEPF

For the chancellor to grace the title page of Germany's daily newspapers is nothing out of the ordinary. But the cover of the April 5 edition of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ) managed to raise a few eyebrows: Angela Merkel has two paintings by the famed German Expressionist Emil Nolde removed from her office. A government spokesperson asserted that Merkel, at the behest of the lender, the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, will "permanently return" *Blumengarten (Thersens Haus)* (1915) and *Brecher* (1936). The author of the article, Renate Meinhof, speculates that the chancellor wanted to "get rid" of the paintings.

But why?

Five years ago, the Berlin-based art historian Aya Soika and the historian Bernhard Fulda discovered that Nolde had been a member of the Nazi Party, had made anti-Semitic statements and was committed to Hitler and to the ideology of the party. Nevertheless, the Nazis seized his paintings and presented them alongside works by other ostracized artists in the mockery of an exhibition titled *Degenerate Art*. In summer 1941, the regime went so far as to ban Nolde from displaying his art. Yet all the while, Nolde's sympathy for National Socialism held firm.

The Seebüll Ada und Emil Nolde Foundation has now, for the first time, presented Bernhard Fulda, the Fellow and Director of Studies in History at Sidney Sussex College at the University of Cambridge, with the artist's entire written estate. The fruits of the evaluation extend far beyond what was previously known of the painter.

The writings of Nolde, the painter, had never been the focus of much attention, notes Fulda. What he discovered can be examined in his collection of essays and images on Emil Nolde, a companion volume to an exhibition in Berlin. As early as 1911, Nolde had bemoaned that the leaders of the Berlin Secession, starting with Max Liebermann, were Jews, as well as the art dealers and art critics: "the entire press core was on their side, and even the art publishers were Jews." This



## Off the wall

Why Angela Merkel has banned two paintings from the chancellery

was thought only to be the case in Berlin, "but the movement has already stretched its wormy long arms across the entire country, just like the rot spreads beneath the red-painted floor of our cozy little room here."

Fulda quotes copiously from the written notes of Nolde (and of his wife, Ada), which provide ample testament to his hatred of Jews. Into the 1930s, Nolde's anti-Semitic sentiments are only detectable in his private correspondence. After the Nazis take power, however, Fulda reports that in summer 1933, Nolde has even formulated an "ambitious plan... of how German society can become free of Jews."

But why? Nolde, born in 1867, saw himself for decades as an unrecognized

genius, a spurned lover, a man ahead of his time, met with hostility and hate for his "devoted commitment to young and revolutionary German art" (Fulda), as a peasant's son not accepted among liberals, who more often than not were Jewish cosmopolitans. Briefly a member of the artist group *Die Brücke* at the beginning of the 20th century, and then of the *Berlin Secession*, Nolde felt himself "preyed upon by Jews, because I paint them as Jews," as he expressed in his 1934 book *Jahre der Kämpfe* (Years of struggle).

Nolde was convinced: "Jews are different people than we are." He didn't see himself as an anti-Semite, nor did he seek to defame Jews, he claimed. But "the vital interests of each race express themselves in relation to their inner vital force."

When the persecution of the Jews intensified in 1938, he showed understanding for the fact "that the process the removal of the Jews, who had penetrated so deeply into all peoples, cannot proceed without great pain."

That staunch Nazis occasionally accused him in the press of opportunism did not improve the matter. Nolde did everything he could to refute the accusations. He even wrote a letter to the Nazi Press Chief Otto Dietrich in defense of accusations levied by the media outlets echoing state propaganda: "As a long as I am an artist [...], I vow to contest the foreign infiltration of German art, the impure dealing in art and the outsized Jewish supremacy in all artistic endeavors," he wrote, considering this struggle to be among "the

harbingers of National Socialism," alongside Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Dietrich Eckart. And when the war finally began, and Poland fell, he wrote: "We place full trust in *Der Führer*."

Even his exclusion from the Reich Chamber of Culture in 1941, which prohibited him from displaying his paintings, did not jog his reasoning. To the contrary, Nolde fancied himself a martyr. The son of a farmer, now "disregarded, persecuted and outlawed" by three governing powers – the German Empire, the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich – wrote in 1943 that he was treated with contempt for his "struggle against Bolshevism, Jewry and plutocracy."

It goes without saying that paintings by an anti-Semite and racist should not hang in the office of Germany's head of government, especially not at a time when those who feel they are being marginalized are retreating into their cultural shell and would like to cast out those who champion liberal values and cosmopolitanism. And this is the case not only in Germany.

The removal from the chancellery of the Nolde paintings means one of them, *Brecher*, can be seen in the Berlin exhibition "Emil Nolde. A German Legend. The Artist during the Nazi Regime." And what did the Chancellor Merkel choose to hang in place of the two Nolde pieces? Her choice was two oil paintings by the German expressionist Karl Schmidt-Rottluff: *Haus unter Bäumen* (1910) and *Häuser am Kanal* (1912). But now she has learned of anti-Semitic statements he made during World War I. Her new plan is just to leave the walls blank.

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## Immune to reason

A spike in the number of measles cases in Germany has revived the debate over mandatory vaccinations

BY KATHRIN ZINKANT

There are, no doubt, many pediatricians and health experts in Germany today who wish they lived in France. That neighbor to the west recently added eight new names to its list of mandatory immunizations – one of which was the measles vaccination – bringing the total to 11. Even to the south in Italy, where the situation is slightly more complicated, mandatory vaccinations have nevertheless proved effective. But in Germany?

After a series of measles cases at schools and childcare facilities caught the German public's attention this year, calls for mandatory vaccinations have become increasingly louder – once again, one should say, considering numerous attempts in the past have yielded nothing concrete. Although the proposed mandatory vaccination would apply to measles alone, the indignation is still great. In fact, many experts fear that compulsory immunization would even lead to increased public resistance to an otherwise entirely reasonable health care measure.

Since early April, the homeopaths and anthroposophists who practice widely in Germany have been collecting signatures for a petition against mandatory vaccination, which they are going to submit to the federal government and the Bundestag. After only two days, the petition had one-fifth of the signatures required.

This form of resistance is palpable not only in Germany. The measles are making a comeback in the United States, too. In early April, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that the number of confirmed measles cases in the first three months of 2019 exceeded the total number of cases nationwide the previous year.

Back in Europe, it was only 10 years ago that Bulgaria was forced to learn the bitter

lesson of just how fast things can develop when an unvaccinated person travels abroad, gets infected there and – while still showing no symptoms – brings the measles back with them. After seven years without a single case of measles in Bulgaria, a man transported the virus from Hamburg to Sofia, causing the deaths of at least 24 people and prompting more than 24,000 people, including many Roma, to fall ill in that country alone. That particular epidemic eventually extended to 11 countries. And yet, in spite of stories like these, far too many people in Germany and around the world continue to ignore the facts.

The measles is not a children's disease. The virus is actually highly contagious and spreads easily through the air people breathe. And it can kill. Prior to the launch of the first vaccine 56 years ago, up to 2.6 million people died each year of the measles, most of them children under the age of five. But the measles is life-threatening to adults as well. In fact, complications related to the disease, such as the brain inflammation (encephalitis), are even especially common in old age.

Still, even though the World Health Organization (WHO) has made great efforts to eliminate the disease by means of vaccination campaigns and, in doing so, has prevented more than 21 million deaths in the period from 2000 to 2017, roughly 110,000 people still die each year from this morbillivirus. It is already clear that the goal of eliminating the measles in five of the six WHO regions by the start of the coming year will not be achieved. And Germany is playing an inglorious role in this failure, as outbreaks of the disease continue to take place in the federal republic.

A glance at vaccination rates in Germany provides little immediate evidence as to why this is the case. The most recent report issued by the Robert Koch Institute, Germany's highest epidemiol-

ogy authority, showed that German children entering primary school have a very respectable vaccination rate of around 93 percent. This is almost enough to achieve the form of indirect protection referred to as "herd immunity," which would protect non-vaccinated individuals from getting the measles. However, Germany's otherwise fine record is cluttered with a number of local and age-related gaps.

For example, it has been shown that educated and high-earning parents from Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria, in particular, are the ones who fail to vaccinate their children. At less than 90 percent, the average vaccination rate for children entering primary school in these southernmost states lie well below the national average. Add to that the fact that

### Is it for reasons of convenience? Is it out of sheer ignorance?

every fourth to fifth child of childcare age nationwide – as well as many adolescents and adults – have never been vaccinated against the measles or have received the first dose only, which provides incomplete protection.

Why are people rejecting vaccination? Is it out of convenience? Or sheer ignorance? The tragic death of an 18-month-old in Berlin four years ago showed that even pro-vaccine parents can simply forget to have their children vaccinated. The scant few scientific surveys of skepticism toward vaccinations ("vaccine hesitancy") that have been conducted in Germany suggest that although the number of true anti-vaxxers in the country is low, the unease often felt by parents

is compounded by reports of supposed side effects associated with the vaccination. To make matters worse, these fears are then propagated to larger audiences via social networks, childrearing books and films such as *Eingeimpft* (Germany, 2017) and *Vaxxed* (USA, 2016).

Some families are even pursuing a special form of health awareness based partly on conventional medicine, but also on an esoteric image of physical integrity and self-healing. These families often vaccinate their children, but they tend to do so at a later date than officially recommended, that is, when they feel the child is more robust. Sometimes they base their decision selectively on the parent's own personal sense of the risks.

The key challenge is therefore by no means to silence radical anti-vaxxers. Instead, the most important goal should be to raise awareness of the extent to which non-vaccinated individuals are endangered by measles. People need to understand that non-vaccinated individuals pose a threat to their direct environment as well as to more distant ones, as the Bulgarian case has shown. This is why mandatory vaccination has long since become a political issue – far longer than since the recent spike in the number of measles cases.

While specialist politicians with expertise in the field such as Karl Lauterbach (SPD) and ministers in the CDU/SPD grand coalition regard mandatory vaccination as the correct approach, the left-wing opposition parties, including the Greens and the Left, are pro-vaccine yet want nothing to do with mandatory vaccinations.

They argue that Germany should instead pursue a policy of "persuasion" and "education" designed to stop anti-vaxxers in their tracks. Green Party health expert Kordula Schulze-Asche recently noted that mandatory vaccina-

tions would not solve the real problem; instead, she argued in favor of reaching out to parents as a means of protecting unvaccinated adults and children. What Schulze-Asche did not discuss, however, was how mandatory vaccinations for kindergarten and elementary school children would conflict with a policy of educating adults and older students.

It is not surprising that the various associations that have been providing this "persuasion" and "education" for decades now see things differently than many Bundestag members. Once again in March, the Association of Pediatricians in Germany (BVKJ) and the German Pediatrics Society (DGKJ) came out very strongly in favor of mandatory vaccination.

In the meantime, in environments at higher risk of a breakout, it has become clear that a system of mandatory vaccination anchored in law would bring great relief to schools, childcare facilities and health authorities. Indeed, whenever the virus emerges from its slumber and starts to widen its impact, the first response is to prevent the spread, which means closing schools and childcare facilities and checking the vaccination status of children and adolescents. Pupils at a Hamburg school recently had to have their blood taken to determine whether they were immune to measles or not.

A program of compulsory vaccination, like that recently passed by the Brandenburg state legislature, could prevent the virus from being introduced into childcare facilities and schools. And it might finally make it clear to adults how important it is to have vaccine protection against the disease. Not least for themselves.

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