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"The City Without Stairs": sanatorium and spa care in Germany, 1880s to 1950s

Edward Shorter[1*]

[1]Temerty Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto, Toronto M5T 1W7, Canada.

[*]**Corresponding to:** Edward Shorter, Temerty Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto, 15 Hocken Avenue, Toronto M6G 2K1, Canada. E-mail: edwardshorter@gmail.com.

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Abstract
Spas were medical facilities in small towns and villages offering hydrotherapy and other treatments on the basis of local mineral springs. Within the world of spa culture in German-speaking Europe, there was a major shift of emphasis in diagnosis and treatment between the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. A previous emphasis on "rest" (Ruhe) as the indication for treatment shifted to recommending sport and physical exertion. Tennis, in a sense, replaced the resting bench in the park. Why the upper-middle-class world of spa culture underwent these changes seems to have depended on changes in the larger culture. Yet the change was unmistakable and profound.

Keywords: spas; German-speaking Europe; *Ruhe* (rest); sport; exercise

Epigram: "Look round Germany alone, and you will find that country teeming with mineral springs... They have all been frequented, from the earliest periods, by invalids who have found in them a successful termination to their sufferings" [1]. Augustus Bozzi Granville 1838.

This paper argues that, in Germany in the years of the late Imperial Empire up to the early 1950s, a huge paradigm shift in views of the body swung on a cultural axis from "rest" to "physical activity". Spas, meaning watering places in small towns and villages with a local mineral spring, were central in the health-care of middle- and upper-class people in German-speaking Europe [2-4]. Often located in picturesque landscapes, they were patronized by a mixture of tourists seeking recreation and patients referred by their local family doctors. The patients generally did not have grave illnesses – though tuberculosis and heart conditions were common enough. Rather, a majority suffered from disorders of mood and well-being, known in German as "Befindlichkeitsstörungen," and were diagnosed as nerves, hysteria and neurasthenia. The kinds of hydrotherapy offered in a spa, which featured drinking mineral water and bathing, were essentially placebo therapy, but "nervous" patients responded well. (There were also marine spas and mountain-air spas, which are less considered in this paper.)

German spas were distinctive in international context for two reasons. One is that they were so numerous. The spa section of the *Bäder-Almanach* for 1913, goes on for 375 pages, the great majority of the sites receiving no more than a paragraph or so of discussion. Almost all were in German-speaking Europe. Secondly, far more than elsewhere, the German spas contained sanatoria, private medical facilities. The presence of these facilities emphasized the medical nature of the German spa.

The spa culture went back for centuries and there were many international counterparts to the German fondness for balneotherapy. Yet hydrotherapy took off in German-speaking Europe with the propagandizing of "cold water treatment" in the 1820s by Silesian "peasant" Vincenz Priessnitz in Graefenberg, Austria. It was, however, the arrival of the railroad in the second half of the nineteenth century that led to an explosion of spa-visiting, as the onerous horse-drawn carriage journeys of yore were placed by effortless rapid rail trips.

The German term for spa is "Bad," meaning medical services based on hot springs and mineral water. A large spa, such as Baden-Baden, Wiesbaden or Bad Ems, would typically consist of a social centre (Kurhaus) with hotel rooms, a restaurant, a theatre, and salons for socializing (Konversation), smoking and reading – plus dedicated bath houses where the actual mineral springs flowed in. A smaller spa might combine all of these functions in one building. Yet for reasons of sociability the Kurhaus was just as important as the water, and large sums were spent on building a Kurhaus that might be really quite magnificent; many are regarded today as architectural treasures. (The German term "Kur" may be understood as a health therapy.)

In the hotels around the Kurhaus were lodged patients seeking "rest" (Ruhe). The concept of rest dominated the medical approach to the middle classes in the period before the First World War. These were the years of the Weir-Mitchell "Rest Cure" originated by Philadelphia neurologist Silas Weir Mitchell whose famous *Fat and Blood and How to Make Them* in 1877 (with the later subtitle "The Treatment of Certain Forms of Neurasthenia") became holy writ in the world of the spas and sanatoria. The concept was made a beachhead in Germany in 1883 with Valentin Holst's book on neurasthenia, where he emphasized the "rest" component of the Weir-Mitchell Cure [5]. Then in 1887 the German translation of the fourth US edition in 1885 of the Mitchell book was published as *Die Behandlung gewisser Formen von Neurasthenie und Hysterie*. The book was an instant hit among the spa and sanatorium owners because it offered a justification for giving upper-middle-class women a "rest cure" for their woes; the cure demanded individual rooms and a pricey staff. (The cure was called in Germany "the Playfair-Mitchell Cure" or the "Mastkur" [6].)

Then after the First World War, the rest paradigm began to yield to the exercise paradigm, seeing the key to wellbeing as aerobic exertion rather than the inertness of rest. This new paradigm enjoyed a take-off in the 1920s, then emerged in full form after World War II. In the 1920s the exercise paradigm evolved in two directions: towards genteel exercise in the form of croquet and mini-golf, or towards frank athleticism, with tennis tournaments in the spas and a huge panoply of work-out activities on the wide beaches of the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. Tennis was the lead activity, but hockey and even football made an appearance in the world of the spa. Physicians simply stopped talking about the need for rest and they did so because the demand for it had evaporated. The sanatoriums and spa hydrotherapy centers were, after all, money-making propositions in private or corporate hands, and they were exquisitely sensitive to demand. Popular tastes drove medical treatments; in other words, popular culture not scientific advances. This is not the first time in the history of medicine that physicians have trimmed their sails to suit the winds of culture. – one thinks of the "hysteria" diagnosis, born of a culture that saw women as flighty and unserious.

The years of "Ruhe" (rest)

Ruhe was the watchword of the classic spa culture. In 1815 Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland, Berlin physician and author of one of the first spa guides, wrote of the crucial three to four hours after taking mineral water in the morning, "Ruhe without sleep is the rule for these hours. Ruhe, in order to achieve the uniform distribution and assimilation of the water, in addition to the marshaling of energy that the morning promenade can exhaust in weak persons" [7]. Thus Ruhe, as a key mechanism in a spa treatment.

In the spa world, Ruhe could mean "quiet," or count as a specific indication for treatment (Ruhebedürftige), or a treatment itself. In the former sense of quiet, many spas qualified themselves as quiet, peaceful and so forth. In 1965 the "Municipal Sanatorium Elisabethenbad" in Bad Waldsee touted its "peaceful location in the new spa district" (ruhige Lage im neuen Kurviertel) [8]. This is not the sense in which this paper analyzes "Ruhe".

In the last third of the nineteenth century, Ruhe became a leitmotif of spa life. The spas granted Ruhe. In 1882 Freudenstadt, a Black Forest watering place, claimed that "a stay here is actually suitable for healthy people, namely for those who seek Ruhe from the monotonous routines of the day, but also for valetudinarians of every kind..." [9] (Despite this gauzy talk, Freudenstadt pitched itself as a "first-rank venue for nervous patients" [10].) "For convalescents from somatic and mental illnesses," Ballenstedt spa promised "the Ruhe of a sojourn in the countryside; for those who crave the strengthening air of the Harz Mountains, under medical supervision," Ballenstedt would be perfect. At Dr. Brosius's sanatorium in Bendorf on the Rhine, in the Villa Sayn females "from the higher classes" were promised the idyllic "Ruhe of the forest (Waldesruhe) that they seek and deserve" [9]. (Convalescent – or Rekonvaleszent – often meant convalescent from mental illness [11].)

Thus, "Ruhe" was avidly sought, and granted! Of Cleve in the Lower Rhine we are told in 1892, that it is "ideal for convalescents" and those with "weak nerves and in need of recuperation. But despite its great popularity, thanks to its rich and extensive surroundings it constantly offers quiet and rest" (Stille und Ruhe). Diez on the Lahn was "the cheapest and most rewarding idyll for convalescents, those needful of Ruhe (Ruhebedürftige) and the nervous". If you want to flee the "quotidian noise and the pressures and entertainments of modern spa life in the international watering places (Weltkurorte), Eisenach in Saxony is the place for you! "Rest and the marshaling of your mental and physical forces may be found here" [12].

There could be no more quintessential expression of the German desire for Ruhe than standing alone in the forest. The Misdroy spa on the Baltic Sea island of Wollin evoked this in 1928, "In the forests the exhausted person will find Ruhe and solitude" [13]. These were restful images of enduring power.

Valentin von Holst in Riga, first a family doctor and later founder of a private sanatorium – "the first in Russia" – continued to beat the rest drum long after other themes predominated elsewhere. He said in

1903, "We must not forget that – often for months – absolute rest (Ruhe) is demanded, and, to be sure, not only bodily rest but also rest of mind." "(gemütliche Ruhe)... It is evident that treatment with absolute Ruhe, whether as the so-called Mastkur or not, is a most essential factor in a nerve sanatorium" [14].

There could be no greater threat to Ruhe than the rise of the noisy, dust-raising, horn-blasting automobile, and in the spa literature this is a common theme: either that autos must be restricted or "our spa regulates them". In 1913, Otto Thilenius, chief physician in the Soden (Taunus) spa near Frankfurt, declaimed, "Ruhe in the spa is specially served by regulation of street traffic, not only in the interest of security but also because of the noise nuisance". He said "fast driving must be unconditionally forbidden. This regulation is directed quite specifically to the steadily increasing, and steadily noticeable, automobile traffic and the resultant noise, dust and smell". Indeed, regulation was "urgently necessary" in watering places for "persons with diseases of the nervous system" [15]. This became a common theme. "No automobile traffic" (kein Autoverkehr) insisted the Fremdenheim Carla in Braunlage (Harz mountains) in 1929 [16].

It would be inexact to state that Ruhe disappears entirely from the discourse, or that it is completely replaced by such concepts as "exhaustion" or "over-exertion," which of course would cry out for Ruhe. Schlangenbad near Frankfurt billed itself as "the spa without motorcycles" [17], appealing to the Ruhe crowd. In 1931 Bad Heilbrunn claimed itself as suitable "especially for those cure-seekers who are more interested in beneficent Ruhe and the pleasures of the countryside than in a noisy spa scene" [17].

There was also the question, which patients were one pursuing? For spas that were courting the geriatric population, lack of need to exert oneself was a selling point, which is another way of saying "rest". Bad Oeynhausen in Westphalia called itself "the city without stairs": Every slope was said to be gentle "in order to spare the slightest physical exertion or inconvenience" [17]. As English writer Samuel Bensusan commented of the houses of Oeynhausen in his 1925 guide *Some German Spas*, "Inclined platforms instead of steps lead to the ground floor, so that invalids can leave and return in bath chairs. Even the streets have wide turnings for the sake of those who cannot walk" [18].

A longing for Ruhe lingered on long past the due date of the concept. In 1927 a physician in Misdroy thundered against "wild dance music" – because the "exhausted patients from the big cities" (Gross-stadtmüden) needed "Ruhe" [19]. As late as 1950, Kurt Schröder, by now an elderly man (medical graduate in 1914) and the chief physician in the Braunlage spa, said, "We live in an epoch in which the recognition has dawned that the Ruhe and proportionality of life of our grandfathers has given way to the onslaught of the industrialization and mechanization of life. It is in this sphere that the concept of the sanatorium arose. Its birth was the fulfillment of the wish to distance oneself from the disorder of the day and the hectic pace of the time" [20].

The spa sample

I have a sample of spas that includes 24 health resorts mentioned in the 1950 edition of the "Spa-Guide" that featured exercise of some kind, genteel or demanding. The monographs for many other spas, submitted by local physicians, do not mention exercise at all, either because it was not part of the therapeutic offering or because the monographs' authors considered it unimportant. (Much longer are the descriptions of the waters' chemical content and longer still the list of indications for which the waters were deemed apt.) For these 24, the Spa-Guides (*Bäder-Almanache)* for 1892 and 1926 were then consulted to see approximately when the exercise theme began.

It certainly did not begin in 1892. Of the 24, the monographs for 17 make no mention in 1892 of any kind of exercise. One, indeed, contains a kind of cautionary note. The popular seaside spa at Wyk on the North Sea island of Föhr, was said to have "a beautiful completely danger-free bathing beach with moderate surf suitable for weak natures" (schwächliche Naturen) [12].

Among the 7 making some mention of exercise in 1892 were Herrenalp in the Black Forest, which featured "walkways". Not to be outdone, Bad Kissingen in northern Bavaria offered "walkways with benches for resting". Bad Pyrmont in northwest Germany (principality of Waldeck), the soul of gentility, made available croquet and lawn tennis. The only two health resorts to feature a more vigorous offering in 1892 were Wildbad in the Black Forest, where "Swedish medical gymnastics" [Heilgymnastik] had existed for years [9]; its exercise machines were evidently made by the Zander Company in Sweden. As well, there was the North Sea island of Norderney, with its Swedish gymnastics. None of this except perhaps Norderney, amounted to much in the way of exertion. Rest remained king.

The formal organization of sports medicine in Germany began in 1912 with the first German sports medicine congress at the spa Oberhof in Thuringia. A whole network of sports-medicine organizations, under the leadership of Arthur Mallwitz, blossomed from there. An inflection mark was the renaming in 1933 of previous organizations as the Deutscher Sportärztebund and its incorporation into the National Socialist German Medical Association [21]. So there is no doubt that spa sports bore an official imprimatur.

Change in the 1920s

In June 1919, as Austria and Germany lay exhausted under the misery of war, the first thought of the leadership in spa journalism was sport. Edmund Oratsch in Klosterneuburg near Vienna, the editor of *Deutsch-Oesterreichische Internationale Illustrierte Zeitschrift für Fremdenverkehr,* said it is terribly important that we regain our health, also our mental equilibrium (seelische Gesundheit). "Sport offers an excellent means of improving health. Therefore we want to support the development of all sports and we hope thereby to render good service to our youth, the future generation". For the first time, the spa searchlight turned on sport and away from "Ruhe" [22].

The world began to change in the 1920s. At the publication of the *Spa-Guide* in 1926, women were wearing short skirts and smoking in public. And even though many middle-class fortunes had been wiped out by the great inflation after World War I, enough money remained to fuel a big increase in spa visiting. (Frequentation at Bad Wildungen in Hesse, for example, increased from 5,100 in 1895 to 15,700 in 1925 [23], a not untypical result.) Apropos, Wildungen remained a Hochburg of exercise. As Samuel Bensusan noted of Wildungen in 1925, "If you are minded to play golf, there are the links... If you desire tennis rather than golf, or fishing rather than tennis, or a long woodland ramble rather than any of these, everything awaits you, and the air has an exceedingly stimulating quality" [18].

The war had changed a great deal. Bensusan noted "the extraordinary development of the sporting instinct which has come to Germany in the past few years. Deprived of their drill sergeats, the young men [at Bad Elster in Saxony] have apparently turned their energies to games and are learning to play tennis, golf, football and the rest". At Bad Elster, a huge sport arena had just been erected "with eight tennis courts" [18].

Thus, by 1926 tennis was king, and would remain the premier spa exercise for decades to come. Of the 24 spas, 11 stated expressly that they offered tennis. In Bad Ems, in the lovely valley of the Lahn river, it was tennis plus swimming and hockey! (up from nothing in 1892). At Herrenalp there was, to be sure, tennis, but not to forget "medical walks" (Terrainkuranlagen) with "numerous benches for resting". Bad Neuenahr went from no sport references in 1892 to "tennis tournaments" in 1926. And in, Wyk "sport" was on offer, "instructed by gymnastics and sport teachers hired by the spa's administration" – up from weak natures not needing to fear the mild surf in 1892) [23]. Some kind of terrain-walking was also common – it is assumed that virtually everybody went for walks, but "Terrainkur" was in Germany a specific medical concept.

In 1926, of the spa sample, only two left sport and exercise entirely unmentioned: Bad Homburg near Frankfurt (probably an accidental omission because Bad Homburg greatly emphasized sport), and Bad Orb in the Spessart district of Hesse. This, accordingly, was an

enormous leap forward from 1892 in the availability of sport and aerobic exercise.

As early as 1905 spa doctors were dilating upon the importance of "winter sport for nervous sufferers" [24]. In 1908 the travel magazine *Der Fremdenverkehr* added a rubric for "Wintersport" that would run from October to April [25]. In the 1920s, the spas in the wooded uplands (Mittelgebirge), previously for the treatment of tuberculosis, came into their own with winter sport. And so the concept of winter sport became integrated into the palette of spa activities, even for the nonsporting. In 1929, Bad Salzbrunn in Silesia featured in the local press a snowy landscape and invitation to tobogganing. And the spas of the Silesian Eulengebirge lured patients with the prospect of brisk winter walks [26].

The NS Years

There is a subtle but unmistakable transition in emphasis from the Weimar Republic to the years of National Socialism. At Friedrichroda in Thuringia, chief physician Kurt Bieling emphasized exercise in the late 1920s, then in 1939 insisted on the "natural health components" (die natürlichen Heilmittel), meaning water, climate and so forth [27]. Bieling edited the main spa directory that year, and the phrase "natural" recurs specifically as a mantra in the Nazi health literature.

NSDAP policies emphasized making the hitherto pricey spas available to the general population through special "package" deals [28]. This began the "democratization" of the spa experience that was maintained in the 1950s and -60s.

The shift to more vigorous forms of exercise in the private sanatoria continued in the NS years. In 1939, the "Sanatorium Dr. Amelung" in Königstein in Taunus, near Frankfurt, offered "gymnastics" as a medical therapy [27]. This is, to be sure, not tantamount to "sport" but does entail aerobic training.

Reinhard Jaup's article in *Der Balneologe* in 1939 on "Gymnastics for Patients in Spas" was a kind of inflection point. Jaup, a Baden-Baden spa-doctor, noted "The Zander-Gymnastics, which still are frequently met with in our thermal watering-spots, should be rejected as out of step with the times". He played for more "German patient-gymnastics" [29].

By 1939, the "Sanatorium Baumstark" in Bad Homburg had a female "gymnastics teacher," as did the "Sanatorium Waldhaus" in Ballenstedt in the Harz Mountains. The "Sanatorium Nerotal" in Wiesbaden, for the first time, mentioned "great sport opportunities" [27]. So there is no doubt that in the NS years spa athleticism was accelerating.

After the war

By 1950 the clock ticked again. All spas in the sample offered exercise, because that is how they were selected. But the types of exercise were shifting from the genteel – lawn tennis, mini-golf and walking – to much more vigorous experiences. Badenweiler in the Black Forest now listed its "sports" separately: in addition to indoor and outdoor swimming pools, there were "tennis courts with a clubhouse, tennis trainers and tennis matches"; skiing was featured in the winter. (This is up from zero in 1892.) The North Sea spa Cuxhaven featured an attractive woman in its monograph, against a background of fun-seekers, and offered "sports options": "daily beach gymnastics", tennis, surfing, and beach sports, in addition to sailing and table tennis [30]. Here, strenuous activities predominated.

By 1950, swimming and golf had now joined tennis as almost universally available exercises. All are vigorous. At Bad Neuenahr in 1950 there were "tennis, hockey and soccer". The description of sport on the North Sea island of Langeoog takes up a third of the monograph: "a decided sport sea-spa with a large variety of medical-sport events and programs, such as a beach sports center, body training for children and adults, many kinds of ball activities, sport courses, contests and beach-sport festivals" [30]. There was more, which it is not necessary to quote in order to make the point that, five years after the end of the Second World War, medical spas in the North Sea islands were alive with physical activity. (In 1892 Langeoog made no mention of sport but guaranteed "the most complete rest" [31].)

In 1950 at Bad Pyrmont, one would find tennis, swimming "at a pool of Olympic dimensions with a diving board," and a gymnastics center. Wildbad featured "rejuvenation", and Bad Wildungen was set to attract "sport-lovers". A vivid expression of this exercise culture is the promotional material in 1965 of the Mettnau Sanatorium in Radolfzell on Lake Constance: "Healing Through Activity" promised its ad (Heilung durch Bewegung) [8].

The case is not being made here for a general increase in athleticism at the German medical resorts, although that undoubtedly happened as well, but for the 1920s as the take-off period, as well as for a shift in forms of exercise from the genteel to the vigorous, from croquet at Bad Pyrmont in 1892 to its diving platform in 1950. The year 1950, as noted, is only five years after the collapse of the Third Reich. It is evident that Germany was, literally, much more on its feet than conventional accounts of the first few postwar years suggest.

It is interesting that Ruhe disappears almost entirely as an indication for treatment or a kind of therapy. In the 1958 edition of the *Spa Guide* – an extensive document with 118 pages given over to spas and their offerings – the word Ruhe appears exactly once, for Salzhausen, a little known spa in Hesse: "The idyllic Bad Salzhausen... through its complete Ruhe, offers for big-city dwellers the preconditions for reduction of tension [Entspannung] and for successful treatment" [32].

The shift from Ruhe to exertion bookmarks a major shift in German society from the self-pampering of those who could afford spas to the athletic engagement of the entire population. As Germany marched into a post-Nazi future, it did so wearing running shoes.

Conclusion

The middle classes of German-speaking Europe received much of their health care in the context of spas, or watering places, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. Although patients with serious illnesses were not uncommon, most of the clients suffered from psychogenic maladies that responded to the kinds of placebo therapy on offer in a spa. It is therefore interesting that these disorders of mood and well-being (Befindlichkeitsstörungen) shifted over time from a need for rest (Ruhe) to an emphasis on sport and physical exertion. By the 1920s, the term "Ruhe," once so common in the promotional literature of the spas, had virtually vanished, while tennis competitions and other hearty exertions had blossomed. The emphasis on exertion even increased during the Nazi years, and remained strong in the postwar climate. Even though much has been written about the supposed destitution of Germany in the post-World War II years, the continued – even strengthened – patronage of the spas remains an interesting phenomenon.

Why the change from the rest to the exercise paradigms? Although my work is still in progress, several themes stand out. One is the gathering change in sex roles. The fainting Victorian woman in her hoop skirts did not need to play tennis. The dynamic post-World War I "flapper" of the 1920s did. The whole Gestalt of women changed, opening them to exercise models of well-being.

Secondly, the shift in medicine from humoral models of illness to bacterial and nutritional models made rest seem implausible as a model of pathophysiology. It was micro-organisms and not "yellow bile" that made people ill, and the path to recovery was marked by growing physical energy and not by even more bed rest.

Finally, big-city life came to be seen as a source of dynamism, rather than a social evil to be rested up from, and the Berlin street scenes of the 1920s inspired an entire generation with the excitement of the city. Treatment indications as well ceased to reflect the need to escape big-city stress and embrace activism.

The spas were, in short, a kind of litmus test of the larger society that nourished them.

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