

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

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Birth, Death, and Regeneration:  
Giessen University, 1945-1957

Plockstrasse 8  
Giessen, Germany  
September 4, 1957

Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Sixty per cent destroyed - a nice round figure for what the explosives and fire bombs did to Giessen University in World War II - a newspaper statistic.

Here's a rough idea of what was smashed:

The Medical Clinic, the Children's Clinic, the Clinic Dispensary - all flattened; the Obstetrics Clinic badly damaged; the University Library nearly eradicated - 500,000 books, 300,000 dissertations, and 90 per cent of the catalogue up in smoke; the Botanical Institute and the Zoological Institute with their fine collections - both gutted by fire; the Anatomy Institute, in the same building with zoology, burned out; the Mathematics Seminar on the Bismarckstrasse, blown up by aerial mines; the Physics Institute, razed by fire; the Physiological Institute, heavily damaged; the Pharmacological Institute, completely destroyed; the Institute for Animal Husbandry and Dairy Studies, destroyed; and the Main Building, partially damaged.

March 28, 1945: American reconnaissance vehicles cautiously crossed the Lahn bridge into Giessen. Rifle fire from a few die-hard Nazis along the boulevards was the only sign of resistance. It was late afternoon when Professor Christian Rauch, Prorektor of the university, gingerly stepped out of his Art History Institute on the Ludwigstrasse. The kindly, 68-year-old scholar was the temporary head of university. Drawing himself up to his full five feet, the white-haired Dr. Rauch approached the first American jeep and spoke to a surprised officer: "I surrender the Giessen University to you."

During the next weeks, the remaining faculty members busied themselves with cleaning up their shattered buildings, salvaging instruments and books from the ruins. Rumors abounded: The Americans would reopen the university . . . the Americans would take what was left as booty. By June there was some order in the chaos. A council of faculty members unanimously elected the physicist, Karl Bechert, as the new Rektor.

Then on July 6, the newly appointed Ministerpräsident of the State of Hesse, a man named Bergsträsser, announced that Giessen University was to be closed. Only a medical academy would remain, he added. Some Giesseners recalled that Bergsträsser had once failed in an attempt to get on the Giessen faculty. They muttered that he was now seeking his revenge. A few days after the announcement, the new hessian government cut off all professor salaries and monetary support for the university institutes.

On August 8, the government declared that nothing was to be done at the remaining university clinics except care for the ill. "You may not employ anyone except for that purpose," was the wording.

However, the 44-year-old Rektor and the Giessen faculty still had hopes for reopening the university. Bechert, an anti-Nazi in deed and word, asked the Darmstadt government authorities what was to happen to his faculty, now that pay had been cut off.

"We haven't made any thoughts about that," said Dr. Boll, director of the State Finance Department. What should the professors do? "They must look for other work, like hundreds and thousands, and millions of other Germans - for instance in farm labor," was Boll's reply.

Rektor Bechert, a slender man with a long sharp nose, and a gentle light of idealism in his eyes, set about other ways of saving the university - American ways. He issued an appeal in the name of the university for emergency funds. The response was good. Voluntary contributions poured in from the Giessen townspeople. The City of Wetzlar came across with 100,000 Reichsmarks.

More rumors about the fate of the university circulated - among others one that hinted the establishment of a teachers' college here.

In October, the new Minister President, Geiler, declared that there was a "state of competition" between the universities at Frankfurt and Giessen. The Frankfurt University was also a victim of heavy bomb damage. On December 9, the Finance Ministry decided: "one university must fall." The fact was, the newly-created state of Hesse had its hands full juggling four higher education institutions. The map-makers of the Occupation Government had drawn up Hesse to include Marburg, which had been part of Prussia for 80 years. Thus Hesse had the young Frankfurt University, the Darmstadt Technical College, Giessen, and Marburg to support. The Finance Ministry now suggested that Giessen's theology and law faculties move to Marburg. Natural science and medicine would stay here.

Following orders from Education Minister Boehm, the faculties of Giessen and Marburg met in January, 1946 to discuss the possibility of joining forces. The Marburgers refused to accept the Giesseners as equal partners.

The American Military Government's "university officer" for Hesse, Dr. Hartshorne, took part in these discussions. A well-known American educator, Hartshorne was living in Marburg. The way the Giesseners have it, he was "in the palm of the Marburg Rektor's hand." Dr. Hartshorne declared at one meeting that "uniting Marburg and Giessen is the only possible solution, because a small university is completely senseless and unnecessary." The American defended his argument by citing U. S. universities with 10,000 and 20,000 students. This incensed the Giesseners. Bechert commented: "Every researcher knows that large numbers of students hinder research work more than they help it."

Dr. Hartshorne countered with the suggestion that Giessen be opened "provisionally" for two semesters, to be followed by a final closing. Understandably, Rektor Bechert opposed this idea too.

The last-ditch stand took place on March 29, when a conference of Hesse's four Rektors met in Wiesbaden. In the corridor outside the meeting room, Bechert and his colleagues pleaded with the men from Marburg, Frankfurt, and Darmstadt for support. They hoped to present a united front to the Education Ministry, to keep Giessen alive.

It was no use. The other Rektors refused to help. They preferred to guard their own private interests.

It looked suspiciously like a conspiracy against Giessen when one Rektor spoke up and said: "It's better to split the (State) funds among three than four."

The Marburg Rektor, Eppinghaus, condoled Bechert with: "This is the only reasonable solution." Some Giesseners saw in Eppinghaus the villain of the piece. "He wanted to wring Giessen's neck," said one.

The Rektor conference concluded with the decision that Giessen should reopen only its agriculture and veterinary medicine departments. It was to remain limited to these subjects. The primary excuse offered was the State's lack of money. Yet the Education Ministry closed its books in 1946 with a large surplus on hand - enough to have tided Giessen over.

At the beginning of April, the "College for Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine" was opened here. Rektor Bechert quit in disgust, April 13.

Giessen University was a corpse. The vultures began to descend - from Frankfurt University, from Darmstadt, from Marburg. They came for books and professors. Of course it was a good thing that Giessen's unemployed professors were being sought for other universities. It was another matter, as far as Giessen's library was concerned.

The Leichenflaetterer, (grave robbers) is what Library Director Hugo Hepding called them. Using a blanket decree from the Wiesbaden Education Ministry, professors from Frankfurt, Darmstadt, and Marburg trucked off thousands of books.

Dr. Hepding says Frankfurt "plundered" the archeological seminar, German literature, classical language works, a large part of the Romance language collection, oriental languages, and the folklore collection. Giessen's Professor Walter Fischer, one of Germany's leading Americanists, moved up to Marburg with most of Giessen's English and American seminar books. He also took along some Shakespeare quartos. Darmstadt made off with a large hunk of the art history seminar collection. Giessen was able to keep the philosophy, psychology, theology, and history collections.

The big grab may not go down as an irretrievable loss for Giessen. From a legal point of view, the books taken by the other universities still belong to Giessen. They are registered as being on "long term loan". The present University Library Director, Dr. Joseph Schawe, says there is a fair chance Giessen can get the books back again someday. However, 11 years have gone by, and in Germany as well as elsewhere, possession is nine-tenths of ownership.

Heavily damaged, stripped of professors and books, Academia Ludoviciana was closed - the only university in all post-war Germany to suffer this fate.

The regeneration, such as it was, began on May 16, 1946, with the first semester of Giessen's "college". The Agriculture Faculty made an especially good start - with more than a hundred students. By 1949, the enrollment in this department had tripled.

Reconstruction started with the veterinary medicine clinic. In 1947, new stalls and isolation rooms were built. An institute for parasitology was opened in 1948. Because most of its buildings lay at the extreme southern end of Giessen, the veterinary medicine department had escaped grave bomb damage. Therefore, this faculty was able to begin work with relative ease.

Following orders from the State Government, the medical faculty kept busy with the sick and war-wounded during the first couple of years after the collapse. They had their hands full; the bombed out clinics were set up again - here in private homes, there in nearby towns like Hungen and Bad Nauheim. But the professors were anxious to get started in academic work again.

Their hopes were encouraged in June, 1947, by the new Minister of Education, Dr. Stein. Speaking in Giessen, Stein said the medical faculty was to be turned into an academy for medical research and advanced studies. The Hessian minister also announced that a forestry department was to be added to the college. The university, he concluded, was not going to be reopened.

In 1948, the Medical Clinic was partially restored and during the next year, advanced courses in medicine were begun. Further development of medical studies was promised when the neuropathological department of the Kaiser-Wilhelm Institute decided to move here. The department had been transferred from Berlin to nearby Dillenburg after the war. The neuropathologists moved into the partly-damaged Physiological Institute. By this time, the number of students enrolled in the Giessen college had reached 830 - nearly half the pre-war number.

From the beginning of the post-war period, the Hessian government had hinted that the forestry department would be re-established. It seemed a logical element to add to a college that was concentrating on agriculture and animals. Besides, forestry had had a distinguished tradition at Giessen. But it wasn't in the cards.

When the State Government took over the university's experimental forestry plot in 1950, it was plain Giessen wasn't going to have any forestry science. Apparently, the faculty had harbored private thoughts that the re-establishment of forestry might put them in line for re-establishing the university. As this hope died, the faculty reluctantly decided to go along with the State's idea of giving Giessen's college a respectable name.

On September 11, 1950, the Hessian Parliament proclaimed a law declaring the Giessen school to be the "Justus Liebig Hochschule" (college). Under the new law it was to include faculties in natural sciences, agriculture, veterinary medicine, medical research, and a "general department". The latter was to be a sort of general education section.

Giessen University's most famous son, Liebig, has been invoked as patron saint of the orphan college. Subsequent developments in the expansion of the college were to emphasize the great scientist's agricultural interests.

Here is a brief chronicle of additions made in the agriculture department from 1950 to the present: 1952--Institute for plant pathology planned, opened in following year; Institute for Crop and Meadow Economy begun. 1953--Department for Agricultural Management opened; Viticulture studies begun. 1954--Professorship in parasitology and bee-culture established. 1955--Chair for assistant professor in microbiology established; Field laboratory for plant pathology opened; Institute for Continental Agriculture and Economics Research founded. 1956--Soil science department expanded.

Veterinary medicine experienced an equally gratifying growth: 1951--Veterinary psychology department expanded. 1953--The new building for veterinary obstetrics clinic begun - finished 1956; Lecture hall for veterinary surgery put in use again. 1954--Beginning of new building for veterinary physiology - finished this year. 1955--Facilities for domestic and non-domestic animal diseases expanded. 1956--Chair for veterinary physiological chemistry professor established; Veterinary Parasitology Institute opened.

The natural sciences and medicine were also given some shots in the arm. The institutes for physiology, comparative anatomy, and zoology were all in operation by the end of 1953. Physics, mathematics, and chemistry expanded their facilities. The Obstetrics Clinic was reopened in 1955. A new building for the Hygiene Institute was begun last year. Finally, the general education department was gradually enlarged, with professors of art history, literature, philosophy, and social studies - providing some degree of balance to the science-heavy faculty.

One other important part of the reconstruction plan was the library. Only the facade of the old 1904 building remained from the air raids. A brand-new library was designed. In 1956 construction on a modernistic 12-story "magazine" was begun. This year, some 200,000 books were moved into it - most of them new acquisitions.

Meanwhile, good news arrived on February 17, 1954, when the Hessian Minister President toured the college and hinted that Giessen might one day again attain the status of "university." Hope sprang anew in the breast of the academic orphan. Another three years passed before the hope became a reality.

The Government quietly set a target date for the re-establishment of the university. It was to be in the summer of 1957 - appropriately the time of the 350th anniversary of the old "Ludoviciana." The next years were occupied with arguments as to what kind of university Giessen should have.

Last May the Hessian cabinet prepared a new law to replace the 1950 decree which had created Justus Liebig College. Education Minister Arno Hennig put the bill before the Legislature in June. The new law stipulated that:

- 1--The Justus Liebig College will be known as Justus Liebig University from now on.
- 2--The University will include faculties in: Agriculture, Veterinary Medicine, Natural Science - Philosophy, and Medicine.
- 3--All faculties will be aimed towards natural science and biology in research and teaching.

This bill provided for several changes in Giessen's college: first, an expansion of the medical faculty such that it could undertake full instruction in medicine; second, the natural science faculty would be enlarged to include philosophy faculty departments.

Two other elements did not escape the eyes of Giessen's sceptics. One was the fact that their old Academia Ludoviciana was unalterably dubbed the Justus Liebig University: "Nothing against Liebig, you understand, but why change the name of the university?" The Giessen school, like all its ancient academic sisters, was named after her royal founder. Thus Freiburg is called Albert Ludwigs Universität, after the duke who established it, Marburg is named Philipps Universität after the magnanimous Hessian count, and so on. Only the modern era universities like that of Frankfurt (1901) are named for mere commoners. In this case, Frankfurt is known as Johannes Wolfgang Goethe Universität.

Anyway, the Liebig handle galls the Giesseners. They'd rather get back their old familiar Ludwigs Universität title - or Ludoviciana.

Another irritating element in the new law was the paragraph stipulating that all faculties were to be directed towards the natural sciences and biology. It's enough, said the Giessen professors, to keep the university from having the traditional theology and law faculties. Why go further and put limits on the already existing faculties.

The Wiesbaden legislators voted unanimously for the new bill on June 27 this summer; but not without comment on the questionable paragraph. Said Representative Martin, a Giessener from the Christian Democratic Union: "I must confess, this sentence causes me to worry." He added that the work of a university could not be circumscribed in this way and that especially in our times, natural scientists must not be hindered from migrating towards philosophy and the arts.

Nevertheless, Giessen again had a university - at least in name. True, it is not a university in the traditional German sense with the four faculties: law, medicine, theology, and philosophy. However, the authorities note that there are other curious institutions carrying the name university these days: the former technical college in Berlin, for instance. As for the heavy emphasis on science at Giessen, they cite the trend towards specialization as exemplified by Frankfurt's Economics and Social Science Faculty.

Giessen University's new era began with a sustained bang on July 3. The blast increased in volume on July 4, followed by festive alarms and excursions on the 5th and 6th. It was time for another jubilee.

Fraternity flags decorated a hundred Giessen shops and houses. The red and white city banner hung from a hundred more poles. Professors from all over Germany as well as 15 different nations swarmed into the city. Hotels were jam-packed. The taverns did a roaring business from dawn to dawn. The weather was Saharan.

Festivities started on Wednesday, July 3, with afternoon track meet. Germany's best university runners competed in the 95-degree heat. A Giessener won the 1,000 meter race.

That evening, Rektor Heinz Hungerland held a halcyon reception in the newly-decorated Aula (auditorium). Sweating faculty members mingled with professors from Japan, American Army officers, colonels from the new German Bundeswehr, Giessen city officials, and gentlemen of the press. Champagne flowed; cigarsmoke eddied to the cerulean heights. Waiters from ten Giessen taverns slithered through the crowds with self-conscious pride. And 25 glasses were broken.

This party broke up about 9:30 p.m. when the students' torch-light parade arrived in front of the building. A Bundeswehr band headed the parade of 3,000 torchbearers. The procession included fraternity students, clad in their 19th-century uniforms; old grads; and members of other student groups. The square lit up in the soft glow of the torches as Rektor Hungerland gave a welcome address from the balcony. Then the parade continued up the Ludwigstrasse to the Volkshalle for a monster beer party. The mercury still hovered in the eighties.

Thursday began steaming-hot with a festival worship service at the Johanneskirche followed by a majestic academic procession to the Aula. The faculty, dressed in their splendid medieval gowns and birettas, marched moistly to the main building. Perspiring representatives of 80 other universities followed. This was the day for speechmaking: Minister President Hans Zinn, who handed the Rektor the new university charter; Bürgermeister Albert Osswald, who announced the city's endowment of a professorship; the German Vice Chancellor, Franz Blücher; and finally, Rektor Hungerland. There was music - Bach's prelude and fugue in c-major. There were honorary degrees - one for Professor Karl Bechert, who had fought for the university in 1945.

In the afternoon, the Hessian Minister President held a reception for the 1,000-odd guests at Otto Eger Heim - the student home. Most of us changed shirts for the second or third time. The champagne fizzled again in academic gullets. Thursday night featured a festival concert in the Aula - Händel's Judas Makkabäus was brilliantly sung and played.

The turkish towel weather continued on Friday as the professors cruised into the third day of whoop-de-do. The morning was filled with festival lectures by professors from each of the faculties. Just before noon, Bürgermeister Osswald held his reception at Otto Eger Heim. The sponges soaked up another load of bubbling wine in order to face the infernal sun of the afternoon. For those who could take it, there was a fancy-dress ball given by the Rektor in the Aula that night. Dr. Hungerland intrepidly led off the incandescent evening with a polonaise.

Saturday, the jubilee week concluded with sports meets in the afternoon and a Bürgerball (citizen's ball) at the Volkshalle. The heat held on.

Other entertainments were available to the guests during the jubilee days: four exhibitions including one which featured pictures and mementoes tracing the university's history, excursions to scenic spots in the area, and of course countless reunions with old friends.

The pomp and ceremony are summer memories now, but several elements of the jubilee celebration remain fresh. One was the congeniality attending the festivities. Despite the fact that there were 1,000 guests, each visitor seemed to bring along a special affection for Giessen's little university.

The other impressive element was the Rektor's address on July 4. Heinz Hungerland is a pediatrician. A slender, sandy-haired man, he looks a lot younger than his age - 52. Soft-spoken and mild-mannered, he managed to give the impression of being cool throughout the whole molten week. That Thursday, he stood before the assembled dignitaries in his black Rektor's robe, the golden chain of his office on his chest. Here are some of the things he said:

"The task which now lies before us is the internal construction of our university, which does not include the four classical faculties as we know them from the Middle Ages.

"Today it is hardly possible that everything from Hamitic languages and Chinese art to nuclear physics and virus research be represented in worthy form in a single university...

"When it is stated in the law that 'the university shall be aimed towards natural science and biology in research and teaching, then we regard this stipulation as a basis from which we proceed, and not as a limitation. For the development of a university - and that is the development of the individual professors as well - cannot be compressed in a law. Nor can research be cramped by a law.

"And if the researches of one of our physicists lead him to become a philosopher, then he will still remain one of ours - the same if a physician becomes a theologian.

"The favorable relation between the number of professors and the number of students in Giessen, one of the essential problems which occupies us today, is already solved here. The fact that the State of Hesse has recognized the right to existence of the small university offers teachers and students the necessary possibilities for unfolding here."

In a modest way, Rektor Hungerland was expressing the strong sentiments of Giessen's faculty: keep the university small, but let it grow from within, unfettered by legislative limitations. Above all, keep the university free.

*David Binder*  
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