

Personal Testimonies Relating to the Contemporary History of German Geriatric Nursing

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Abstract

In May 2022, nursing expert and critic Claus Fussek, who became known in Germany through his numerous media appearances, entrusted his enormous collection of files and documents to the Institute for the History of Medicine of the Robert Bosch Foundation for archival storage. This material includes approximately 50,000 letters from private individuals who reported severe shortcomings, acts of violence, and other issues in German nursing homes, covering the period from the 1990s to the year 2021. This extensive corpus of sources is unique due to its size and the type of selection, and it is hugely important for historical and social science research: it is a comprehensive reflection on the position and situation of nursing within German society. While reporting from different perspectives on the disastrous situations in German nursing homes, the writers – residents, family members, and nursing staff – provide many insights into the everyday practice of nursing.

Keywords: Geriatric Nursing, Germany, Nursing Homes, Every Day Practice

1 Introduction

On 1 February 2022, Claus Fussek officially retired from his life-long career as social worker and advocate of nursing care. He had made a name for himself as an expert and critic of nursing and gained a significant influence through the media. During his career, he collected thousands of personal testimonies reporting on the situation in German nursing homes. For instance, in 1997 a woman from Wolfsburg described the care her mother was receiving in a home as follows:

We, as daughters, took care of our mother in her familiar environment until this was no longer possible, and she was admitted to a home because our mum now needed 24-hour care. Due to my physical disability, I was unable to perform extremely demanding care activities and my sister had to earn her living. In the following, I list some of the events that we regarded as inhumane and negligent. [...] At wintery temperatures and with the window slightly open, our mum was lying in her urine. The early shift arrived and heard whimpering from her room. She was freezing cold. In the presence of volunteers doing their community service, our mum was washed in her bed. The nurse was very rough while washing her intimate areas and our mother was in pain. [...] Our mother could not open her bowels without help. My sister asked the nurses for assistance. The stool was already halfway outside, but mum did not have the strength to push it out. The nurses' response was the following: "She should squeeze it back in. The bowels will be emptied only tomorrow." [...] For fear of being a nuisance to the nurses, our mum

had stopped drinking properly, because of course that makes you need the toilet. She was almost completely dehydrated.¹

At first glance and to outsiders, this situation might seem degrading and scandalous, yet such instances might possibly have been part of normal practice in German nursing homes in very recent history. Fussek's documents contain numerous descriptions like the example above that are now being kept at the Institute for the History of Medicine of the Robert Bosch Foundation.

2 Who is Claus Fussek?

Claus Fussek was born in 1953 and studied social pedagogy. Fussek co-founded the Association for Promoting Integration (Vereinigung für Integrationsförderung, VIF) in the late 1970s in Munich and then worked in various functions as a social worker. In its first project, the association focussed on the (lack of) inclusion of individuals with disabilities in society. Over time, the scope of the association's tasks widened and Fussek increasingly concentrated on nursing and, in particular, geriatric nursing. He gained increasingly deep insights into this scene and found himself confronted with conditions that he would not have believed possible. In 1997, Fussek reported at a press conference on the catastrophic conditions in care homes in Munich, thereby making the "Munich nursing scandal"² public. Since then, he has been pointing out existing problems within the German nursing system in newspaper interviews and TV shows. Through his media appearances he has gained nationwide recognition. He has been a guest on all popular German talk shows, and even collaborated with the investigative journalist Günter Wallraff.

At that time, relatives and nursing staff began to contact him either in writing or by telephone. They regularly told him of their distress, described specific deficiencies, and asked for help because they could not get any from the authorities. Fussek always tried to step up. He gave advice to the relatives on an informal basis, but also contacted the financing bodies and authorities and, when nothing else worked, he turned to the media. He has received more than 50,000 letters, phone calls and emails over the past 40 years discussing the dismal conditions, enormous problems and acts of violence in nursing homes throughout Germany. He is continuing his work even after his retirement as he still receives daily requests for help from members of the public. In March 2022, the Bavarian Minister for Health and Nursing, Klaus Holetschek, presented Fussek with the Weißer Engel ("White Angel") award for his lifetime achievement. During the award ceremony, Holetschek highlighted Fussek's 40-year dedication to both nurses and people in need of care. He said:

Claus Fussek has been justifiably called an "angel for the elderly". For about 40 years, he has tirelessly advocated for the dignity of the elderly and of disabled people and fought for better conditions in the field of nursing. He has truly earned

¹ The quotes used in this article were previously published by Claus Fussek himself. Hirsch/Fussek 2001, pp. 75–76.

² One social worker told Fussek that every Monday more old and dehydrated people would be admitted to the hospitals in Munich than usual. In response, Fussek began to investigate and learned that many residents would not get enough to eat and drink over the weekend and were fastened to their beds because on Saturdays and Sundays the number of staff was even lower than usual in many homes.

the Weißer Engel award for exemplary achievements in the health and nursing sector.³

3 Transfer of the Collection

Fussek collected all these letters of complaint, emails and phone transcripts and kept them in the offices of the VIF. When he retired, however, a new home was needed for the collection of approximately 250 thick files. This collection, which the media had often called the “nursing wall”, was at risk of being taken away or destroyed.

The Institute for the History of Medicine at the Robert Bosch Foundation in Stuttgart is not only home to the homeopathy archive, but also houses the archive of the Robert Bosch Foundation and its facilities. Aware of the situation, the institute contacted Claus Fussek to discuss the future of the files. At the end of May 2022, Claus Fussek presented his collection to the Institute for the History of Medicine in Stuttgart, where it will be kept for posterity. Fussek was grateful that his decades of work had not been in vain. In Stuttgart, the files are now being reviewed, catalogued and professionally packed for archival safe-keeping, meaning the documents will still be available for research purposes for many years to come. It is Fussek’s express wish that Bundesinteressenvertretung der Altenheimbewohner (BIVA), the federal advocacy organisation for nursing home residents, be permitted to access and use the files at any time, in line with archival regulations and data protection laws, so that his documentation can be used to bring about urgent changes within the German nursing system.

Fussek’s collection has found a good home at the Institute for the History of Medicine, not only from an archival perspective but also in terms of its content. The Robert Bosch Foundation has long advocated for the professionalisation of nursing and the improvement of working conditions in the health professions, and has sponsored various programmes since the beginning of the 1990s. For example, it prompted the creation of the highly regarded position paper “Pflege braucht Eliten” (Nursing Needs Elites),⁴ in which leading experts advocated the academisation of nursing in Germany. The topic of aging is also an important issue for the Robert Bosch Foundation.⁵ Every two years, the Otto und Edith Mühlischlegel Stiftung, a dependent foundation within the Robert Bosch Foundation, presents the Otto Mühlischlegel Prize for exemplary scientific work in all areas of old age and aging. Furthermore, the history of nursing has for years been a professional focus at the Institute for the History of Medicine. Seminal studies on everyday conditions in nursing have been based on research conducted here,⁶ as have studies on the history of denominational nursing,⁷ and on the development of geriatric nursing in the Federal Republic of Germany.⁸

³ Bavarian State Ministry for Health and Nursing (Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Gesundheit und Pflege) 2022.

⁴ Robert Bosch Stiftung 1992.

⁵ In 2002 the foundation began to support the research project “Life in Older Age – Aging and Demographic Structures”.

⁶ Faber 2015 and also Hähner-Rombach 2009.

⁷ Kreutzer/Nolte 2016.

⁸ Grabe 2016.

4 Research Corpus and Positioning

Geriatric nursing research is still in its infancy, both in terms of its own history and in terms of the history of nursing. Nina Grabe's pioneering study on the inpatient care of older people in Lower Saxony between 1945 and 1975 was a portrait of the establishment of geriatric care structures in Germany that also introduced the various agents, such as home providers, staff, and residents.⁹ Kristina Matron's research on geriatric assistance in Frankfurt am Main addressed the question of what kind of nursing programmes were developed in the domestic setting.¹⁰ Nicole Kramer's numerous articles provide insights into the development of a very complex job market within German geriatric care, and also disclose some of the reasons why the situation of geriatric nursing is so complicated in Germany.¹¹ Neglect, malpractice, and violence have often been addressed in the history of nursing, yet – with the exception of the participation in National Socialist medical crimes – have never been a separate subject of investigation. In recent years, these issues have appeared more often in connection with homes for children, adolescents, and disabled people.¹²

By default, the field of nursing ethics is often confronted with issues of malpractice and violence. Yet here, the focus is not on the analysis of specific cases, but rather on the ethical evaluation of actions by nurses in a particular context or the development of a distinct definition for geriatric nursing.¹³

5 Topics

Fussek's documents are in general very significant for historical and social science research because they reflect the position and situation of nursing in German society. Furthermore, they are unique in the field because of the size of the collection. The history of nursing often suffers from a lack of source materials, as often only normative materials such as laws or regulations are available because only these documents "matter" and are preserved. Personal testimonies such as the ones in Fussek's collection represent a valuable corrective voice to such administrative texts.¹⁴ They are especially useful and informative for the history of patients.¹⁵ While there are some investigations of everyday aspects in the history of nursing,¹⁶ often the source material consists of testimonies by the nurses. In contrast, a large proportion of the testimonies in Fussek's collection came from the clients and their relatives, which allows a different perspective. The documents provide insights into the everyday life of the residents of the homes, show the working routines of staff and, more often than not, graphically illustrate the discrepancies between theory and practice in the institutions.

Yet, despite the large number of entries, one should not immediately succumb to the obvious temptation to interpret the contents described as "everyday life" without reservation and

⁹ Grabe 2016.

¹⁰ Matron 2017.

¹¹ Kramer 2019; Kramer 2020; Kramer 2022 a; Kramer 2022 b.

¹² The resources on this issue have since grown substantially. For instance: Wenger 2022; Schmuhl 2023; Winkler/Schmuhl 2011; Winkler 2021; Kaminsky/Klößner 2020.

¹³ Schwerdt 1998.

¹⁴ On the role played by personal testimonies in historical research, cf. Schulze 1996.

¹⁵ On the history of patients cf. Porter 1985 and Jütte 1991.

¹⁶ Faber 2015; Hähner-Rombach 2009; Thiekötter et al. 2009.

hence as the “normality” in nursing facilities. Ultimately, the collection is a compilation of complaints, descriptions of negative experiences and accusations. There are no descriptions of positive experiences in German nursing homes because a) it was not Fussek’s task to keep such positive memories and b) when the writers of the letters sat down to put their experiences into words, they were pursuing particular goals and intentions: they hoped Fussek could bring about an improvement of the conditions. When everything was fine and the conditions were good, there was no need to write. This of course poses a problem of missing sources, which historians must not forget during their analysis if they want to be thorough and critical in their investigation of their source materials.

Fussek’s collection can be roughly divided into four large areas:

Letters by Affected People

After initial inspection, there is only a small number of letters from those who were affected, which can most likely be explained by the fact that many of those individuals were not in a position to write the complaints themselves, let alone do the research necessary to find Fussek as the addressee. In those few instances where affected individuals wrote to him themselves, they mostly expressed their resignation and helplessness. They were particularly hurt by treatment from the nursing staff that they experienced as insensitive and degrading. One resident of a home in Bad Nauheim described her biggest problem in 1998 as being dependent on the nursing staff.

It’s the dependency on the young nurses (for me this is really bad!). We are so helpless and so at the mercy of their mood, their temper – but also dependent on the house rules and the work regulations of “our” home.¹⁷

Letters by Relatives

It is not surprising that the majority of Fussek’s correspondence comes from relatives of home residents. Children, grandchildren, spouses and, in rarer cases, friends of the residents turned to Claus Fussek. The triggers for writing to Fussek vary, but in most cases it was a specific event or distinct incident that made them write the letter. Furthermore, most of the writers were looking for help.¹⁸ Depending on the intensity, complexity and the specific requests of the relatives, Fussek’s documentation of the different cases could vary in length. In some instances, there is just a single letter, but in other instances, we see correspondence that lasted for years. Sometimes a letter may have caused Fussek to dig deeper and take a closer look at the individual home, its structures and nursing practices on site. In such “cases”, in addition to the letters from the relatives, there are accompanying photographs, medical reports, letters by authorities and funding bodies, or medical expert opinions.

Letters by Nursing Staff

Some of the cases that Fussek investigated were brought to his attention by the nursing staff. These letters reveal that the descriptions by the affected people and the relatives must contain a certain amount of truth. If we include these statements by the nursing staff in the analysis of the deficits we come closer to the multi-perspective approach required for analysis, be-

¹⁷ Hirsch/Fussek 2001, p. 60.

¹⁸ On reasons for writing to health institutions in Germany cf. Pfütsch 2017, pp. 128–129.

cause it steers the question of guilt away from individual nurses and towards structural factors. For instance, one nurse from Ahenhausen described her experiences on a closed geropsychiatric ward in 1998:

All the others would need help with washing and getting dressed, they would not do it on their own, meaning they are all at the back of the queue for physical hygiene, just like everyone else. The results were bad gum infections, since there was not even time for oral or denture hygiene. In the mornings and evenings, the residents underwent robotic processing, which would have led to massive protests by animal rights activists if this had happened in a cow barn. The bad thing is that you cannot “work” any differently because otherwise you would not have everyone out of bed before breakfast, and in the evening, you would not have them in bed before midnight. So you start to put people to bed by 3pm or at least put them in their nightgowns. Because it is fast, they are only fed pureed food because normal food would take far too much time. In terms of the amount they are drinking, it is extremely horrible. Sometimes they are hardly drinking anything for days on end, especially when they refuse, for example. And in such instances, you would need time!¹⁹

Another nurse got to the heart of the matter as follows: “The system must be changed because only then will we be able to make geriatric nursing more humane again.”²⁰

Interviews, Manuscripts, Presentations

The extensive collection also contains numerous newspaper articles, interviews and manuscripts about and by Claus Fussek. They illustrate his work for the Association for Promoting Integration but also his increasing role as a nursing expert and critic. Furthermore, he also published some non-fiction books in which he tried to raise awareness of the disastrous situations.²¹ These books are based on his experiences and are simultaneously an attempt to process what he had learned. With his public engagements, Claus Fussek also became a person who hugely influenced public discourse about the importance of nursing in the 1990s. This is another reason why it is so critical to secure and preserve these documents for the history of nursing.

When it comes to specific malpractices, experiences of violence and other problematic issues, Fussek’s documents provide many insights, as discussed above. Many of the depictions provide insights into the everyday world of nursing institutions, describing the reasons for people being sent to homes, often combined with justifications from the relatives. Consequently, Fussek’s documents are a remarkable illustration of the living situations, networks and self-assessments of older individuals in Germany.

Delving deeper into this material and researching it in more depth will probably be of interest in disciplines as varied as history, sociology, nursing ethics and even ethnology. Depending on the question and the approach, the documents may provide a wide range of answers. While the obvious topic might be research into horrific situations in the homes, the residents’ rela-

¹⁹ Hirsch/Fussek 2001, p. 200.

²⁰ Hirsch/Fussek 2001, p. 174.

²¹ Fussek/Schober 2008; Fussek/Schober 2013; Fussek/Loerzer 2005.

tionships with their families might also become a research topic. Furthermore, the dealings between the managers and financing bodies of homes and the residents have not been analysed before. Finally, the documents may also provide insights into the practical implementation of nursing reforms over the past few decades.

6 Options for Use

As mentioned above, in a first step, the collection will be reviewed, partially indexed, and professionally packed for archival purposes. Due to the abundance and disparity of the individual pieces of writing, this work will take some time. Students, postgraduates and other interested scholars can contact the Institute for the History of Medicine to discuss potential research questions and approaches. Close collaboration with the institute will be obligatory because the initial searches will be conducted by institute employees. Due to certain data protection timelines and the sensitivity of the data, access to the data will be granted on a case-by-case basis after thorough evaluation. Once access has been granted, the material cannot be removed from the premises in Stuttgart and must be studied there. Users must also agree to anonymise sensitive data that could identify individuals or institutions.

After a first rough review of the documents, it seems apparent that one possible result of investigating Fussek's documents from a historical point of view could be the continuance of the disastrous conditions and issues in care homes. Letters by relatives from the 1990s sound nearly the same as letters from 2022, even down to the specific issues: going to the toilet, nutrition and feeding, and receiving empathy and attention. It seems that not much has changed, but more detailed analyses would be needed to confirm or contradict this impression.

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