

Correspondence

Henry E. Sigerist – Adolf Meyer

1934–1947

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1. Introduction

1.1. Adolf Meyer (1866-1950)

Adolf Meyer was the leading non-Freudian psychiatric theorist in the United States. He was born on 13 September 1866 in Niederweningen, Switzerland, the son of a minister and the nephew of a doctor, and grew up in an atmosphere of liberalism and reflection. Meyer was trained in neurobiology and neurophysiology at the University of Zurich, where he received his M.D. degree in 1892. He had hoped for the post of assistant to the professor of medicine at Zurich, but when this was denied him he decided to go to the United States. His first appointment was as a pathologist at the Illinois Eastern Hospital for the Insane at Kankakee, IL. Meyer soon became acquainted with the work of psychologist William James, the philosopher-educator John Dewey, and others who were molding psychology and philosophy. He blended these different influences into a concept of human behavior that he called ergasiology or psychobiology, which sought to integrate the psychological and biological study of human beings.

In 1910 Meyer became Professor of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University. In 1914 he was named the first director of the Henry Phipps Psychiatric Clinic, a position he held until his retirement in 1941. Under his leadership the Phipps Clinic became one of the most important centers in the world for training psychiatrists. Rejecting the traditional view that separated the mind from the body, Meyer taught his students to be concerned with the whole human being. He rejected simple biological explanations of mental illness and worked to develop formulations of "reaction patterns." Before the widespread acceptance of Sigmund Freud's work, Meyer began to contend that childhood sexual feelings could lead to serious mental problems.

Meyer's psychobiological studies showed that thoughts and feelings affected a person's physiological state. He became the first American psychiatrist to compile voluminous case histories of his patients, creating a behavior chart for the day-by-day notation of each patient's conduct. Containing data on hereditary and environmental details, social and economic circumstances, and conscious and unconscious factors, Meyer's case histories became the main research material of the Phipps Clinic.

During the first half of the twentieth century Meyer exercised a major influence on psychiatric research. Much of his teaching has been incorporated into psychological theory and practice in the United States, Britain, and other English-speaking nations. He can be credited with giving American psychiatry a pragmatic bent by maintaining a view of psychiatry as a biological science while incorporating many psychoanalytic principles. Through his illustrious career Meyer impressed generations of students with the idea that in the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness the whole person must be taken into account.

For biographical Literature see (Lief 1948), (Feierstein 1965), (Bordley/Harvey 1976), (Leys 1991).

(Another of Sigerist's correspondents is the German historian of science Adolf Meyer (1893-1971) who from 1940 on called himself Adolf Meyer-Abich. From 1930 on he was professor in Hamburg.)

1.2. The Correspondence

This is a small correspondence of only about ten letters by each of the correspondents over a period of 13 years. The period is Sigerist's time at the Johns Hopkins University, whereas for Meyer it represents the end of his career at that university and the first years of his retirement.

The correspondence is of value for a number of reasons. Both correspondents were eminent medical men, one in psychiatry, the other in the history of medicine. Short as the correspondence is, it reflects a mutual appreciation and empathy, despite a difference in age of 25 years. Thus, in contrast to other Sigerist correspondences this one is neither between two colleagues of the same field nor between friends. As colleagues of the same faculty most of their communication may have been through direct encounters. The topics are limited too. There is the help for European victims of Nazism and of the Spanish War in the 1930s. There are invitations for dinner or conferences to meet people, often of the liberal or progressive wing. There is also mutual help for literature as well as exchange of works which are read and commented by the recipient. One value of this correspondence may be its very contrast to the extensive Sigerist correspondences, i.e., its scarcity of information, yet on a background of a touching human relationship.

2. The Letters

Sigerist to Meyer, Baltimore, 23 April 1934

Dear Dr. Meyer:

I just had a letter from Dr. Wartenberg, Neurologist, in Freiburg in Breisgau. He seems to be out of a job and would like to get an appointment in this country. He writes me that the Rockefeller Foundation promised to provide for half of his salary should he get an appointment. I know Dr. Wartenberg only very superficially, but do know that he always was considered a very good neurologist.

Dr. Wartenberg mentioned your name in his letter, and it occurred to me that you might know of a possibility of getting a position for Dr. Wartenberg who certainly deserves to be helped and who would be a credit to any institution.

Very sincerely yours,

Henry E. Sigerist

Robert Wartenberg (1886-1956) lost his job due to Nazi persecution and continued his career in San Francisco. S. helped many victims of the Nazi rule in the 1930s.

Meyer to Sigerist, Baltimore, 26 April 1934

Dear Dr. Sigerist:

I also had a letter from Wartenberg, whom I know from his stay with us in Baltimore. Unfortunately I know of no openings, but I suggested to him to get into contact with Dr. B. Sachs of New York, the chairman of the committee.

Sincerely yours,

Adolf Meyer

Meyer to Sigerist, Baltimore, 11 November 1936

Dear Dr. Sigerist:

I am glad to join you at the dinner on Friday, November 13, at 7 o'clock. I shall be glad to hear Sir Humphry and Dr. Reynolds.

Believe me

Sincerely yours,

[Adolf Meyer]

Sir Humphry: Probably Rolleston (1862-1944) British physician. Reynolds not identified.

Sigerist to Meyer, Baltimore, 11 November 1936

Dear Dr. Meyer:

Here is a letter which is self-explanatory and which I am passing on to you. I do not think you need bother in the matter. Dr. Wolfer has pestered me for a long time, and he seems to believe that the foundations can be compelled to support him.

As you may know, the research institute on the Jungfrauoch has been very generously supported by the Rockefeller Foundation. Dr. Wolfer's institute duplicates the work of the other station to a certain extent, and I can very well understand that the Foundation disapproves of it.

Very sincerely yours,
Henry E. Sigerist

The two Swiss institutes are for high altitude physiology.

Sigerist to Meyer, Baltimore, 10 December 1936

Dear Dr. Meyer:

May I recommend Dr. Johann Marx, one of my former Leipzig students who has emigrated to this country. He has worked for a year and a half in Bethel and is now looking for a job some where in America. I told him that there is no chance for him to be employed at the Hopkins but I thought that you might possibly tell him of psychiatric hospitals or asylums where the chances would be better and where he could apply.

Dr. Marx is an exceedingly bright and nice young man of whom I have always been very fond. He is a nephew of one of my former Leipzig colleagues, Professor Jacobi.

I would greatly appreciate any advice you could give the young man.

Very sincerely yours,
Henry E. Sigerist

Bethel (psychiatric) Hospital in England. Jacobi, possibly Erwin, professor of industrial law.

Meyer to Sigerist, Baltimore, 13 December 1937

Dear Dr. Sigerist:

I want to thank you for letting me have the number of the Bulletin which contains the article of my namesake. He was good enough to draw my attention to its being published there.

Believe me
Most sincerely yours,
Adolf Meyer

“namesake“: (Meyer 1937), also called Meyer-Abich, a German historian of science.

Sigerist to Meyer, Baltimore, 18 December 1937

Dear Dr. Meyer:

The Spanish War is in its second year. It has disappeared from the front page of the newspapers but it is existent nevertheless. For one year and a half the Spanish people have fought a heroic fight against rebels and foreign invaders, for independence, democracy and progress. The war has brought endless sufferings to the population and help is needed more than ever.

Students, faculty, and employees of Harvard University have raised sufficient funds to equip an entire ambulance unit. The New York universities have all organized faculty committees to aid Spain and have raised considerable funds.

The members of our University, in cooperation with the members of other Baltimore schools, must make an effort to succor Spain more efficiently than heretofore.

A group of students, faculty members, and internes will meet Wednesday, December 22 at 5 p.m. in the Lecture Hall of the Welch Medical Library and will discuss ways and means to initiate a vigorous campaign in aid of the Spanish people.

You are invited to come.

Sincerely yours,
Henry E. Sigerist

Meyer to Sigerist, Baltimore ?, 3 March 1938

Dear Dr. Sigerist:

I hope to be able to be present at the dinner in honor of Dr. Edward H. Hume on March 9. I herewith enclose my check for three dollars.

Believe me
Sincerely yours
[Adolf Meyer]

Edward H. Hume (1876-1957) physician and educator, staff member of S.'s Institute.

Meyer to Sigerist, Baltimore, 21 March 1938

Dear Dr. Sigerist:

You are cordially invited to attend a conference which will be held in the afternoon and evening of Friday and in the forenoon of Saturday, the 15th and 16th of April, 1938, at the Henry Phipps Psychiatric Clinic. This conference will mark the completion of twenty-five years of the Clinic's existence. The program will be made up of contributions by the members of the present staff. The clinical and laboratory material of the Phipps Clinic will provide the topics for the contributions. A copy of the final set-up of the program with the titles of the papers will be sent to you before the first of April.

I do hope that you will be able to attend the conference. It will greatly facilitate our arrangements if you will kindly let us know whether we may expect you.

Cordially yours,
Adolf Meyer

Henry Phipps Psychiatric Clinic of the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine.

Sigerist to Meyer, Baltimore, 24 March 1938

Dear Dr. Meyer:

Many thanks for your letter of March 21. I shall be very glad to attend the conference on April 15 to 16.

Yours very sincerely
Henry E. Sigerist

Sigerist to Meyer, Baltimore, 15 March 1939

Dear Dr. Meyer:

The Saturday Night Club, a liberal political group with which Dr. Donald Hooker is closely connected, intends to call a meeting to consider a health program for Maryland following the suggestions of the National Health Conference.

In view of the fact that the Wagner bill is before Congress and that large Federal funds may become available to the states to improve their health facilities, it seems to me that such a meeting at which the various health problems of the state will be discussed is most timely.

The Club has issued the enclosed statement that will be sent out to various groups in the city and state and we would greatly appreciate it if you would be willing to endorse the meeting.

Yours very sincerely,
Henry E. Sigerist

Donald Hooker not identified. Wagner bill for workers' rights of 1935; probably S. meant the Wagner-Murray-Dingell bill for a national health program.

Sigerist to Meyer, Baltimore, 20 October 1942

Dear Dr. Meyer:

I am sure you are familiar with the History of Ideas Club in Homewood. The Club was founded by Professor Lovejoy and has been a very active center for a good many years.

I happen to be chairman of the Club this year and at the last meeting of our Committee, it was our unanimous desire to invite you to address the Club some time this winter on any subject that you care to present.

The Club meets on every second Thursday of the month. We have a speaker of the November meeting but the other dates are still free and I very much hope that you will consent to address our group in a not too distant future.

With kind regards, I am

Yours very sincerely,
Henry E. Sigerist

Homewood: The non-medical campus of Johns Hopkins University on the North side of Baltimore. Arthur O. Lovejoy (1873-1962) philosopher and historian at Johns Hopkins University.

Meyer to Sigerist, Baltimore, 1 December 1943

Dear Dr. Sigerist:

Dr. Zilboorg has asked me to speak to the New York Society of Historical Medicine on "The One Hundred Years of American Psychiatry" and particularly on its evolution, whereas Dr. Whitehorn is expected to give a history of the major therapeutic trends.

I lack the early numbers of the Journal of Insanity and I wonder whether your collection contains any material along along that line. My own library has not paid enough attention to the earlier days.

Most sincerely yours,
Adolf Meyer

Gregory Zilboorg (1890-1959) psychiatrist in New York, friend of S.'s. John C. Whitehorn (1894-1973) M.'s successor at Hopkins.

Sigerist's assistant to Meyer, 3 December 1943

Dear Dr. Meyer:

Dr. Sigerist had to go out of town today and he asked me to reply to your letter of December 1.

The Welch Library has a complete set of the American Journal of Insanity beginning with Volume I in 1844. There are several other publications dealing with the early personalities in American psychiatry which might interest you. They are:

John Curwen, The original thirteen members of the Association of Medical Superintendents of American institutions for the Insane, Warren, Pa., 1885.

John Curwen and others, Memoir of Thomas S. Kirkbride, Warren, Pa., 1885.

You are probably already familiar with Albert Deutsch's *The Mentally Ill in America*, Garden City, N.Y., 1937.

Yours sincerely,

[....]

Assistant

John Curwen (1821-1901). Thomas S. Kirkbride (1809-1883). Albert Deutsch (1905-1961). S.'s assistant may have been Genevieve Miller.

Meyer to Sigerist, Baltimore ?, 12 February 1945

Dear Dr. Sigerist:

I do not want to let pass without explicit thanks the real pleasure I got out of the reprints, and especially my appreciation of that gem, the "Dedicatory Epistle to Castiglioni", whom I had the pleasure to sit with at the dinner before a lecture, at which I made the lapse of confusing him with Castellani of tropical disease fame. Your reprint is one of the warmest and most delightful expressions of appreciation that assuages my lapse at the time and my possibility now to feel what a charming table companion I had on that occasion. It is delightful to see how history in the making covers all periods and the outlook and especially illuminates the now and here. It is one outstanding element in our school.

Most sincerely yours,

[Adolf Meyer]

"Dedicatory Epistle" (Sigerist 1944). Arturo Castiglioni (1874-1953) Italian medical historian, during WWII in exile in the U.S.. Aldo Castellani (1877-1971). "school" of Medicine at Johns Hopkins University.

Sigerist to Meyer, Baltimore, 13 February 1945

Dear Dr. Meyer:

Many thanks for your kind letter that I greatly appreciated. I usually do not send reprints to my immediate colleagues because I do not want to impose upon them but since you actually read them, I take great pleasure in sending you enclosed some of my older papers that you might care to have.

With kind regards, I am

Yours very faithfully,

Henry E. Sigerist

“immediate colleagues: faculty colleagues.

Meyer to Sigerist, Baltimore, 28 February 1945

Dear Dr. Sigerist:

You gave me a very happy continuation of a glimpse in your abundance of contributions to history and the present-day making of history.

Mrs. Meyer and I were both very much delighted with Frank’s paper and the one on Arthus, and the Paracelsus notes, the life and death symbols, and social security contributions as well as the Saratoga reminiscences. The note on Klebs brings back many memories of both father and son. The father played an interesting role in my university days.

Dr. Temkin has sent me the invitation to the closer contact with the History society. I know I shall derive much pleasure in sharing the spirit of the group.

With my sincere appreciation,

Sincerely yours,

Adolf Meyer

Mrs. Mary Meyer. Frank’s paper (Sigerist 1941). Arthus (Sigerist 1943a). S. published six titles on Paracelsus in 1941; see bibliography (Miller 1966). “life and death symbols“ (Sigerist 1942). “social security contributions“

see bibliography (Miller 1966). Saratoga (Sigerist 1943b). Klebs (Sigerist 1940). Edwin Klebs (1834-1913) German pathologist and microbiologist, M.’s teacher at the University of Zurich. Arnold C. Klebs (1870-1943) son of Edwin Klebs, physician and medical historian in the U.S. and Switzerland. Owsei Temkin (1902-2002) S.’s pupil and associate in Leipzig and Baltimore. “History society“: Johns Hopkins Medical History Club.

Meyer to Sigerist, Baltimore, 6 February 1947

Dear Dr. Sigerist:

I should like to give to the Welch Library the copy of the presentation of my viewpoint in Portuguese by Danilo Perestrello. As far as I can gather from my limited knowledge of the language, it is a very understanding presentation, which I should like to be used by the South

American pupils of the School of Hygiene. With the exception of Billings and Muncie, no one has given as understanding and comprehensive a presentation of my perspectives which, to my mind, paved the closest relation to the social - and individual - perspective of psychiatry. Unfortunately the extreme behaviorism of Watson and the anti-philosophical attitude of the American psychologists are the main reasons why they became more interested in showing their independence and side-stepping the social aspects I emphasized in the mental hygiene movement. [?] and ergasia.

I should like to talk over with you some time the sociological aspects of psychobiology and the development of psychiatry. I hope I can do this without causing undue inroads on what is such a regrettably short time of having you within reach.

With best regards,

Most sincerely yours,

Adolf Meyer

Welch Medical Library of the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. Danilo Perestrello (1916-1989) Brazilian psychiatrist. "School of Hygiene" and Public Health. Billings, John S. (1839-1913) medical historian, founder of *Index Medicus* and of what eventually became the National Library of Medicine. Wendell Muncie (born 1897) psychiatrist, M.'s pupil. John B. Watson (1878-1958) psychologist. Mental hygiene movement, ergasia, and psychobiology are terms introduced by M.. "regrettably short time" until S.'s leaving Hopkins in summer 1947.

Sigerist to Meyer, Baltimore ?, 25 February 1947

Dear Dr. Meyer:

Thank you ever so much for your letter of February 6th and for Danilo Perestrello's publication that I have turned over to the Welch Library in your name.

I am delighted to see that a South American scholar has written such an excellent presentation of your philosophy and psychiatry, and I am sure that our numerous South American students will be much interested in the publication.

It will be a great privilege for me to be able to talk over with you the sociological aspects of psychobiology, and I will come to see you in the very near future.

With kind regards, I am

Yours very faithfully,

Henry E. Sigerist

Perestrello see M. to S. of 6 February 1947. In mid-1947 S. quit Hopkins and settled in Switzerland for the rest of his life. M. died in 1950 in Baltimore.

3. Literature

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4. Name Index

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