

Working and Living Conditions for Nursing Staff at the Provincial Asylum and Hospital for the Mentally Ill Feldhof near Graz (Austria) around 1900

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Zusammenfassung

Arbeits- und Lebensbedingungen der Pflegenden der "Landes-Irren-Heil- und Pflegeanstalt Feldhof bei Graz"

Der vorliegende Beitrag erörtert die Arbeits- und Lebensbedingungen von Pflegepersonen ("Wärtern" und "Wärterinnen") in der "Landes-Irren-Heil- und Pflegeanstalt Feldhof bei Graz" im späten 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert. Ein zentrales Merkmal der Organisationsentwicklung dieser psychiatrischen Anstalt im damaligen "Kronland" Steiermark von ihrer Gründung im Jahr 1874 bis zum Beginn des Ersten Weltkrieges war ein rapides Wachstum, das sich sowohl an den Veränderungen des Insassen- und Personalstandes ablesen lässt als auch an baulichen Erweiterungen. Diese konnten allerdings mit dem "Zustrom" an Insassen nicht mithalten, so dass vehemente "Überfüllung" ein konstantes, von der Anstaltsleitung immer wieder beklagtes Problem darstellte. Von diesen "Übelständen" war naturgemäß das Pflegepersonal in besonderem Maß betroffen. Immerhin konnte die von der Anstaltsorganisation angestrebte Wärter-Insassen-Relation von 1:7 im Allgemeinen tatsächlich erreicht werden, was eine Ausweitung des Personalstands an Pflegern von ca. 50 auf fast 200 zwischen 1874 und 1912 bedeutete. Die ohnehin vorhandenen Probleme mit der "Qualität" des Personals wurden so freilich noch verschärft. Aufgrund der wenig attraktiven Lebens- und Arbeitsbedingungen des "gewöhnlichen" Personals hatte einerseits die Anstaltsleitung oft Mühe, überhaupt ausreichend Bewerber zu finden, und musste immer wieder ungeeignete Personen schon nach kurzer Zeit entlassen. Andererseits kündigten viele Wärterinnen bzw. Wärter nach wenigen Wochen oder Monaten selbst: Die Einkommen waren sehr niedrig und die beruflichen Aufstiegschancen, trotz der Schaffung einer begrenzten Zahl von "höheren" Wärter-Positionen, schlecht und begrenzt. Vor allem aber waren die Arbeitsbedingungen ausgesprochen hart. Die meisten Pflegepersonen mussten die Nächte gemeinsam mit den Patienten auf den jeweiligen Trakten verbringen, Dienstwohnungen waren einzelnen "Oberwärtern" vorbehalten. Die Dienstzeiten waren horrend lang; sie dauerten von halb sechs Uhr morgens bis zehn Uhr abends (mit wenigen Pausen), und dies bei einer mehr als Sechs-Tage-Woche (nur jeder achte Tag war dienstfrei). Zudem mussten die Pflegerinnen und Pfleger, neben der Beaufsichtigung und Betreuung der Insassen, nahezu sämt-

liche auf den Trakten anfallende Arbeiten erledigen, also auch einen beträchtlichen Teil der Reinigungs- und sonstigen “Haushalts”-Tätigkeiten. Schließlich war die Berufstätigkeit in der Anstalt angesichts der erheblichen Verbreitung von Infektionskrankheiten unter den Insassen auch für das Personal ausgesprochen gesundheitsgefährdend. Die Etablierung eines fachlich qualifizierten Personals war unter solchen Bedingungen verständlicherweise kaum möglich; in manchen Jahren wurden mehr Wärter entlassen bzw. kündigten selbst, als überhaupt Posten für Pflegekräfte vorgesehen waren. Unter solchen Umständen waren auch anstaltsinterne Weiterbildungsmaßnahmen kaum durchführbar; Prüfungen für Pflegepersonen wurden erst 1907 eingeführt, und dies nur auf freiwilliger Basis.

Introduction

Historiography has largely neglected the history of psychiatric nursing for a long time, at least in German-speaking countries. In recent decades interest in the subject has increased, although the amount of relevant scholarly publications is still limited.¹

This article deals with the history of nursing care in psychiatry in Austria around 1900 and particularly addresses fundamental aspects in connection with the working and living conditions that nurses experienced in the main psychiatric hospital that existed at the time in the Austrian province of Styria: the “Landes- Irren- Heil und Pflegeanstalt Feldhof bei Graz” (Provincial Asylum and Hospital for the Mentally Ill Feldhof near Graz).² This asylum, which was named after the huge farm near the state capital of Graz on which it was situated in 1874, was at the time the only state institution for the care of chronically mentally ill people in all of Styria, a region which had approx. 1.2 million inhabitants in the late 19th century.³ Until World War I it remained almost the only institution of its kind, apart from a considerably smaller institution for “the invalid insane” without hope of recovery that had been founded in the 1890s. Since the 1870s there had been another psychiatric clinic for the care of people suffering from acute mental diseases, also in Graz.⁴

1 Cf. for Germany: Falkenstein (2000); Höll/Schmidt-Michel (1989); Müller (2006); for Switzerland: Braunschweig (2007); Braunschweig (2004); Braunschweig (1991); for Austria: Ledebur (2007).

2 Quotations have been translated into English by the author of this article. The abbreviations ‘StLA, LaA’ indicate the locations of archival sources: Steiermärkisches Landesarchiv, Landschaftliches Archiv.

3 Cf. Bolognese-Leuchtenmüller (1978), part II, 3.

4 The history of the psychiatric ‘landscape’ of Styria is outlined in: Watzka: Landesnervenklinik (2006).

Development of the Institution

The most important structural change in the institution's history during the period under consideration (1874–1913)⁵ was its rapid growth which affected all aspects of life at the “Feldhof”. This phenomenon was common to almost all psychiatric institutions in Western and Central Europe during the late 19th century⁶, to varying degrees, and the “Feldhof” seemed to have been particularly affected. The institution had started off in 1874 with a quite small number of inmates, about 350, but by 1910 their number had risen to nearly five times that as there were more than 1.600 in-patients then. The considerable extension that needed to be built at the time to house all the inmates and the staff that was needed to manage them is well depicted in a contemporary print.⁷ It shows the estate of the asylum like a town of its own, which, in those days, was still totally separated from the city of Graz (of which it is now a part), but there was a train connection.⁸

The need for this enormous expansion was, in my view, not so much the result of some government master plan to detain all “misfits”⁹, but rather of tightening social standards and the rapid rise in the economic and technical demands imposed on the individual as well as the loosening of emotional ties due to modernization's socially disintegrating influences. These developments left many people helpless, faced with a rapidly changing environment, in mental as well as in socio-economic terms.¹⁰ This does not only apply to Styria

- 5 For an outline of the asylum's history in general cf. Weiss (2006), pp. 39–100; Watzka: Landes-Irrenanstalt (2006), pp. 14–40; Watzka (2008), pp. 141–157; for quantitative analyses of the patients' history cf. also Watzka/Grießenböck (2008); Watzka (2002), pp. 21–26. Important surveys published in the late 19th and early 20th century are: Czermak (1871); Krafft-Ebing (1879); Scarpatetti (1899); Hassmann (1912).
- 6 Cf. for the English-speaking countries including USA and Canada: Torrey / Miller (2007); for the German-speaking countries cf. the contemporary compilation: Laehr / Lewald (1899), esp. p. 338.
- 7 For a reprint with indications on the functions of individual buildings cf. Watzka: Landes-Irrenanstalt (2006), p. 23.
- 8 The asylum even received its own railway station shortly after its foundation. The name of the station, together with the direction one had to follow to reach the institution has become a well-known nickname of the psychiatric hospital: ‘Puntigam links’ (Puntigam to the left).
- 9 As indicated by some – also very eminent – publications on the history of psychiatry in general, related to the anti-psychiatric movement of the 1960s and 1970s, as for example Blasius (1980). Still, the sources regarding the *Feldhof* asylum, for instance, show that the administration was probably not eager to reduce the absolute number of inmates – who represent its *raison d'être*, so that a high number of clients was desirable for the directors – but definitively wished to considerably slow down the high annual growth in patient numbers as they caused enormous administrative problems. This certainly does not mean that psychiatry was no instrument of enforcement of social discipline, which it obviously was and still is.
- 10 For an early discussion of ‘anomia’ and what we call social disintegration today, cf. Durkheim (1897) and Masaryk (1881).

but to large parts of modern day Europe, where similar increases in the numbers of psychiatric patients were registered.

Increase of the Staff

The rapid growth and overcrowding took its toll on the staff. Let us look at the quantitative aspect first: whilst at the foundation of the institution its statutes stipulated posts for about 50 nurses altogether¹¹, the number rose to nearly 200 in 1912¹² at the “Feldhof” near Graz alone, not taking into account the numbers – which are not known – of the Catholic brothers and sisters who took on nursing work at two subsidiary branches for the care of the ‘incurable’ mentally ill which had been established in rural areas in 1877 and 1883¹³. The fact that the management of those ‘branches’ was entirely entrusted to Catholic orders (the Charitable Brethren and the Charitable Sisters), despite the fact that influential members of the provincial government as well as psychiatrists and civil servants in charge of the care for the mentally ill, held distinct anti-clerical views¹⁴ – highlights the difficulties that arose with regard to the administration and funding of psychiatric institutions at that time¹⁵. The costs of caring for the mentally ill were high and the subsidies that the provincial government had to pay to run the “Feldhof” (not taking into account private contributions from the patients and their relatives) amounted to over 200,000 florins, i.e. 4 % of the province’s total budget) in the year 1890 for which reliable data are available.¹⁶

All this was not without effect on everyday life in the institution, where scarcity of resources was an enduring and obviously depressing phenomenon: staff numbers were almost always too low compared to the needs of the institution. Before the asylum opened in 1870, the statutes stipulated a numeric nurses-patient ratio of 1:7.¹⁷ In subsequent decades one always aimed at meeting that target, mostly successfully.¹⁸ It has to be taken into account, however, that this is a numeric ratio only and not all nurses were able to work at the same time, as they also had to sleep etc. The actual number of patients super-

11 StLA, LaA Rezens VI-3, 434/1874.

12 Jahresbericht der Landesirrenanstalt Feldhof bei Graz pro 1912/13.

13 The history of these branch institutes has not really been researched yet.

14 Cf. Watzka/Griessenböck (2008).

15 The quoted main reason for involving those ecclesiastic organizations was their offer to take on the administrative and nursing tasks for much less money than the government would have been able to pay: StLA, LaA Rezens VI-3, 9814/1876.

16 Landesvertretung 6 (1898), 2nd section, appendix 41. For the general province budget in 1890 cf. Hye (2000), p. 1555.

17 Landes-Ausschuss (1870), p. 3.

18 Cf. table of nurses-patient-ratios at Feldhof between 1874 and 1913 in: Watzka, Landes-Irrenanstalt (2006), 28. This applies to the “central institute” at the Feldhof only. The nurses-inmates ratios at the “branch institute” for the chronically mentally ill are likely to have been considerably lower, but have not been exactly determined to date.

vised by one nurse was therefore obviously much higher. Still, the given ratio was about average compared to other mental asylums in the late 19th and early 20th century, as is shown by two contemporary surveys on the topic that were conducted in Germany in 1895 and 1907.¹⁹

The ‚Quality‘ of the Nursing Staff

Similarly, the ‚quality‘ of the nursing staff, which probably was even more important than its quantity, was not just a Styrian problem.²⁰ The administration and the physicians at the “Feldhof” repeatedly complained about this. Whilst these complaints clearly reflect hierarchical views on the management of the institution in general and internal staff relations in particular – which were based on huge differences in education, professional prestige and the economic situation of physicians and nurses – one should not try to put them down to social tensions and assume that there weren’t any ‚real‘ problems with the nursing.

Right from its beginnings, the Styrian mental asylum documented problems concerning the quality of nursing staff which were then already seen as resulting, not least, from the poor working and living conditions that psychiatric nurses had come to expect: in 1873, shortly before the “Feldhof” was inaugurated, the director of the old “madhouse”²¹, who was also the designated administrator of the new one, Dr. Franz Köstl, appealed to the Styrian government to improve “the material and professional position of the nursing personnel”²² to make the job more attractive for candidates who were adequate to its demands. He suggested to divide the attendants into different categories according to their duties, and create one supervisor position each for male and female nurses; furthermore to offer permanent contracts to well-performing attendants which had not been possible before. Some nurses were indeed offered permanent positions, just like the physicians and other officials, but this applied only to the highest ranking nurses, seven altogether, whereas the remaining more than 40 nurses were still paid monthly wages and could be dismissed at any time by the director.²³

After one decade the official situation had improved to a certain extent; in 1883 the Styrian parliament set new staff guidelines declaring that “servants, superior attendants, male and female attendants in the 1st and 2nd class wards, and one quarter [sic] of the nurses on the 3rd Class ward are entitled to a pen-

19 Cf. Falkenstein (2000), p. 32.

20 Cf. Höll/Schmidt-Michel (1989); Falkenstein (2000).

21 The Feldhof institute had a smaller predecessor in the inner city of Graz from the late 18th century on. A brief report on its history is given in: Watzka, Landesnervenklinik (2006), pp. 310–314.

22 Landesvertretung 3 (1878), p. 333.

23 Landesvertretung 3 (1878), p. 333. From 1874 to 1880, the world-famous German psychiatrist Richard Krafft-Ebing was director of the mental asylum at Feldhof.

sion after 10 years of continuous employment, should they become unable to work". The condition was that their inability to work had arisen "not through their own fault", but was due to old age or chronic illness.²⁴

Wages

Another very important issue regarding the nurses' labor and living conditions were their wages: the differentiation between the academically trained physicians and the rest of the staff was very pronounced at the time, but there was also a hierarchy among members of the same professional groupings. The director earned 2,400 florins per year in the second half of the 1870s, the "1st assistant physician" 1,300 fl., but the male 'superior attendant' only 350 fl., and the female "superior attendant" only 250 fl. The "2nd assistant physician", in contrast, also earned no more than 400 fl. per year. An ordinary "male attendant" was only paid 10 fl. per month, while his female counterpart received, as was usual at the time, less: only 8 fl., amounting to 120 fl. or 96 fl. respectively per year.²⁵

Career perspectives were also rather different for nurses and physicians. There were dozens of nursing posts, but only the two nursing supervisors earned significantly higher wages than the "ordinary" nurses. There were only three physicians at the "Feldhof" in the 1870s, and even in 1913 there were no more than 9 – for about 1.600 patients.²⁶ Each of the medical doctors working at the asylum therefore had a good chance of reaching the top of the institute's hierarchy.

Because the number of physicians was so small, they had little influence on the day-to-day management of the asylum. The attendants, together with some other non-medical staff such as maintenance workers were supervising the inmates most of the time.

It must be mentioned, though, that all staff members, including the attendants, did not have to use their wages to cover most of their basic needs, because the institution supplied accommodation and meals free of charge.²⁷ Work clothes and shoes were also either given to them or they received an annual allowance to purchase them. "Ordinary nurses" were accommodated

24 Landesvertretung 4 (1885), appendix, p. 136.

25 Landesvertretung 3 (1878), pp. 333f. To get an idea of the value of some incomes it is useful to compare them to prices: in the city of Graz, during the late 1870s, one could buy 15 to 30 eggs for 1 fl., or 1 ½ to 2 kg of rice, or 2 kg of bread. A comparison to other professions might be interesting: a primary school teacher in Graz earned between 300 and 450 fl. per year in 1875. It still has to be taken into account that the staff at the provincial asylum did not have to pay for many things that presented extra expenses for people in 'normal' jobs. For information on prices and wages in 19th century Styria cf. Baravalle (1966), esp. p. 119 and appendices.

26 StLA, LaA Rezens VI-3, 434/1874, 1802/1877, Jahresbericht der Landesirrenanstalt Feldhof bei Graz pro 1912/13.

27 Landesvertretung 3 (1878), p. 334.

in what must indeed be described as “sleeping areas”: when the institute first opened, the nurses were not provided with regular flats, but had to either share the dormitories with the patients or – especially on the wards with “furious” or “unclean” inmates – in small chambers adjacent to the wards.²⁸ In the 1870s the two superior attendants were only guaranteed their own flats. They were also the only staff members to receive the same meals as the ‘second class patients’, whilst all other attendants had to eat the same food as the poor patients, for whom only the lowest or even no fees were paid.²⁹

A menu dating from the year 1900³⁰ implies, however, that the attendants at least received the same meals as the workers (German: *Arbeiter*), i.e. patients, who were part of the asylum’s extensive “autonomous production system” that included agricultural work as well as maintenance and cleaning jobs.³¹ Thus, the nurses at least received a somewhat more nourishing and varied diet than the non-working third-class patients, who mostly only had “soup” in the evenings, while the attendants and “workers” had “canned meat with potatoes”, “rice and salad”, “pasta and salad” and so on. Lunch was similarly simple but with more meat.³²

A more serious problem at the “Feldhof” was the water supply. At first, the water came from small, basic wells that had been established at the hospital and it was therefore probably often contaminated causing epidemic diseases. This suspicion was even expressed by physicians working at the asylum in 1883, but effective measures were only put in place in 1904 and 1905, when a “deep-well” was finally installed together with canalization for the waste water, which before had simply vanished in drainage pits right next to the hospital buildings.³³ The project had been delayed several times due to lack of public funding – or at least due to the lack of willingness to invest money for that purpose. Epidemics naturally did not only put the patients at risk but also the staff and led to many casualties at the “Feldhof”, a situation which only changed with the installation of an “isolation pavilion” in 1903.³⁴ The asylum’s annual reports very often contained notices of the deaths of one or several nurses (sometimes also of a physician), who had died from some infectious disease, often tuberculosis.³⁵

28 Landes-Ausschuss (1870), pp. 8–11: The plans for the rooms to be built for the “Feldhof” given there do not include any flats for ‘ordinary’ nurses but indicate a certain number of beds for nurses in addition to those for patients within their sleeping quarters.

29 Landesvertretung 3 (1878), p. 334.

30 StLA, LaA Rezens VI-3, 10345/1900. For the full text of this interesting source cf. Watzka (2008).

31 The annual reports offer detailed information on the ‘Eigenregie’ [self-direction] as that concept is called in the sources: *Jahresberichte der Landesirrenanstalt Feldhof bei Graz pro 1886–1913*.

32 StLA, LaA Rezens VI-3, 10345/1900.

33 Landesvertretung 7 (1903), p. 588, 8 (1916), p. 696.

34 Landesvertretung 8 (1916), p. 695.

35 *Jahresberichte der Landesirrenanstalt Feldhof bei Graz pro 1886–1913*. Patient mortality, by the way, was very high, on average 11 to 12 % in the period under consideration, and

The water supply problems mentioned above have to be taken into account when one examines what was drunk in the asylum. The food lists do not mention any particular drinks apart from coffee or milk in the morning. Water was probably drunk by a lot by patients, but they were also allowed to buy non-alcoholic (until about 1910 also alcoholic) drinks in a small shop within the grounds of the “Feldhof”. The shop was used by the staff, too. Nurses and other employees received an „allowance” of free beverages which was, however, not exactly abundant: according to a source from the 1890s it consisted in “half a liter of beer or a quarter of wine per day” for all attendants.³⁶ In the years after 1910 the use of alcohol on the *Feldhof* was drastically reduced and by the end of 1911 “total abstinence” of all inmates was achieved “without particular difficulties”.³⁷ The direction extended this rule to the staff in the first half of 1912, by which time all the attendants had accepted the rules not to drink alcohol on the wards, not to bring drinks into the hospital and to return sober from their day off. They received monetary compensation for the free ration of alcohol they had been used to getting.³⁸ Alcohol had obviously presented a serious problem for the work discipline until then. Staff discipline was generally considered problematic: a 1908 report of the Styrian authorities in charge of the “Feldhof” states:

For [many] years, the question of establishing a stable, reliable staff of attendants who support the institute’s physicians in the humanitarian aspirations of modern psychiatry has been a serious concern.³⁹

Anybody familiar with the language typical in Austrian bureaucracy will know that “concern” (German: *Sorge*) really means “serious problem”. The statement is followed by the notice that the number of “higher ranks” for nurses was to be increased to 20 % of all nursing posts and that wages in general would be adapted to the rising costs at the time.

Teaching for New Attendants

No other significant improvements are mentioned but, in this report, we find the first evidence that efforts were being made to introduce structured teaching for new attendants at the asylum: it mentions that an ‘examination’ was introduced in 1907. This, however, referred only to those attendants who, after several years of service, wanted to be promoted to 2nd class service, whilst no examination was foreseen for attendants in 3rd class service who were satisfied

at least half of these deaths resulted from infectious diseases. Cf. esp. Watzka: *Landes-Irrenanstalt* (2006), pp. 30–37.

36 Landes-Ausschuss (1896), p. 12. The amount was the same for most of the other servants, too.

37 Jahresbericht der Landesirrenanstalt Feldhof bei Graz pro 1912 / 13.

38 Jahresbericht der Landesirrenanstalt Feldhof bei Graz pro 1912 / 13.

39 Landesvertretung 8 (1916), p. 699.

with that.⁴⁰ According to the annual reports an attendants' course was held in 1908 by the director to prepare the 12 participants (4 male and 8 female) for the exam. This is not a very impressive figure given that almost 200 nurses were employed by the hospital at the time.⁴¹

A minimum of knowledge had been required by attendants before and most of it was included in the "service instructions" and the "house rules" which were handed out to every nurse who started work in the asylum. The 1896 instructions also stipulated that the patients were to be regarded as "sick people with wrong minds, many wrong perceptions [...] and ill drives"⁴² and were therefore to be treated "with understanding and compassion".⁴² What is more remarkable, compared to these very fundamental and not at all surprising demands, is that the same document admonished attendants not to try to convince the inmates of the wrongness of their ideas nor to confirm them, but to ignore such utterances as far as possible.

Working Condition

There were other job requirements that also show the harsh working conditions as well as the exploitation of the nurses: we read in the „house rules" that the patients rose at six o'clock in the morning and went to bed at nine in the evening. The attendants had to rise half an hour earlier, and go to bed one hour later.⁴³ The daily working hours were extreme, even though a certain amount of time was probably conceded for breaks in the more than 16 and a half official daily working hours. Only every eighth day was a holiday which means that the nurses worked for more than six days a week.⁴⁴ Vacations seem to have been quite rare. Moreover, the attendants had to be on night duty several times. This meant that they had to stay awake half the night and were then replaced by another nurse. These duties were strictly monitored with control clocks that had to be punched every quarter of an hour.⁴⁵ Attendants' duties were obviously heavy: not only did they have to supervise the patients and help them with their day-to-day activities such as eating, dressing, washing, taking medicine and so on, if needed, but around 1900 nurses at the "Feldhof" also had to clean the rooms, serve the meals, wash the dishes and do all other housework on the wards where they worked. In general, the attendants had to perform any tasks that the physicians required them to do whene-

40 Landesvertretung 8 (1916), p. 800.

41 Jahresbericht der Landesirrenanstalt Feldhof bei Graz pro 1908.

42 Landes-Ausschuss (1896), p. 69.

43 Landes-Ausschuss (1896), pp. 99–100.

44 Landes-Ausschuss (1896), 75. Working conditions for nurses were, in some of the German asylums at least, similarly hard, cf. Falkenstein (2000), pp. 68–69.

45 Landes-Ausschuss (1896), p. 74.

ver they were not engaged in their crucial “main task” of supervising “their” patients.⁴⁶

Above all, they had to ensure that the inmates did not commit acts of violence towards themselves or other patients. The nurses also experienced violent attacks towards themselves. The 1896 service instructions state that, in that event, they should only attempt to overpower the aggressor in groups of two or more attendants, in the interest of their own safety, and that they should avoid excessive violence towards the inmate in question.⁴⁷ It was forbidden for nurses to harm or mock the patients. This rule was highly desirable from the patients’ point of view but certainly not always easy to obey. A lot of nurses were obviously not able to obey these guidelines and a considerable number of them were dismissed sooner or later after inflicting injuries on inmates or other kinds of ‘misconduct’ that the director deemed unacceptable.⁴⁸ The above mentioned service instructions also explicitly forbade the use of restraining measures (such as isolation cells, strait-jackets etc.) to intimidate or discipline the patients, but it is highly questionable to what extent this rule was observed in the actual practice.⁴⁹ Difficulties probably often arose from the strict supervision of the patients, who were not allowed to carry possibly harmful items such as lighters, scissors, knives etc.

A quite specific feature of the “Feldhof” was the prohibition of any religious activity within the institution apart from ‘simple morning and evening prayers and grace at the table’ and the attendance of the mass on Sundays and holidays. The latter was restricted to a few selected patients. Other regulations obviously aimed at preventing the nuns among the nurses from exerting any lasting influence on the patients. “The positioning of religious symbols (pictures [or] crucifixes) on the wards and the handing out of saints’ pictures, prayer books and so on to inmates are forbidden”, can be read in the 1896 service instruction.⁵⁰

The nurses had to keep up their disciplined behavior also outside their duty times at the institute. On their days off they had to “behave morally”, which is not a very precise description. ‘Female nurses’ were warned more explicitly that if they became pregnant out of wedlock they would be dis-

46 Landes-Ausschuss (1896), pp. 73–74.

47 Landes-Ausschuss (1896), p. 71.

48 In the year 1914, the “Statthalter” (governor) as the highest national civil servant in the province of Styria, in charge also of the enforcement of public health laws, personally signed a letter addressed to the *Landeshauptmann*, the head of the autonomous government of the province, the authority that financed and directly controlled the asylum, stating that there had been “14 violent deaths at the provincial asylum during the last 10 years” all thought to have been caused either by inmates harming themselves or being attacked by fellow patients. This indicates a serious “lack of supervising personnel”: File without number at the recipients’ office, stored in a box (K 1501) referring to the year 1905 in: StLA, LaA Rezens VI-3. Maybe it is not a coincidence that this file went ‘missing’ through wrong classification.

49 Landes-Ausschuss (1896), p. 70.

50 Landes-Ausschuss (1896), p. 68.

missed and not re-employed after the birth of the child.⁵¹ The daily work must have been stressful as the possibly exaggerated, but surely not totally fictitious statement of a physician shows who worked at the “Feldhof” in 1899. He refers to the problem of overcrowding:

What was intolerable [about the situation] was not so much the more than 300 provisional beds that had to be made up in the day-rooms [each night] and that led to a permanent changing of straw mattresses and bed sheets which promoted [...] the spread of epidemics, [...] but other serious matters: in the large day rooms [...] the insane – on the women’s wards there were up to 45 or 50 [per room] – are singing, jumping, dancing and fighting with one another. There are five, sometimes four attendants, [...] only two are left for the proper purpose of supervision [there]. [...]. These circumstances lead to restrictions for patients which do not exist in institutes that are not so overcrowded.⁵²

Staff Shortage

Because of these difficulties it is not surprising that the administration often had problems finding any attendants at all. The situation was somewhat easier in the case of the female nurses, because a considerable number of nuns worked in the asylum – 28 in the year 1910⁵³ – but not all of them were doing nursing work (some took on administrative duties or housework)⁵⁴. Of the secular workers of either gender, large proportions kept leaving after short stretches of work – voluntarily or not – as is shown especially by the annual reports.⁵⁵ After 1900 this trend reached almost unbelievable dimensions: out of 86 male nurses engaged at the beginning of 1912 one died, 61 left voluntarily and 44 were dismissed. That makes 106 resignations, 20 more than actual positions available for male nurses! That means that several nurses’ positions had to be refilled twice or three times in that year. In 1913, a similar situation arose among the female nurses. These conditions seriously affected the intentions to qualify the nurses better for their job, as there obviously were still little incentives for them to stay at the asylum despite some reform measures that had been introduced since the late 19th century (as discussed earlier). The director of the “Feldhof” summarizes these problems 1905 in a letter to the province authorities: “Due to the current low wages the turnover of staff has risen to an extent that renders lessons for the new nurses entirely unrealistic”.⁵⁶

Even among the physicians working at the “Feldhof” there were notable problems with qualifications, as some of the ‘assistant physicians’ were – more

51 Landes-Ausschuss (1896), p. 75.

52 Scarpatetti (1899), pp. 78–91.

53 Hassmann (1912), p. 301.

54 At the „central institute” “Feldhof” as well as at one “branch” institute in Maria-Lankowitz, which was managed by that order although it was officially part of the health care system provided by the Province of Styria. Cf. Watzka: Landes-Irrenanstalt (2006), p. 24.

55 Jahresberichte der Landesirrenanstalt Feldhof bei Graz pro 1886–1913.

56 STLA, LaA Rezens VI-3, 26994/1905.

or less experienced – medical students rather than qualified doctors⁵⁷ because it was simply not possible to find any of the latter who were prepared to work in the asylum. Desperate staff reactions were quite common and quitting was probably a natural step for many. Self-destructive behavior quite often occurred not only among the patients⁵⁸ but among staff members, too⁵⁹.

Positive work aspects, if there were any, certainly varied depending on the kind of activities the nurses had to perform. In any case, the institute offered a quite closely tied social setting to staff members, as they were, to some extent, stigmatized by society just like the insane. The administration tried to bring some color into the daily routine by organizing celebrations on occasions such as Christmas or the emperor's birthday and by offering cultural events such as public readings, concerts, film shows and so on, which seem to have been aimed at the staff as well as the inmates.⁶⁰

57 Landesvertretung 8 (1916), p. 698.

58 In 1910, 11 suicide attempts and 117 other serious injuries of patients – it is not known who inflicted them – were counted officially at the Feldhof hospital: Jahresbericht der Landesirrenanstalt Feldhof bei Graz pro 1910.

59 The cases described in the annual reports relate mostly to higher ranking officials of the institution, which does not at all imply that nurses were rarely affected. Such incidents – like suicide or death by an overdose of drugs – were probably not reported if they were not related to physicians or other higher ranking employees. An exception was the case of the institute's coach driver, who in 1907, 'out of revenge' first struck one of the nuns with a hammer at Feldhof, then fled to the main station in Graz, where he attacked a 'man unknown to him', whom he met there, with some instrument. He was afterwards arrested by the police and later returned to the asylum as a patient: Jahresbericht der Landesirrenanstalt Feldhof bei Graz pro 1907.

60 Jahresberichte der Landesirrenanstalt Feldhof bei Graz pro 1886–1913.

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