Private Practice

After three years of study in Padua and the completion of his doctorate in Ferrara, Handsch returned home via Trento. It was time to establish his career. For a young physician, however, this was anything but simple. As a rule, patients preferred experienced physicians with a good reputation who were known for their successful treatment of numerous patients. Accordingly, fresh out of university in 1577, the doctor medicinae Johann Schwartz complained that he was hardly able to gain experience in Tübingen, where he had settled to practice medicine. The few patients who sought the advice of a learned physician were almost all seen by the local, experienced practitioners, meaning that as a young and little known physician he had hardly any work. Handsch knew that he had to expect similar problems. Early on, in his collection of sayings, he noted down this proverb: “People prefer to go to the tailor than to the tailor’s apprentice.”

Indirectly, this widespread preference for experienced physicians can also be inferred from the letters physicians wrote to municipal authorities when they were applying for the position of municipal physician. Applicants frequently emphasized not only their university education, preferably at a famous university, but also their practical experience. The Wasserburg physician Georg Haindlacher, for example, underlined in 1549 that in his fourteen years of medical practice, he was consulted by so many patients and had become so practiced and experienced that he was a match for other physicians, by which he meant those in Augsburg in particular. Likewise extolling his experience in 1606, Jacob Berckhmüller wrote that he had not only studied at different universities, “but also practiced in the medical field at the renowned and praiseworthy Hospital Santa Maria Nuova in Florence and in other places to such an extent that now, with divine assistance, I have cause to apply my talentum.”

2 Cod. 9650, foll. 25v-26v, copy of a letter to Matthaeus Collinus from Trento in the summer of 1553, announcing that he hoped to be back in Prague in the fall.
3 HStA Stuttgart, A 282, Bü. 1301, undated letter from Johann Schwartz to Duke Ludwig of Württemberg, received 4 April 1577. Schwartz therefore wanted to go to Esslingen, where only one physician was active.
4 Cod. 9671, fol. 74r.
5 Schlegelmilch, Promoting (2019).
7 Letter from Berckhmüller, Augsburg, 7 March 1606 (www.aerztebriefe.de/id/00001973, S. Herde).
to the practical experience he had gained in hospitals in Munich. In their letters of recommendation, physicians' previous employers likewise praised them with words like "an experienced and lauded medicus".

Competition was particularly stiff in larger cities like Nuremberg, Augsburg, Prague, Basel, and Zurich, which dangled the prospect of a lucrative practice due to their large populations of wealthy citizens. The population of Prague, for example, was about 20,000 at the time, and included numerous members of the nobility and wealthy citizens. However, newcomers had to hold their own against a host of established, experienced physicians, not to mention the countless barbers, barber-surgeons, and lay healers who also offered their services. As Handsch summarized the situation concisely: “In large ponds one catches large fish, [but one] may also drown in them”. There were young physicians such as Felix Platter, who by his own account was able to assert himself over a good dozen other doctores medicinae in his home city of Basel within a short period of time, soon counting among his patients sick people from the leading families of the city and the surrounding area. Platter had studied at a renowned foreign university, however, and his family as well as his future father-in-law, the surgeon and councilor Franz Jeckelmann, were well-known and influential in Basel. Thus, he could draw on a well-developed network of social connections. Moreover he knew well, it seems, how to effectively showcase his anatomical and uroscopic abilities.

For a young, inexperienced physician, the competition encountered in smaller cities and market towns was less threatening. In these places, he could hope for smoother sailing. At the same time, however, they were home to fewer well-to-do families who would be able to secure him the income he hoped for with their generous remuneration. Even in Innsbruck, with the nearby archducal residence in Ambras, Handsch found: “If you want to survive in Innsbruck, you will have to mend much and eat little.” Moreover, while the competition from other learned physicians in smaller cities and market towns might be less substantial, the young physician still had to assert himself over the local barbers, barber-surgeons, and

---

9 Stadtarchiv Augsburg, Collegium Medicum, Karton 4, testimonial of Pfalzgraf Wolfgang Wilhelm zu Neuburg, 1615.
11 Cod. 9671, fol. 60v.
13 Cod. 9671, fol. 58r.
lay healers who, often in the absence of any university-trained physicians, had provided healthcare in many places for a long time and satisfied their clientele. Despite such difficult beginnings, the large majority of medical graduates eventually worked in their own practice. Some, like Platter, stayed in their hometowns. Many moved to other places. Some were active in a single location for a long time or until their death. For others, the first move only marked the beginning in a series of way stations as these physicians climbed – in the ideal case – to ever more attractive and profitable positions over time. Physicians here were paradigmatic for a new and historically highly significant social phenomenon, and perhaps even acted as trailblazers: they were the members of a mobile profession whose success – both professional and economic – and standing in the urban society were primarily owed to their education and their academic degree rather than their family background and inherited fortune. Supported by the cultural capital\textsuperscript{14} of their academic training, many of them could establish a professional life for themselves as strangers working far from home without the support of family and friends, and some accumulated considerable wealth.

Handsch was among the less successful physicians. It is possible – though there is no solid evidence – that he first attempted to gain a foothold in his hometown of Leipa when he returned from Padua. In his hometown, of course, he was known and his family was well-established. At any rate, soon after his return from Italy we find him back in Prague. It appears he was once more working in Collinus’s school in the Angel’s Garden, waiting, as he wrote in an epistolary poem, for the Archduke Ferdinand to return to Prague with his personal physician Andrea Gallo, who, for all we know, had paid for Handsch’s studies in Padua. At that point, he hoped to live in Gallo’s house and work with him.\textsuperscript{15} From May 1555 to July 1556, Handsch lived with Gallo,\textsuperscript{16} accompanied him on his visits to numerous patients and he also sometimes treated them on Gallo’s behalf. He also had contact with Gallo’s colleagues, especially Pietro Andrea Mattioli, who would play a crucial role in Handsch’s later career. Handsch also assisted Gallo in other ways. He contributed to a detailed consilium that Gallo was writing regarding the “fluttering of the heart” (“tremor cordis”) from  

\textsuperscript{14} Bourdieu, Les trois états (1979).
\textsuperscript{15} Cod. 9821, fol. 247r-v, \textit{epistola poetica} to Hoddeovinus, 16 January 1554, written in Prague where “tantisper residebo, Ferdinandus/ Dum princeps rursus Pragensem migret in urbem/ Illius tunc cum medico Doctore, manebo/ Andreae Gallo fautore meo atque patrono/ Excellente, suas quoniam me sumet in aedes/ Inque suam praxim, sic innotescere possum/ Egregieque artem medicam deductere in usum.”
\textsuperscript{16} Cod. 11207, fol. 1r; the whole notebook documents his time with Gallo.
which the king, the future Emperor Maximilian II, suffered. In 1556, he prepared Gallo’s extensive plague treatise for printing.

Working as an assistant or *famulus* to an older physician allowed Handsch, like other *doctores medicinae* fresh out of university, to watch how an experienced physician proceeded at the bedside. Handsch’s comprehensive notes from his time in Prague impressively document this learning experience. He recorded numerous cases, noted down prescriptions given by Gallo and other physicians, and monitored the course and success of their treatments.

Despite his acquaintance with Lehner, Gallo, Mattioli, and Collinus, Handsch was unable over the course of several years to establish a lucrative practice of his own in Prague, however. He was under no illusions about his failure. Eight years after receiving his doctorate, he loathed the thought of continuing to work in Prague as a physician for remuneration that was poor and shameful (“*indigna et exigua praemia*”) and faced with the detestable crudeness (“*de-testabilem barbariem*”) and ingratitude of the people. He hardly had enough money for modest clothing and food, he wrote. His poverty, in turn, as he saw it, was a major reason of the poor esteem in which he was held, and for the rather limited authority his patients granted him. A physician of only moderate erudition, he complained, who made an illustrious appearance became more popular than one who was truly learned but lived in modest circumstances. The present time was so corrupt, that what was inside a person was measured by what was on the outside. A physician who could not afford a certain style of living may indeed have raised eyebrows and for good reasons, too: It could be expected that if a physician cured many patients, he should achieve a degree of affluence that was evident to the eyes. Staying poor suggested the opposite.

---

17 Cod. 11158; Tobias Heusinger, Würzburg, is currently concluding his work on a dissertation on Maximilian’s *tremor cordis* (Heusinger, Das zitternde Herz [2021]).
18 Cod. 9821, foll. 270v-221r, *epistola poetica* to Hoddeiovinus, Juli 1556; presumably Handsch was referring to the *Fascis de peste* (1567) which was published only after Gallus’ death.
19 Cod. 11207.
20 Cod. 9650, foll. 76v-78r, copy of a letter from Handsch to Pietro Andrea Mattioli, 26 April 1561.
21 Cod. 9650, foll. 63v-67v, copy of an undated letter from Handsch to a parish priest (“*parochus*”) in Leipa; he must have written it around 1560/61, since he mentioned only three volumes of *Farragines poematum*, which were in press but not the forth volume, which appeared in 1562.