

# German Micronesia and the Beginning of Medical and Health Education

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The beginning of health and medical education in Micronesia are usually traced to the end of World War II and the establishment of various training programs for Micronesians at Guam. However, such training and education really goes back considerably farther. Spanish Catholic missionaries working in the Carolines between 1885 and 1899 frequently treated islanders who were ill or who had met with accidents. Such treatment was dispensed on an ad hoc basis at the modest mission compounds erected in the district centers. It might more appropriately be referred to as "first aid," since none of

New Guinea Protectorate was established which included the Bismarck Archipelago, a few of the Solomon Islands, and New Guinea.

Following that, other less wealthy German traders began operating businesses in the Pacific, such as Alfred Cappelle and Stapenhorst and Herrnsheim. In 1885 Germany established a protectorate over the Marshall Islands which the Spanish objected to; however, the dispute was mediated by Pope Leo XIII who awarded the Marshalls to Germany and allowed the Reich to establish coaling and trading stations in the Carolines. After the Spanish-American War, Germany bought the remaining Spanish possessions of the Marianas and the Carolines for some 30,000,000 Marks.<sup>1</sup>

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these missionaries were physicians as far as is known, with the exception of the American missionary, Dr. Alfred Sturges, who came to the Eastern Carolines during the Spanish administration.

It was not until the German colonial period in Micronesia that more serious efforts were made in the way of combating disease and providing minimal training in public health and medical procedures for islanders. The German effort should be seen in light of the greater presence of the German Empire in the Pacific region. When Germany assumed control of the Caroline and Mariana Islands in 1899, she had already ruled the Marshall Islands and Nauru for thirteen years through the offices of the Jaluit Gesellschaft.

In the late 1850's Germany established herself in New Guinea. She had come at first flying the flag of the medieval Hansa city of Hamburg and those of her wealthy traders like Johan C. Godeffroy. However, after Chancellor Otto von Bismarck unified Germany, the

These new possessions in Micronesia were distinguished from the "old protectorate" of New Guinea in the German lingua franca of the day with the term *inselgebiet*. These was a *gouverneur* appointed by the colonial office in Berlin who was responsible for the entire area. He was resident of Herbertshoehe, which is now part of Kokopo on the island of New Britain, but after a short time the headquarters was moved to Rabaul where

it remained for the rest of the German colonial period. From the headquarters the governor traveled out through his domain and established district offices, called *bezirksamter*, in Pohnpei and Yap. Pohnpei was to be the seat of the district government for the eastern Carolines and Yap for the westerns. District officers, called *bezirksamtmaner* were placed in charge at each location.

Herbertshoehe was a modest, but active capital. In addition to the chief administrator's residence and office, there was also a local court which was the superior court for all German adjudication in the region. There were large numbers of police and offices for a number of other officials, and the settlement was a regular port-of-call for the German warships which routinely toured the Carolines. There was a dispensary at Herbertshoehe which was staffed by German doctors with local orderlies and helpers who were recruited and trained on-the-job. As far as is known, however, no Micronesians served as health orderlies in the faculty at Herbertshoehe.

The Pohnpei district office was situated in the former Spanish colony of Kolonia at the northern end of the island. Also located there was the district court for all the eastern Carolines, a sailor's registration office, a shore office, and a registrar's office. The first *bezirksamtman* at Pohnpei was Albert Hahl who served from October

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1899 to August 1901. Hahl was also designated as vice governor of New Guinea and later became governor of all German Micronesia.

Besides *bezirksamtmann* Hahl there were a number of other German officials at Pohnpei including the physician Dr. Max Girschner who established the dispensary. He is a figure too little remembered today, and although he was undoubtedly a stern taskmaster for the islanders, he began the earliest medical and public health training programs in the small dispensary which formed the basis of the continuum which in this day has culminated in the Pacific Basin Medical Officers Training Program (PBMOTP) in Pohnpei. Dr. Girschner remained in Pohnpei throughout the German administration and twice served as acting governor.

Another public health act of the German times was to prohibit the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages by the islanders, although *bezirksamtmann* George Fritz at Saipan reported that considerable amounts of palm wine, called *tuba*, was secretly drunk. Interestingly, beer was proposed as a substitute because at the time the Germans thought that it was not deleterious to one's health.

Alfred Vahlkampf was the first secretary to the governor, and lived also at Pohnpei. Also living there were the public works supervisors and laborers, the police chief and his force, and the harbormaster. Captain Hanns Mattens was the first of these important officials, and there were also resident the various officials assigned to the government vessels stationed in the islands.

The main Jaluit Gesellschaft station at Pohnpei was located on Langar Island in Pohnpei Harbor. In 1904 the company built a copra warehouse, a general storehouse, and a trader's residence on Langar. In the main settlement at Kolonia, the Jaluit company built a large house, an inn for transients, and a bakery. By March 1907, the facilities on Langar Island had been expanded to include a water cistern, a store, worker's quarters, a garden, a depot for flammable materials, and a coal shed. Copra was moved around in small, four-wheeled carts and iron tipping-wagons that ran along rails the length of the Langar jetty.

Dr. Girschner's main task was to give attention to the combating of various infectious diseases such as yaws, which was a widespread and disfiguring disease in Micronesia. This required the assistance of islander helpers who were usually enlisted first as volunteers. Missionaries were primarily responsible for the education of the Micronesians, and as dispensary orderlies had to read and write at some minimal level in order to be of optimal help to the physicians, their book-learning went hand-in-hand with their practical tasks.

After 1897 and the establishment of the German colony at Tsingtao, and the Shantung Peninsula, China,

some few Micronesian dispensary orderlies who showed special promise were sent to the hospital there for the further training. These islanders came from all regions including the Marianas, Carolines, and Marshalls, but very few records survive attesting to their experience and training at Tsingtao.

At the time of World War I in 1914 the German administration in Micronesia abruptly ended and the Japanese immediately occupied the islands. All in all, the German presence in the Micronesian region extended from 1885 to 1914, hardly sufficient time to make much difference in the culture and society. However, the public health and medical education and training that was fostered by the Germans has been too often forgotten. It was significant and documented, and helped to usher the Micronesians into the modern age.

## References and Notes

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3. *Ibid.*
4. Viktor Berg. *Uber die Insel Ponape. Deutsches Kolonialblatt, 13, (Berlin 1902)*, 178. Hereinafter *Deutsches Kolonialblatt* will appear as *DKB*.
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7. Alfred Valkampf. *Expedition nach der Gruppe der Ruk-Inseln. DKB 12 (Berlin 1901)*, 634.
8. *Denkschrift 1907-08, op.cit.*
9. Anttila, *op.cit.*
10. Townsend, *op.cit.*
11. For an excellent treatment of the Japanese period in Micronesia, see: Mark R. Peattie, *Nan'yo: The rise and fall of the Japanese in Micronesia, 1895 to 1945. University of Hawaii Press, 1988.* □