

A Depressing Time in the History of Psychiatry in Vorarlberg

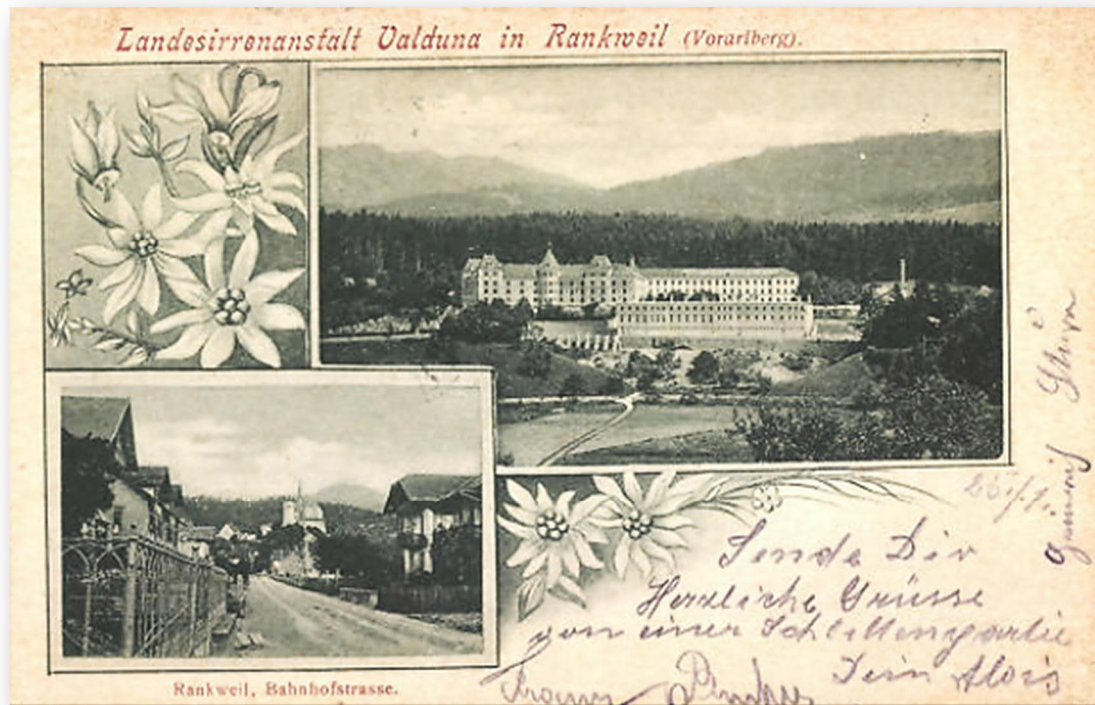
Today's document takes us back to the eventful history of psychiatry in Vorarlberg. Everyone here in the "Ländle" knows the psychiatric hospital "Valduna" in Rankweil. But does anyone know its history, in which the addressee of this correspondence card from 1877 - Dr. Max Birnbaumer - was also involved? Probably less, just as little as I knew it before finding this card. (Correspondence card: 2 Kreuzer, Dornbirn single-circle postmark Ø 23 mm in Antiqua - with date without year (Earliest known cover: 15.4.1861 Latest known cover: 9.11.1881))



The card dates from a time when a bitter political dispute began over the merging of two asylums that housed so-called "lunatics" in Vorarlberg. The two institutions were the so-called "Wohltätigkeitsanstalt" and the "Landesirrenanstalt" in Vorarlberg.

The "Wohltätigkeitsanstalt" in the Valduna was founded as a private institution in 1862 by the priest Josef Anton Jochum. It ran into considerable financial difficulties shortly after its foundation. However, after the Vorarlberg state parliament decided to no longer house the state-owned "lunatics" in Hall in Tyrol, but to allow them to be housed in the state itself (since 1865 there had been a law that the administration and thus also the financing of the "lunatic asylums" was the responsibility of the states), the "Wohltätigkeitsanstalt" was able to recover by taking in the "lunatics" from Vorarlberg and the associated payment by the state. At the insistence of the liberal Carl Ganahl, a "Landesirrenanstalt" was now also built directly next to the "Wohltätigkeitsanstalt" under its management. However, it was unclear until 1869 how the cooperation between the directly neighboring institutions was to be organized. A contract with the state government then regulated the cooperation. From now on there were two separate closely interwoven institutions with a common chapel and kitchen, paid services of the staff of one for the other institution, free missionary work, work of the inmates for one institution. Administratively and medically, however, the two institutions remained strictly separate. In the "lunatic question" the Liberals (Landesirrenanstalt) and the later Christian Socialists (Wohltätigkeitsanstalt) from the outset advocated

very different concepts, which also reflected the different treatment of the mentally ill at that time: separate medical care under secular-state supervision or joint accommodation with "ordinary" poor and sick people.



Die "Valduna" in Rankweil um 1900

After the death of the two directors, the tug-of-war of the political parties over the supremacy over the asylums began anew. There were long and frequent discussions about merging the two institutions. In the end, however, this failed again and again because of the question of power and money. While the "Landesirrenanstalt" also had to take in poor "lunatics", the "Wohltätigkeitsanstalt" concentrated on wealthy patients, even though it could have taken in "incurable" poor patients from the neighboring institution for care. Due to the resulting financial hardship, the medical care of mentally ill patients in the "Landesirrenanstalt" became a tragedy. In 1909, there was a new contract between the institutions. In it, the "Wohltätigkeitsanstalt" became a purely private institution, whose family doctor was subordinate to the director of the "Landesirrenanstalt" in the treatment of the mentally ill (but not of other patients). The latter also had the right of assessment when admitting the mentally ill. But who paid whom was still far from clear.

Throughout that time and even beyond, as the political and ideological struggle continued, the main sufferers were the mentally ill. For reasons of cost (as far as the state of Vorarlberg was concerned) and for reasons of maintaining political power (as far as the Vorarlberg clergy and its influence on the Christian Social Party was concerned), a reform of the system of psychiatric care, as had been demanded by Dr. Waibel, a physician and the then mayor of Dornbirn, among others, was omitted in Vorarlberg.

And now we are finally back to our document. It was sent by that same mayor, Dr. Waibel, to Dr. Birnbaumer in Feldkirch. Both of them belonged to the liberal camp in this dispute. Dr. Birnbaumer - who had already worked as a psychiatrist in Marsens (Canton of Fribourg, Switzerland) - was propagated by the liberals in 1872 as the successor of Dr. Wachter. However, the liberal camp had to admit defeat to the Catholic camp, whose candidate had to resign as early as 1874 because he had no medical training. Dr. Birnbaumer, however, was no longer available. In the meantime, he had opened a practice in Feldkirch, became the municipal doctor of Altenstadt, Tisis and Tosters, and later also the railroad doctor. In 1878 he became chairman of the "Association of Physicians of Vorarlberg". While Birnbaumer apparently kept

himself politically out of the events surrounding the "Valduna" after his failed application, Waibel continued to fight politically for its orientation as a psychiatric sanatorium. However, Birnbaumer continued to be concerned about the fate of the patients. In 1877 he became president of the "Vorarlbergische Hilfsverein für Geisteskranke" (Vorarlberg Association for the Care of the Mentally Ill), which was dedicated to the resocialization of the mentally ill. This association existed until 1906.



All in all, it can be said that Dr. Birnbaumer was among the first doctors in Vorarlberg to follow the approaches of Philippe Pinel (freeing the mentally ill from chains) and Wilhelm Griesinger, who regarded "lunatics" as sick people whose deviant behavior was explained

physiologically by a malfunction of the brain. A revolutionary way of acting and view at that time, which would have overturned the entire field of psychiatry in Vorarlberg - if political, financial and ideological motives had not stood in the way of this in the local

Whether the cover had anything to do with the developments in the Valduna, I dare to doubt (text see below), but nevertheless two of the main actors at that time are philatelically documented here (correspondence card = postal stationery = everything on the card can be used in thematic philately, for example, addressee, sender, etc.).

Text back of card:

24.2.77

On Monday 4 hr I have arranged a school council meeting, which has already been postponed once recently but cannot be postponed any further, and which I must attend.

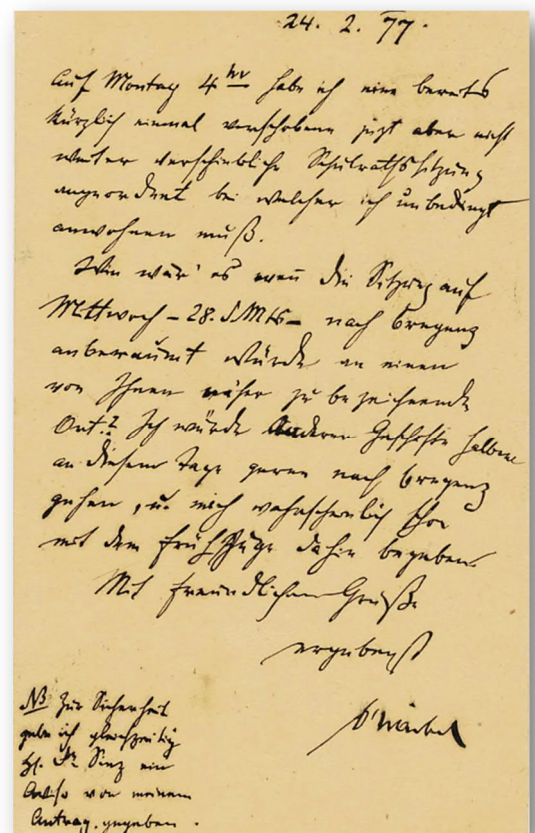
How would it be if the meeting were to be scheduled for Wednesday - 28th of March - in Bregenz at a place to be specified by you? For the sake of other business, I would like to go to Bregenz on this day, and probably go there already with the early train.

With kind regards

Sincerely

J. Waibel

N.B. To be on the safe side, I am at the same time giving Dr. Sinz an advice of my application.



Sources: Wikipedia, STUDIES ON THE HISTORY AND SOCIETY OF VORARLBERG 7 Gernot Egger: Ausgrenzen - Erfassung - Vernichten: Arme und "Irre" in Vorarlberg, 1990; Emil Rosé: V O R A R L B E R G Stempelhandbuch.