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# Siegmond Erben (1863–1942)

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The son of Emanuel Erben (1832–1885), a bookseller and publisher, and Rosa Erben (née Heit, 1842–1924), internist–neurologist Siegmund Erben (Fig. 1) was born on 25 April 1863 in Nitra (in the Captaincy of Lower Hungary, now in Slovakia) into a Bohemian-Jewish family.

Erben entered the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Vienna in 1880, and graduated in July 1886. He then specialised in internal medicine under Hermann Nothnagel (1841–1905), Otto Kahler (1849–1893), and Friedrich Kraus (1858–1936). He worked as a *Secundararzt* (secondary physician) for five years in the Clinic of Dermatology at Vienna’s General Hospital, which at the time was headed by Moritz Kaposi (1837–1902). In 1891, Erben was appointed director of the Outpatient Clinic for Nervous Diseases at the Viennese Cooperative Health Insurance Fund (*Wiener Genossenschaftskrankenkasse*), where he remained for 30 years. In 1900, he was habilitated in internal medicine, and in 1912 he was appointed associate professor (*Extraordinarius*) at his alma mater, where he taught until his retirement in 1934. Concomitantly, he was sworn in as an expert (*Sachverständiger*) in neurology at Vienna’s Regional Court [9].

From 1888 up to World War I, Erben published works on the aetiology of scleroderma (1888), the reflex pathways (1890, 1897), the clinicopathological aspects of sciatica (1894), neuralgic scoliosis (1897), muscular rheumatism (1898), the histopathology of multiple sclerosis (1898), chronic mercury poisoning (1900, 1902), the simulation of nervous symptoms (1901), including hemiparesis with ipsilateral hemianaesthesia (1904), palatal paralysis (1902), myotonus (1910), and tetany (1912). With the anatomist Emil Zuckerkandl (1849–1910), Erben co-authored a study on the physiology of voluntary movements in relation to the body axis and gravity [10].

His monograph on the differential diagnosis of simulated nervous symptoms [3] was based on a series of lectures given to practitioners associated with industrial insurance, so that errors in examining for simulation could be avoided. The work also targeted those called upon to testify in court on nervous disturbances sustained through railway or other industrial accidents. The book went through two revised and expanded editions, in 1920 and in 1930, based on experiences gathered during the war, and became a standard work in the field. Erben addressed many of the intricate questions arising from a host of simulation, malingering, and exaggeration problems of a perplexing character; he described neurasthenia, sciatica and its complications, various types of tremor, gait disturbance, dizziness, cephalalgia, backache and back pain, paralyse, and depression. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* (28 December 1912, p. 2334) called the book “an excellent addition to the many recently

published.” In reviewing the second edition, the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* (June 1921, p. 501) added that “an English translation would be welcome.”

During World War I, Erben became particularly concerned with the neurological and psychiatric effects of the war on soldiers. Unlike the psychoanalysts, he considered the causes of mental disorders to be primarily hereditary. During and after the war, Erben published the works “On motor disturbances in war veterans” [4], “On traumatic neuroses” [6], and “On morphine and cocaine addiction” [7]. He contributed additional papers on the diagnosis and treatment of dizziness (1927), the simulation of lower back pain (1932), rheumatic pain and its diagnosis (1933), and erectile dysfunction (1934).

Erben was a member of Vienna’s Association for Psychiatry and Neurology, the Society for Internal Medicine, and the Society of Physicians, and was bestowed the imperial title of Court Councillor (*Hofrat*). After Austria’s *Annexation* in 1938, he was licensed to attend Jewish patients exclusively as a “special therapist” (*Fachbehandler*) in nervous and mental diseases. When the National Socialists came to power, the Erben family were evicted from their home at Grillparzerstrasse and moved to Schottenring in Vienna’s First District.

On 9 October 1942, Erben and his wife Maria (née Ititzer, 1877–1965) were deported to the Theresienstadt (Terezín) ghetto and concentration camp. He was murdered on 12 December 1942, while in the 80th year of his life. (The source documents relating to Theresienstadt are available at [www.holocaust.cz](http://www.holocaust.cz), [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org), and [www.geni.com](http://www.geni.com)). His sister Fanny Kopperl (née Erben, 1866–1943) was also murdered in Theresienstadt, on 1 May 1943. Maria Erben survived the Holocaust and died in Vienna at the age of 88 years. Siegmund and Maria had a son, Peter Anton Erben (1907–2004).

Siegmund Erben is eponymously remembered by the sign known as the Erben reflex, or Erben pulse phenomenon (*Pulsphänomen*) [2, 5]. This is a temporary, vagus-mediated slowing of the heart rate when the head and trunk are flexed [8]. In addition, he described a knee phenomenon (*Kniephänomen*), where the kneecap on the affected leg of sciatica patients is cooler than the one on the healthy leg [1]. This was later also named after him [9].

#### **Compliance with ethical standards**

**Conflicts of interest** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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**Fig. 1.** Siegmund Erben. Portrait by Foto Fayer, Vienna. Credit: Austrian National Library.

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