

Leopold Schenk (1840-1902)

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Summary

Leopold Schenk attained international fame by his contributions to the science of embryology. The first chair of embryology in any medical school was established for him in the University of Vienna. This article briefly describes his life and his work.

Résumé

Leopold Schenk devint célèbre pour ses contributions à la science embryologique. La première chaire d'Embryologie fut créée, pour lui, dans une Ecole de Médecine, à l'Université de Vienne. Cet article décrit brièvement quelles furent la vie et l'œuvre de L. Schenk.

Leopold Schenk was born into a poor Jewish family in Urmény, in northern Hungary, in 1840. He graduated from high school in Budapest and studied medicine at the University of Vienna, receiving his MD in 1865. He became assistant to Prof Brucke at the Institute of Physiology and published, in the 'Sitzungsberichte der Akademie der Wissenschaften' (Proceedings of the Academy of Sciences), a series of papers on the embryology of the heart and of the pleural and pericardial cavities.

In 1869 he was appointed as a lecturer on evolutionary theory - the Physiology of Procreation and Development - and in 1873 a new chair of Embryology was established and he became Associate Professor. A year later, he published his 'Lehrbuch der vergleichenden Embryologie der Wirbeltiere' (Textbook of Comparative Embryology of Vertebrates). Very soon, he was surrounded by many students and visitors and he became a popular personality in Vienna.

He published the results of the research from his department in a journal 'Mitteilungen aus dem k.k. Institute für Embryologie der Universität Wien' (Communications of the Imperial Royal Institute of Embryology in Vienna).

In 1885, 'Grundriss der normalen Histologie des Menschen' (Outline of normal Human Histology) was published, to be followed by 'Grundriss der Bakteriologie', subsequently published in the USA as a Manual of Bacteriology for Practitioners and Students.

In 1896 he became a full Professor, but two years later there came a break with the Faculty following the publication of his new book. This was 'Über den Einfluss auf das Geschlechtsverhältnis' (On influencing the Sex Ratio), which appeared in 1898 in Magdeburg with the Theory of Schenk' on its front cover. In the book, he advanced theories concerning the determination of sex, claiming that the sex of a child depended on the nutrition of the mother during her pregnancy. This theory met with harsh criticism at the time from colleagues such as Virchow and in 1900 he resigned his chair.

Despite the opposition to his beliefs, he stoutly maintained them until the end of his life, claiming that it not only was it possible to determine the sex of a child, but that by special nutrition it was possible to develop special characteristics in a child. His last book was 'Lehrbuch der Geschlechtsbestimmung' Halle 1901, (Textbook of sex determination), while a book of his memoirs appeared in 1900 'Aus meinem Universitätsleben' (From my life at University).

He died at Schwanberg on August 17 1902, a memorable figure, known far beyond Vienna because of his controversial and strongly held beliefs.

References

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