

'NeuroTribes' explores autism's history, tumultuous beginnings

The GLP aggregated and excerpted this blog/article to reflect the diversity of news, opinion and analysis.

Autism, as the science journalist Steve Silberman informs us, was identified separately by Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger. The crucial difference is that Kanner had the fortune to publish his work in Baltimore, while Asperger had the misfortune to publish his in Nazi-controlled Vienna, and this accident of geopolitics lies at the tragic core of Silberman's ambitious, meticulous and largehearted (if occasionally long-winded) history, "NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity."

Over his many years at the Children's Clinic in Vienna, Hans Asperger studied more than 200 children he would ultimately treat for what he called *autistischen Psychopathen* (autistic psychopathy). Some were prodigies who couldn't make it through school; others were more disabled and were shunted into asylums. But what they all had in common was a family of symptoms — in Silberman's words, "social awkwardness, precocious abilities, and fascination with rules, laws, and schedules" — that Asperger recognized, right away, made up a continuum, one occupied by children and adults alike, and he viewed those differences as cause for celebration, not distress. When he finally shared his findings with the world, the only reason he focused on his higher-functioning patients, Silberman contends, was a chilling function of the era: The Nazis, on a mad campaign to purge the land of the "feeble-minded," were euthanizing institutionalized children with abandon. In so doing, Asperger accidentally gave the impression that autism was a rarefied condition among young geniuses, not the common syndrome he knew it to be.

Read full, original post: ['NeuroTribes,' by Steve Silberman](#)