

Several of the projects proposed in the final months of the war border on the comical. In late February or early March of 1945, for example, when the Russians were already chopping into German territory, Himmler wrote SS Reichsarzt Ernst Grawitz, asking him to investigate why there were "no people with cancer" in Germany's concentration camps.³¹

It would be interesting to determine exactly what these people [concentration camp prisoners] are dying of. The mortality in the camps is, as you know, no higher, on average, than outside the camps. [And since so few are dying from cancer] it makes no sense to test new cancer therapies on these prisoners. But there is another question that can be asked from a somewhat different angle: How many people are suffering from cancer in the German population as a whole? What percent of the population finds itself at the beginning or some other stage of cancer? If you were to apply this proposition to our prisoners, many of whom are foreigners, you could calculate how many cancer patients you would expect among our 700,000 prisoners [This figure seems to include prisoners outside the concentration camps, and possibly POWs—RP]. I am therefore assigning you the task of exploring why the prisoners are not getting cancer. I think that in this way we can do an even greater service to science.³²

It is hard to say which is the most bizarre aspect of this proposal: the idea that cancer was absent in the camps, that the prisoners were healthy ("robust"), that Grawitz would still have the wherewithal to conduct such studies, or that whatever results might be obtained would have meaning for the population as a whole. Himmler by this time must have been living in a kind of fantasy world—the would-be cancer sage was spending the last weeks of his life exterminating Jews as fast as was humanly possible; he also apparently hoped to have one last go at *Volksfeind Krebs*.

Himmler's cancer follies might be dismissed as the musings of a murderous tyrant, but there was another cancer project of the war years that was far more substantial—with major support from the German Research Council and the Kaiser Wilhelm Gesellschaft—yet remains somewhat enigmatic even today. The Reich Institute for Cancer Research (Reichsinstitut für Krebsforschung) was estab-

lished in the fall of 1942 in Nesselstedt, near Posen (Poznań), about two hundred kilometers east of Berlin in "what used to be Poland." The institute is remarkable for the timing of its establishment (in the middle of the war, when one would imagine cancer research a low priority) and its placement (deep in conquered Poland). Most curious of all is how generously it was funded: from July 1943 through December 1944, the institute received a total of 1.5 million reichsmarks, an enormous expenditure at a time when most other scientific projects were being curtailed. Why the funding on such a scale?

Plans for the establishment of a Reich Institute for Cancer Research began in the early 1940s, primarily through the efforts of Rudolf Mentzel, president of the German Research Council, and Kurt Blome, deputy Reich Health Leader and Plenipotentiary for Cancer Research and one of the most powerful men in German medicine.³³ Cancer journals from the early 1930s had lamented the absence of a single, Reich-wide institute to coordinate German cancer research, and though some had argued forcefully for a decentralized campaign,³⁴ the example of centralized institutes in other nations was too tempting to ignore. Italy had the Milan Institute for Cancer Research, and the United States had had its National Cancer Institute since 1937. England's Imperial Cancer Research Fund was already four decades old,³⁵ and other countries had comparable institutes. Germany, while a leader in cancer research, had no central research institution; the Reich Institute was designed to fill this gap.

Hopes were high for the institute when construction began in the fall of 1942. Hitler was at the height of his power, with much of Europe under his heel. Expectations were still that the Russians would fold in fairly short order: the capture of the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad, the turning point in the war, did not take place until January of 1943. The Institute for Cancer Research was launched with great media fanfare: Hermann Göring visited the site while it was under construction, and Heinrich Himmler made several inspections. The institute boasted separate divisions for gynecology and physiology and a sizable "tumor farm" to raise animals for use in experiments. Hopes were also high for its neighbor