

# University of Tartu medical records

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## **Abstract**

*In 1980 the University of Tartu Museum received one of its largest collections: Universities Clinic of Internal Diseases case histories spanning from 1847 to 1962. The medical case histories give an insight into the world of medicine in an era when science started to take precedence in diagnostics and medical treatment. Due to resource management and funding the museum has only been able to properly research and categorize the papers up until 1885. Now we aim to find the financial resources and personnel to open access to these case histories for historians all over the world via digitization.*

## Background

The University of Tartu Museum has been the keeper of science history records, and science equipment, in Estonia since 1976. The collection is mostly focused on materials or objects owned by the University of Tartu and its staff.

In 1980 Kuno Kõrge, then professor and physician at the university's Clinic of Internal Diseases<sup>1</sup>, gave the museum its largest collection - the clinic's medical records, spanning 120 years from 1847 till 1962. This collection had been maintained by the clinic's archive division under the watchful eye of Mrs. Eleonora Aaslava. It was also looked after by Kõrge, and it was he who was the first to publish papers documenting the history of medicine based on the records (KÕRGE 1977, 1982). The records are divided into 700 folders, but the number of records within the folders is still undetermined due to the fact that only the records until May 1885 are registered as musealia<sup>2</sup>. In her overview of the collection, Ela-Heigi Martis<sup>3</sup> estimates the number of records to be approximately 25,000 (MARTIS 2000) but research conducted since 2016, due to a funding application for the science collection, of which the files are the largest component, has shown that the number is closer to 100, 000. The records seem to focus on the nature and progress of a patient's disease, and treatment procedures which have been conducted by medical students. There is a family history provided by the patient on the first page, lists of tests conducted and their results, temperature measurements, cardiograms and a dissection overview. The latter only if the patient died in the clinic.

The Clinic of Internal Diseases of the University of Tartu – then Kaiserliche Universität zu Dorpat, and the only German language university in the region during the 19th century – was created in 1804 and was used as a teaching hospital (EINASTO & PUNGA 2004). Medical students were required to note the “nature and progress” of the disease and treatment used in a *krankengeschichte*<sup>4</sup> during their rounds (SIILIVASK 1982). The case files registered as musealia are from the period when the University of Tartu attracted high ranking academics and physicians from across Europe. Physicians such as Ernst von Bergmann, Nikolai Pirogov and Alexander Schmidt did their rounds at the clinic, and it is their medical students who wrote the medical records (TOOMSALU 2006). The Professor Institute, which trained lecturers for the Russian Empire higher education institutions, was also based at the clinic and it was this environment that assured that the latest procedures were tested on the patients (KÕRGE 1982). The clinic was not large and in his research of the clinic Karl Siilivask states that the number of beds increased from 10 in 1808 to 50 by the end of the century (SIILIVASKS 1982). Consequently, Kõrge found that the annual average patient number increased from 200 in the 1850s to 500 by the turn of the century (KÕRGE 1977), which correlates with the numbers in the records.

## Conservation and access

Little is known about the collections storage conditions prior to its transfer to the museum. Museum staff collected the case files from the attic (KRIIS 2001), but Kõrge's Ph.D. student, the late physician and lecturer Sulev Maramaa remembers them being in the basement of the clinic in the 1960s (MARAMAA 2013). Furthermore, the archival method remains unclear: were the records organised for teaching<sup>5</sup>, the clinic's historical record keeping purposes<sup>6</sup> or for another purpose altogether? We know that Kuno Kõrge hired Aaslava to systemise and arrange the collection based on his instructions, but no records survive to indicate the foundation of that systematisation (KRIIS 2001). Following historical archives' best practices, the museum has made no changes to the organisation of the folders. Since early 2017 we have asked four interns - two Estonian, one Dutch and one native English speaker- to assess randomly selected folders and to list the necessary qualifications needed to understand them. In order get the most out of these records requires a knowledge in abbreviated medical Latin and knowledge in the changing names of diagnoses, and of course, knowledge in German and Russian and the ability to read 19th century gothic texts. As for the information contained, the past focus has been on Estonian diseases, but a number of patients were students of

1 Due to the political changes the clinic has had multiple names that are present in the case records: Klinik zu Dorpat – Inner Station, Юрьевская медицинская клиника, Sisehaigla

2 Curator Leili Kriis registered 2465 of the medical records in 1980. They have the inventory number of ÜAM 72:1-2465. Further registration was halted due to lack of funding and staff.

3 Ela-Heigi Martis (1939 – 2015), was one of the creators of the University of Tartu Museum and its director from 1979 till 2005.

4 The documentation of the period is in German and the medical records are filled with Gothic German and abbreviated Latin medical terminology. Diagnosis on the first page is marked with Latin letters.

5 There are collections of the same disease placed in a separate folder

6 The folders have been organised based on years. The year in the clinic started in August, but the records have been organised with the entry into the clinic in January.

the university who came from all over Europe. There were patients coming from the neighbouring states as well. Professor Kõrge in his research focused on the changing pattern of diagnosis, yet his personal notes indicate that he believed the highest value of these documents to be historiographical of not only Estonian medicine, but of academic medicine (MARAMAA 2013). The material also provides a possibility for social studies and statistics, for example a study could be used to see the correlation between quality of note taking and the passing marks of that student<sup>7</sup>.

In conservation terms, the collection has clear signs of water damage, we are unable to clearly state when the damage was been done. It could be from the 19th century or the bombing during World War II or much later. The matter is further complicated due to the uneven quality of the paper- the collection spans over 120 years and as such different papers have been used with various degrees of quality, changes have also occurred in the quality of printing ink as well as writing ink. Other specific damage can be seen in the collection such as; signs of discoloration and colour change, both yellowing and browning; paper deformations such as dog-ears, ragged edges, stains, dirt and brittleness; and the water damage has also caused tide lines. There is also mould damage which has caused colour migration and bleeding. There is no live mould present at the moment, but any moisture exposure would be problematic. There are ink corrosions in various stages as well as ink bleaching. There are even occasional signs of felting as well as physical loss - there are missing case files and even a few folders missing. But these are only the most extreme cases and generally the collection is in good condition.

Keeping in line with the Data Protection Act, and Freedom of Request Act, the museum ensures the medical records that are younger than 100 years are not made publically available. Medical research allows access to the entire collection on the premise that no personal information is provided. As for the future, our hope is to make the case files until the end of World War I available to researchers around the world by scanning them and arranging access via the Estonian Information System of Museums (MUIS). MUIS has been developed according to CIDOC (International Committee of Documentation) standards on data groups and categories. We have decided that while the law allows us to make the medical records until 1917 publically accessible, we will only allow complete access to the scans upon request based on academic research needs or genealogy research. MUIS records do not show up on internet searches and as such one has to be aware of the collections existence and location. Nearly a thousand are currently listed on MUIS, with an outsourced large scale scanning of the selected records scheduled from early 2019. This requires the registration of records as musealia up until that point as well.

### Conclusion

The medical records collection is the museum's largest and its importance is recognised through its ability to bring in vital funding that allows us to maintain the scientific collections. The span of the collection provides an overview of the historical landscape of Estonia, from its fledgling emergence during the Russian Empire, through to the creation of Soviet Estonia, from its height as a hub of cultural and scientific exchange, to the Russification programs of the 1890's that saw so many of the German speaking staff forced to adapt or leave, only to be replaced by Russian physicians in the soviet era. Throughout that all, we have the international language of medicine. For at the university the language of medicine was still Latin and as such the diagnosis was always in Latin. As any museum faced with the problem of space management we want to make sure that the collection does not become the victim of funding or storage issues which is why high resolution scanning for future generations seems to be the most logical solution. With the changing regulation of personal information that all museums have to deal with, we will continue to regulate the access and if needed, the names of patients will be digitally removed from the online records.

<sup>7</sup> *Album academicum der Kaiserlichen Universität Dorpat* (1889) lists the matriculation numbers and later history of students and there is a clear correlation between graduates who were attentive record makers and those who were not.

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### Keywords

History of medicine - Medical records - 19<sup>th</sup> century medicine