

# Introduction

## 1. Introduction

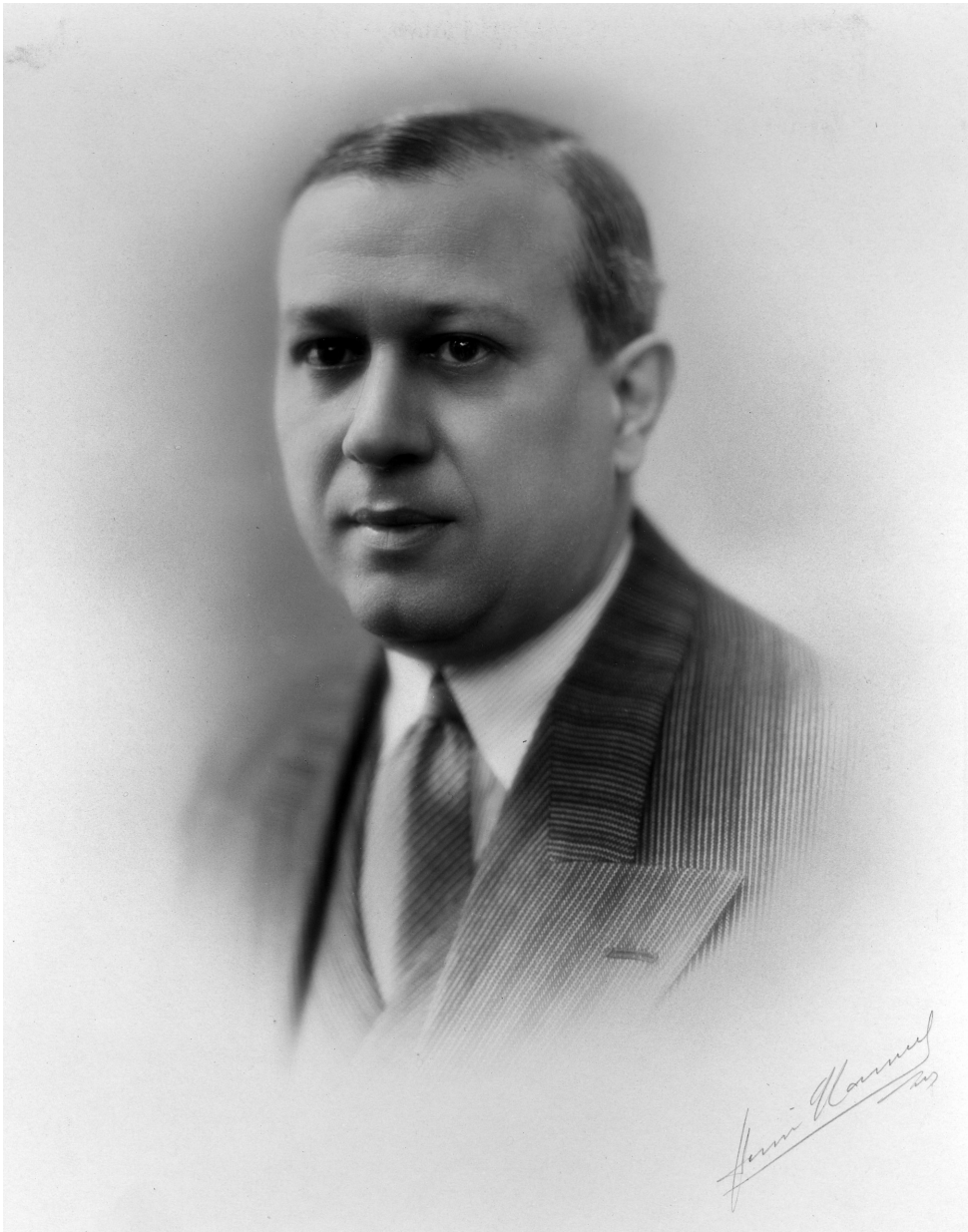
### 1.1. Henry Sigerist (1891–1957)

Sigerist was born in 1891 in Paris, the son of Swiss parents. After schooling in Paris and Zurich he began studies of oriental languages in Zurich and London, then studied medicine in Zurich and Munich. Immediately after obtaining his MD in 1917 he entered the field of the history of medicine as a result of his being encouraged by Karl Sudhoff in Leipzig, the doyen of medical historians. For eight years Sigerist was an independent scholar in Zurich, stimulated by some of his teachers and, above all, by his cooperation with colleagues such as Sudhoff, Charles Singer, and Arnold C. Klebs. He became a lecturer in the history of medicine at the University of Zurich, giving courses and guiding doctoral students. The considerable number of papers and edited books were proof of his productivity and success at this early stage. No wonder, therefore, that in 1925 he was called to fill the leading chair of medical history as the successor of Karl Sudhoff at the University of Leipzig.

In Leipzig, as professor and director of a department, Sigerist's possibilities widened and so did the range of his interests. The Leipzig Institute, which had been Sudhoff's realm, now attracted ever more students and co-workers and opened up to international communication with medical historians and other intellectuals. Sigerist even succeeded in being independent of, and peacefully co-existing with, the authoritarian and vain Sudhoff, who was still present in the Institute. Sigerist also managed things successfully in spite of the difficult political and economic situation in post-World War I Germany. Part of his success was due to his abilities as an organizer. In addition to a variety of publications, Sigerist wrote his three most personal books in Leipzig: *Man and medicine*, *Great doctors*, and *American medicine*. It was also in Leipzig that Sigerist came into personal contact with the foremost American medical historians such as William H. Welch, Fielding H. Garrison, and Harvey Cushing. These contacts led to an invitation for a lecture tour in the United States for the winter of 1931/32 where Sigerist met many American colleagues, gave lectures from coast to coast, and studied American medicine in action. His hosts were so impressed that the Johns Hopkins medical faculty offered him the Chair of the History of Medicine and thus the succession of Welch. Back in Leipzig, Sigerist realized that his chances in the United States were clearly superior to those in Germany with its rapidly deteriorating political situation shortly before the Nazis seized power.

Sigerist's most important time began in 1932 as William H. Welch Professor of the History of Medicine at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. He re-organized teaching, built up a staff of both Americans and exiled European victims of Nazism, and secured the means for the necessary budget. Contacts with the Old World were maintained by spending every summer of the 1930s in Europe, although he never returned to Germany. After his experiences in Germany, and as a liberal democrat, the way of life in America was much to his liking. He continued the research on mediaeval medicine he had begun in Zurich and Leipzig. However, his work soon covered the whole of the history of

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*Figure 1* Henry E. Sigerist

Courtesy: Archive, Department of the History of Medicine, University of Bern

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medicine and the subject's methodology. He also founded the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, which soon became, and still is, one of the leading journals on the subject.

Sigerist's writings and the multitude of his lectures all over the U.S. and Canada were a major contribution to the professionalization of the field of the history of medicine in America. Soon, however, his major interests shifted towards the sociology and economics of medicine, the organization of medical services and public health, and he became an ardent advocate of compulsory health insurance. The study of these aspects took him to Soviet Russia and South Africa, and, during World War II, to the Canadian province of Saskatchewan and to India. During the War many of his writings had little to do with medicine, but much with the world situation, education, and building a better world. His final years in the U.S. were overshadowed by overwork and health problems, by merely occasional successes in his medico-political endeavours, and by the threat of McCarthyism. This led him back into his original field and let him begin his multi-volume *A history of medicine*, planned years before and now marked as top priority. Soon after the War, however, he realized that progress of this work was impossible on top of all his duties in research, teaching, and administration. He therefore made the courageous decision to resign his post at Johns Hopkins in early 1947.

In order to write the eight volumes of his *A history of medicine* Sigerist returned to Switzerland after twenty-two years and found a new home in the village of Pura in the canton of Ticino where he spent the final decade of his life (1947 to 1957). Once more he was an independent scholar, now supported by grants from Yale University and the Rockefeller Foundation. He enjoyed his escape from the burdens of his former position as well as a new kind of life in solitude and in the beautiful natural surroundings of the Italian Alps. However, he now missed the facilities and stimulation a university provided. This was but one factor that delayed progress of his *magnum opus*, which eventually amounted to only two volumes. Other factors were an unforeseen number of secondary publications, out-of-town lectures, new editions of his books, etc., as well as a stream of visitors and failing health. Sigerist died on 17 March 1957 in Pura.

An indefatigable writer, Sigerist produced many books and hundreds of papers. His bibliography comprises of some 520 items (Miller, 1966). To this should be added two volumes with selected Sigerist papers on the history of medicine (Marti-Ibañez, 1960) and on the sociology of medicine (Roemer, 1960). Sigerist's works, combined with his rhetorical talent and his charisma, stimulated many authors to write about him. This secondary literature (Berg-Schorn, 1978) (Fee/Brown, 1997) (Becker, 1991) amounts to about 170 titles (excluding the 57 obituaries and many reviews of his books) and shows even an increasing tendency in the half century since Sigerist's death (Bickel, unpublished). It contains much information on his life and times, and work. There are also autobiographical texts that have been edited (Sigerist Beeson, 1966). In addition to his scientific work Sigerist also wrote an enormous number of letters. They were his link to hundreds of correspondents all over the world, among them medical historians as well as representatives of a large spectrum of cultural life. For instance, in the early 1950s, he wrote some one thousand letters per year (Bickel, 1997), a fact on which his friend John F. Fulton commented:

Sigerist was as greatly interested in men as he was in books – men of all lands, persuasions, and occupations - and so conscientious was he in maintaining lines of communication with his

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ever-widening circle of friends that, toward the end of his life, his correspondence became so vast that it interfered with his more serious writing. (Fulton, 1960).

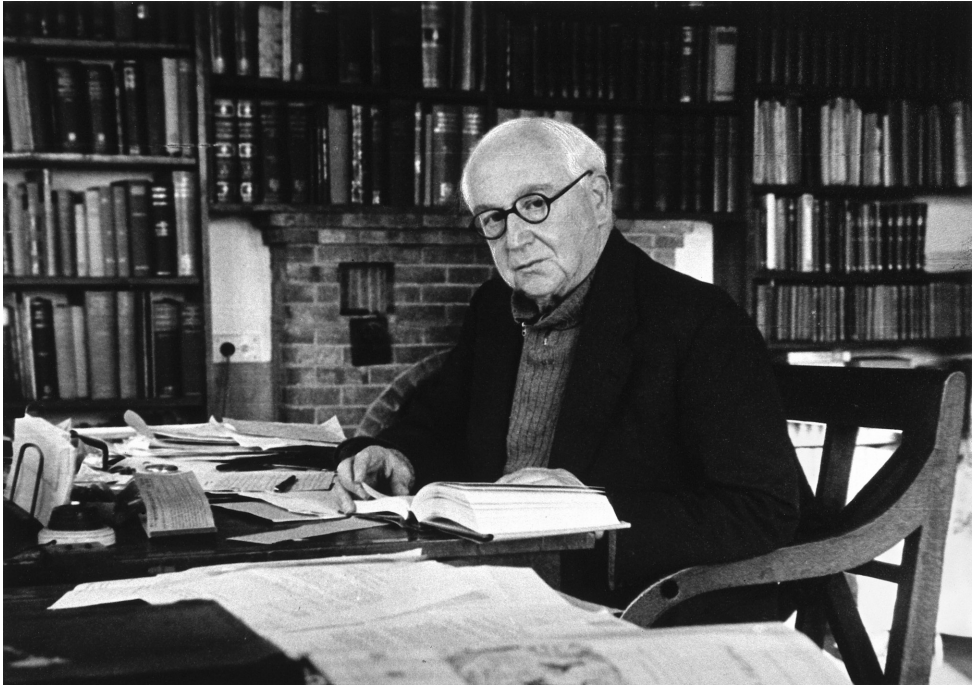
The works given below may serve as a key to the secondary literature on Sigerist.

- Becker, Cornelia (1991) *Schriften über Henry Ernest Sigerist (1891–1957) – Eine Bibliographie*, in S. Hahn and A. Thom (eds) (1991) *Ergebnisse und Perspektiven sozialhistorischer Forschung in der Medizingeschichte. Kolloquium zum 100. Geburtstag Sigerists* (Leipzig), 37–45.
- Berg-Schorn, Elisabeth (1978) *Henry E. Sigerist (1891–1957)* (Cologne).
- Bickel, Marcel H. (1997) ‘Henry E. Sigerist’s annual “Plans of Work” (1932–1955)’, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, **71**: 489–498.
- Fee, Elizabeth and Brown, Theodor M. (1997) *Making medical history. The life and times of Henry E. Sigerist* (Baltimore / London).
- Fulton, John F. (1960) ‘Foreword’, in F. Marti-Ibañez (ed.) (1960), *Henry E. Sigerist on the history of medicine* (New York), ix–xi.
- Marti-Ibañez, F. (ed.) (1960) *Henry E. Sigerist on the history of medicine* (New York).
- Miller, Genevieve (1966) *A bibliography of the writings of Henry E. Sigerist* (Montreal).
- Roemer, Milton I. (ed.) (1960) *Henry E. Sigerist on the sociology of medicine* (New York).
- Sigerist Beeson, Nora (ed.) (1966) *Henry E. Sigerist: autobiographical writings* (Montreal).

### 1.2. Charles Joseph Singer (1876–1960)

Charles Singer was born in London on 2 November 1876, the son of a distinguished Hebrew scholar. He studied classical languages at an early age. In 1893 he started studies in pre-clinical subjects and biology at University College London, then continued in Oxford for another three years as a student and instructor in zoology. Back in London he studied medicine at St Mary’s Hospital Medical School, where he qualified as an M.D. in 1903. There followed years of medical practice at English hospitals and work at research institutions, even medical expeditions to Abyssinia and Singapore. In 1910 he married the mediaevalist, Dorothea Waley Cohen, who had written on alchemical and other mediaeval manuscripts. She became his life-long collaborator and source of inspiration. This also marked Singer’s turn to the history of medicine, which became complete when William Osler invited him to a post in pathology at Oxford where he could devote part of his time to the study and teaching of the history of biology. Unfortunately, World War I interrupted Singer’s career, since he served with the Royal Army Medical Corps in England, Malta, and Salonika. Thus, his full-time career as an historian began only in 1918 at over forty years of age. In 1920 he began his correspondence with Henry E. Sigerist in Zurich. Sigerist, fifteen years his junior, was at the beginning of his career as a medical historian, and less than thirty years old.

Also in 1920 Singer returned to University College London, this time as lecturer in the history of medicine. Ten years later he was elected professor with an honorary chair in this subject. This was the first period of Singer’s research and literary productivity in the history of medicine and science. Highlights of this period were his presidencies of the International Congress of the History of Medicine in 1922 and of the International Congress of the History of Science in 1931.



*Figure 2* Charles Singer  
Courtesy: Wellcome Library, London

In 1929 and 1932 Singer spent some time in the United States, giving lectures at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and teaching at the University of California in Berkeley. When William H. Welch's Chair of the History of Medicine in Baltimore became vacant in 1931, Singer was asked to succeed. However, he declined because he had been elected professor at University College in London. The one to be given the chair was Sigerist.

From 1934, the Singers spent the winter months in an old house, "Kilmarth", on the south coast of Cornwall. Kilmarth became their permanent home after Singer's retirement in 1942 at the age of sixty-seven. Both Singer and his wife were alarmed when Hitler came to power in 1933, and even more so in view of the fate of many of their academic colleagues in Germany who became victims of Nazi rule. The Singers felt it their duty to actively provide moral and material help for the exiled colleagues to find entry and posts in Britain or, with Sigerist's help, in America. From 1933 to the outbreak of World War II in 1939, this became almost a full-time activity, which took its toll in terms of the Singers' financial resources, time and, hence, scholarly productivity. Singer also supported the war effort, for example, by teaching biology, including laboratory courses in his house in Cornwall, for an evacuated school from Canterbury. Once emigration and war had ended in 1945 Singer had another active phase as an historian that lasted up to his death in 1960.

Singer was the author or editor of many books in addition to some two hundred scientific articles and an equal amount of book reviews. His early works dealt with Hildegard von

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Bingen, followed by two volumes of *Studies in the history and method of science*. Among his most important subjects were the history of anatomy, ancient Greek medicine and biology, mediaeval medicine and biology including Anglo-Saxon, and early herbals. Only rarely did he touch periods beyond the Renaissance. He enthusiastically studied early manuscripts in detail, often translating and publishing them, but he was also a master of historical synthesis. This is shown in his *Short histories* of medicine, of biology, and of medicine and scientific ideas. During Singer's fertile post-World War II period, studies on Vesalius and Galen were followed by the monumental five-volume *History of technology*, of which he was the chief planner and editor.

It is notable that Singer's bibliography shows many titles remote from both medicine and history. Examples showing his versatility are: *The teaching of English; Woman doctors; On growing old; The blind; Historical relations of religion and science; The legacy of Israel; The German universities and national socialism; The refugee problem; The Christian failure; A depressing world; The happy scholar*.

The two-volume Festschrift of 1953 in Singer's honour, a monumental work edited by Singer's colleague and son-in-law, E. Ashworth Underwood, contained articles by ninety-five contributors, many of them friends and colleagues. Singer was also the recipient of numerous awards.

Singer travelled the world and lectured in many places. He was in close touch with historians of medicine and science, not only in Britain, but also with early international leaders such as Sudhoff, Sigerist, A. C. Klebs, Sarton and others. He died on 10 June 1960 in his home, Kilmarth, in Cornwall. For literature on his biography see Underwood (1953, 1960), Cope (1960), Hall (1960), Clarke (1961), Jilla (1991). Singer's complete bibliography is in Underwood (1953 and 1960).

For an eminent historian of medicine and science like Singer one would have wished a long-lasting legacy and a secondary literature dealing with his work and influence. This is clearly not the case. The following facts may serve as starting points for explanations. Singer was never given a chair and a full professorship in the history of medicine or science, and after his retirement in 1942, his "department" disappeared. No pupils had been trained who would continue and develop Singer's work. His lack of influence was also due to the fact that soon after his death the historiography of medicine turned against the former positivism and scientism, and that medical men as authors were supplemented by social historians of both sexes for the rest of the century. A twenty-first-century observer comes to the conclusion that Singer does not seem to have left a fertile legacy (Mayer, 2005). As a scholar and as a personality, however, he remains an outstanding figure of the twentieth century.

Cantor, G. (1997) 'Charles Singer and the early years of the British Society for the History of Science', *British Journal for the History of Science*, **30**: 5–23.

Clarke, Edwin (1961) 'Charles Joseph Singer', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, **16**: 411–419.

Cope, Zachary (1960) 'Charles Joseph Singer (1876–1960)', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, **24**: 471–473.

Fischer, Hans (1960) 'Charles Singer (1876.1960)', *Gesnerus*, **17**: 73–74.

Hall, A. Rupert (1960) 'Charles Joseph Singer (1876–1960)', *Isis*, **51**: 558–560.

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- Jilla, Cyrus (1991) 'Charles Singer, his life, aims and achievements in the history of medicine' (BSc Dissertation, London).
- Mayer, Anna-K. (2002) 'Fatal mutilations: educationism and the British background to the 1931 International Congress for the History of Science and Technology', *History of Science*, **40**: 445–472.
- Mayer, Anna-K. (2005) 'When things don't talk: knowledge and belief in the inter-war humanism of Charles Singer (1876–1960)', *British Journal for the History of Science*, **38**: 325–347.
- Miller, Genevieve (1985) 'Charles and Dorothea Singer's aid to Nazi victims', *Korothe*, **8**: 11–2, 207–7, 210.
- Underwood, E. A. (ed.) (1953) *Science, medicine and history. Essays on the evolution of scientific thought and medical practice, written in honour of Charles Singer*, 2 vols (London).
- Underwood, E. A. (1960) 'Charles Singer', *British Medical Journal*, **i**: 1897–1899.
- Underwood, E. A. (1960) 'Charles Singer (1876–1960)', *Medical History*, **4**: 353–358.
- Weindling, Paul (1998) 'History of science and medicine journals in Great Britain', in M. Beretta, C. Pogliano, and P. Redondi, (eds), *Journals and History of Science* (Biblioteca di Nuncius XXXII, Firenze), 145–152.
- Weindling, Paul (1999) 'Medical refugees and the renaissance of medical history in Great Britain, 1930s-60s', in Ralf Bröer (ed.), *Eine Wissenschaft emanzipiert sich. Die medizinhistoriographie von der Aufklärung bis zur Postmoderne* (Pfaffenweiler) 139–147.

### 1.3. The Correspondence

#### 1.3.1. Technicalities and Explanations

The number of preserved letters is shown in the following table:

	Sigerist	Singer
1920–1925 (Sigerist in Zurich)	2	170
1925–1932 (Sigerist in Leipzig)	25	0
1932–1947 (Sigerist in Baltimore)	61	79
1947–1956 (Sigerist in Pura, Switzerland)	30	34
	118	283

These figures include a few telegrams and some letters of the correspondents' secretaries which fill gaps in the exchange of letters. Clearly missing are almost all of Sigerist's letters from Zurich, and Singer's to Sigerist in Leipzig. Otherwise, there are only occasional letters clearly missing. The missing letters after 1932 are predominantly Sigerist's, in all likelihood long-hand letters of which he did not make carbon copies.

Most of the letters are in English; only Sigerist's letters from Leipzig were dictated in German. These are followed in this edition by an English summary of their contents. Practically all letters are clearly dated, and the majority of the letters are typed. Part of Singer's letters are in long-hand. These occasionally contain indecipherable words which in the transcription are indicated by the sign [...] or are followed by the sign [?]. Sigerist liked to write in long-hand, yet he used typewriters from the mid-1920s in order to have his own carbon copies. Spelling errors have been transcribed as such but are followed by the sign [sic], whereas the frequent errors in punctuation have been left unchanged and

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unmarked as long as they did not distort the sense of a sentence. The sign [ ] has also been used if Sigerist's signature was missing on the carbon copies used. Literary works are given as, e.g., Ackerknecht (1931), and listed in the bibliography (chapter 3).

Footnotes follow each transcribed letter. They are meant to help understand the contents of the letters rather than to interpret them and are therefore kept to a minimum, referring to persons and subjects only at their first mention; they also serve as links to previous or subsequent letters and notes. Persons sufficiently characterized and explained in the letter may not appear in the footnote. The term "medical historian" for the characterization of persons is used in a wide sense as, e.g., members of the American Association of the History of Medicine. A few persons, most of them mentioned only once, could not be identified and are marked as such in the footnote. However, all persons mentioned in the letters are listed in the index, as are major topics of the correspondence in addition to institutions, journals, locations, and publishers.

### 1.3.2. Characteristics and topics of the correspondence

The correspondence covers Sigerist's whole career in Zurich, Leipzig, Baltimore, and Pura, Switzerland. In particular, it sheds light on Sigerist's early years in Zurich since it starts as early as 1920. At that time Singer, in London, was an academically established medical historian of forty-four years of age, whereas Sigerist, in Zurich, was at the beginning of his career aged twenty-nine. Their co-operation and mutual help during these early years was very intense, as shown by sixty-three letters from Singer in the one year 1923. Singer's letters of these years are mainly dealing with the correspondents' research. They acknowledge and refer to Sigerist's (missing) letters, so these are likely to be reflected in Singer's (preserved) letters.

The same can be said for the lack of Singer's letters during Sigerist's years in Leipzig (1925–1932). Sigerist's letters suggest an on-going but less intense cooperation, probably due to his new responsibilities and challenges as director of a university department.

This first period of the correspondence (1920–1932) is an exchange on work, e.g., on mediaeval manuscripts, publications, journals, congresses, and institutions such as scholarly societies, departments, libraries, publishers and others. In dozens of letters one follows the progress and setbacks in the creation of the *Festschrift* for Karl Sudhoff, edited by Singer and Sigerist, an excellent example of the problems with the editing of multi-author books. A particular topic in these years was Singer's staunch opposition to the (French) exclusion of colleagues from "enemy countries" (Germany, Austria) from participation at international congresses in the post-World War I years. The two correspondents' attempts at the creation of an international journal of the history of medicine are also remarkable.

From Sigerist's transfer to Baltimore in 1932 and almost through to his death, the correspondence becomes bilateral with only occasional missing letters. From the beginning of this period the correspondence also becomes more intimate, the colleagues becoming friends. Despite the difference in age there is never a trace of condescension on the part of Singer. In fact, Singer often seeks Sigerist's advice or lets him have the freedom of choice between proposals or alternatives.

The list of topics of the correspondence gradually extends far beyond academic subjects. From 1933 politics becomes a topic of increasing importance. Both correspondents are



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increasingly disgusted with the developments in Germany under the Nazis' ghastly rule and horrified by the fate of their colleagues who have become victims of the regime. Both, as well as Dorothea Singer, are active in helping German and Austrian intellectuals seeking immigration and continued activity, some prominent examples being the medical historians Ludwig and Emma Edelstein, Walter Pagel, Max Neuburger, and Isidor Fischer. Singer became overwhelmed by these activities, to such a degree that his scientific output was clearly diminished. In these pre-war years Sigerist also informs Singer of his study tours to Europe, the Soviet Union, South Africa, Canada, and India.

The war then becomes another topic in the correspondence after its outbreak in 1939. Singer provides impressive insights into life in Britain after the retreat from Dunkirk, during the German bombing of British cities, and at the time of the collapsing Nazi war machine. Sigerist provides information on the war effort on the other side of the Atlantic. With the end of emigration and the defeat of Nazi Germany, Singer's productivity increases again, yet he deplors the sixteen years of his life lost to both World War I and Hitlerism:

It is maddening to think of all the years that I have lost by these detestable wars. The last word should, of course, be in the singular for it is all one war. (Letter 302)

After World War II, with Sigerist in Pura, Switzerland, (1947–1957) and Singer retired in Cornwall, new topics appear in the correspondence. Both correspondents are busy with their multi-volume opera magna: Sigerist with *A history of medicine* and Singer as editor of *A history of technology*. The slow progress of Sigerist's *History*, and finally his idea to finish the work with the help of co-authors, is a major topic at that time. Still discussed are the correspondents' secondary works, the ones projected, in progress, or achieved. Books, reprints, and other materials are still exchanged or discussed, as are the new and often surprising problems of these postwar years. Sigerist happily mentions his travels for lectures and congresses, particularly the ones to England, a country he is increasingly fond of. In the final years, deteriorating health becomes a topic too. Singer informs Sigerist of the not-so-smooth development of the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum and Library. The letters also happily mention the correspondents' continuing encounters in Switzerland, London, and Cornwall.

No fewer than about 200 books and papers and about 450 people are mentioned in the correspondence (see chapters 3 and 4). Some of the people appear time and again, and are characterized in a straightforward way and thus become familiar to the reader. The correspondence is also a document of an impressive friendship, based on common interests, congeniality, confidence, and the will for mutual help in a generous way. There are congratulations without flattering, mutual admiration of capabilities and achievements, and thus mutual stimulation. The correspondents' families are important, and Dorothea Singer is ever present. There is humour, too. In summary, the whole correspondence is a document reflecting many political, cultural and academic aspects of the first half of the twentieth century and the first decade after World War II.