CHAPTER TEN
HOW TO TURN NEUROTICS INTO PRODUCTIVE CITIZENS

As I have shown in the previous chapters, neurosis became a ‘national malady’ in Sweden in the early twentieth century. Internist Josua Tillgren told a journalist in the daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* in 1924 that “neuroses are quantitatively the largest group of illnesses with which doctors are dealing.”¹ His opinion was shared by many of his colleagues, who not only marvelled at the expansion of neuroses but also wanted to do something about the alarming epidemic.² After the establishment of the Royal Board of Pensions (RBP) in 1914, an institution for the care of the chronically neurotic was high on the agenda of this governmental agency. In 1915, the RBP began to send patients to spas and water cure clinics, and a few years later it opened its first clinic for neuroses and rheumatism.

The state was now actively involved in the fight against nervous illnesses, and the primary goal of these state-financed clinics was to turn neurotic patients into productive citizens. Neurotics, a large group of potential invalids who might become a heavy burden to the national economy, needed to be provided with effective therapy and then swiftly returned to working life. Thus the motivation behind the RBP’s clinics was at least as much national-economic and utilitarian as it was medical. It was this principle of utility that characterised both the clinical work at the RBP’s clinics and the medical discussion of the proper cure of the neurotics in the decades to come. Sweden was not the only European country where the national-economic aspects of neurosis were taken up for a discussion; in Germany, for example, doctors routinely linked nervousness with the questions of national health and national economy, while in England the incidence of neurosis among workers was a matter of utmost importance, as a 1947 editorial of British Medical Journal

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² See, for example, Malte Ljungdahl, “Flykten in i sjukdom,” *SLT* 43 (1946): 3192–207.
makes clear: in the editorial, it was noted that “neurosis is one of the commonest causes of absence from work”.\textsuperscript{3}

**Neurotics as Second-Class Patients**

Unlike the somatically ill, who were seldom directly blamed for their illness, the nervously ill were typically seen as second-class patients, a class of lazy pariahs whose inferior character or deficient mental faculties made them vulnerable to neuroses, and to all kinds of more or less imaginary complaints. This is what Drs Bringel and Welander, both working at the Serafimer’s Nervpoliklinik, proclaimed in 1936:

> Everywhere you can find a specific type of the dregs of society; people who are not somatically ill, criminal or abnormally lazy, but who nonetheless find it difficult to work. These people are neuro- and psychopaths, the unbalanced, the depressed, the spineless, the overnervous [övernervösa], much too egocentric or much too dumb. Nobody will employ these people. The poor among them have to choose between illness, beggary or criminality as a way of making a living if they don’t want to be dependent on poor relief. As we shall see, those who choose illness are not so few.\textsuperscript{4}

The disparaging attitude of these two doctors towards ‘neuro- and psychopaths’ was shared by many other doctors, including the first chief physician at the RBP, Professor Hjalmar Forssner, who called this group of patients “the parasites of society”.\textsuperscript{5} Even those physicians who had a more benign attitude towards neuroses were inclined to believe that neurotics had difficulties in adjusting themselves to the ‘hard demands’ of life, and that these difficulties may manifest themselves as an escape into illness. Indeed, Flucht in die Krankheit (“a flight into illness”) is an idiom that regularly appeared in medical writings where the nature of neurosis was discussed (sometimes the idiom was reformulated as Flucht ins Krankenhaus—a ‘flight to hospital’). The bottom line was that people who suffered from neurosis were, in most cases, of inferior quality: they were regarded, on average, as less intelligent than

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\textsuperscript{4} Bringel and Welander, “Neurosården närmaste behov,” 36.