

DISABILITY

The Nazis' First Victims Were the Disabled

By Kenny Fries

Sept. 13, 2017

I sit facing the young German neurologist, across a small table in a theater in Hamburg, Germany. I'm here giving one-on-one talks called "The Unenhanced: What Has Happened to Those Deemed 'Unfit,'" about my research on Aktion T4, the Nazi "euthanasia" program to exterminate the disabled.

"I'm afraid of what you're going to tell me," the neurologist says.

I'm not surprised. I've heard similar things before. But this time is different — the young man sitting across from me is a doctor. Aktion T4 could not have happened without the willing participation of German doctors.

I have a personal stake in making sure this history is remembered. In 1960, I was born missing bones in both legs. At the time, some thought I should not be allowed to live. Thankfully, my parents were not among them.

I first discovered that people with disabilities were sterilized and killed by the Nazis when I was a teenager, watching the TV mini-series "Holocaust" in 1978. But it would be years before I understood the connections between the killing of the disabled and the killing of Jews and other "undesirables," all of whom were, in one way or another, deemed "unfit."

The neurologist does not know much about what I'm telling him. While he does know that approximately 300,000 disabled people were killed in T4 and its aftermath, he doesn't know about the direct connection between T4 and the Holocaust. He doesn't know that it was at Brandenburg, the first T4 site, where methods of mass killing were tested, that the first victims of Nazi mass killings were the disabled, and that its personnel went on to establish and run the extermination camps at Treblinka, Belzec and Sobibor.

Three years earlier, when I first arrived in Germany, I was consistently confronted with the treatment of those with disabilities under the Third Reich. But I soon realized I had to go back even farther. In the 1920s, the disabled were mistreated, sterilized, experimented on and killed in some German psychiatric institutions. In 1920, the psychiatrist Alfred Hoche and the jurist Karl Binding published their treatise, "Permitting the Destruction of Unworthy Life," which became the blueprint for the exterminations of the disabled carried out by the Third Reich.

In Dr. Ewald Melzer's 1923 survey of the parents of the disabled children in his care, they were asked: "Would you agree definitely to a painless shortcut of your child's life, after it is determined by experts that it is incurably stupid?" The results, which surprised Melzer, were published in 1925: 73 percent responded they were willing to have their children killed if they weren't told about it.

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I am also Jewish. At the Karl Bonhoeffer psychiatric hospital in the Berlin suburb of Wittenau, where the exhibition "A Double Stigma: The Fate of Jewish Psychiatric Patients" was held, I learned about, as the exhibition title suggests, how Jewish patients were doubly stigmatized by being separated from other patients, denied pastoral care, and were cared for not at the expense of the Reich but by Jewish organizations. Jewish patients were singled out for early extermination; by December 1942, the destruction of the Jewish patient population at Wittenau was complete.

The young neurologist in Hamburg did not know this history.

It is only at the end of my talk with the neurologist that I notice he wears a hearing aid. I want to ask if he knows about “100 Percent,” the film produced by deaf Germans to show they could assimilate and be productive citizens who worked. Did he know the hereditary deaf were singled out not only by the German authorities but also by those with acquired deafness who tried to save themselves? Too often, even those of us with disabilities do not know our own history.

Not many people know about disability history in the United States. They do not know that in the United States in 1927, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote that “three generations of imbeciles are enough” as part of his opinion in *Buck v. Bell*, in which the Supreme Court ruled that compulsory sterilization of the “unfit” was constitutional. This decision has never been expressly overturned.

Many Americans still do not know about the so-called “ugly laws,” which in many states, beginning in the late 1860s, deemed it illegal for persons who were “unsightly or unseemly” to appear in public. The last of these laws was not repealed until 1974.

Why is it important to know this history? We often say what happened in Nazi Germany couldn’t happen here. But some of it, like the mistreatment and sterilization of the disabled, did happen here.

A reading of Hoche and Binding’s “Permitting the Destruction of Unworthy Life” shows the similarity between what they said and what exponents of practical ethics, such as Peter Singer, say about the disabled today. As recently as 2015, Singer, talking with the radio host Aaron Klein on his show, said, “I don’t want my health insurance premiums to be higher so that infants who can experience zero quality of life can have expensive treatments.”

These philosophers talk about the drain on “resources” caused by lives lived with a disability, which eerily echoes what Hoche and Binding wrote about the “financial and moral burden” on “a person’s family, hospital, and state” caused by what they deem lives “unworthy of living.”

Experts point out the recent Republican health care proposals would strip Medicaid funding that helps the elderly, the poor and the disabled live healthier and more dignified lives. A recent New York Times article quoted the Rev. Susan Flanders, a retired Episcopal priest, as saying: “What we’re paying for is something that many people wouldn’t want if they had a choice. It’s hundreds of dollars each day that could go towards their grandchildren’s education or care for the people who could get well.”

In the article, Flanders, whose father had Alzheimer’s, is described as “utterly unafraid to mix money into the conversation about the meaning of life when the mind deteriorates.” Practical ethicists are similarly unafraid to do this. As were the Nazis. Third Reich school textbooks included arithmetic problems on how much it would cost to care for a person with a disability for a lifetime.

Three years ago, I was the only visitor at a museum dedicated to the history of the Reinickendorf area of Berlin. The museum building was once part of Wiesengrund, which, in 1941, housed the “wards for expert care” of the Municipal Hospital for Children.

Down a hall with fluorescent lighting, in a white-walled room, were 30 wooden cribs. On each of the cribs was a history of a child, some as young as a few months old. This was the room in which these infants and children were experimented on and killed: the 30-bed Ward 3, the “ward for expert care” at Wiesengrund.

My heart raced; my breath shortened. I couldn’t stay in that room for long. The room evoked the first four weeks of my own life spent in an incubator. Nobody knew if I would live or die.

What kind of society do we want to be? Those of us who live with disabilities are at the forefront of the larger discussion of what constitutes a valued life. What is a life worth living? Too often, the lives of those of us who live with disabilities are not valued, and feared. At the root of this fear is misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and a lack of knowledge of disability history and, thus, disabled lives.

Correction: Sept. 13, 2017

*An earlier version of this article misquoted a phrase from Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes’s opinion in the Supreme Court case *Buck v. Bell*. It is “Three generations of imbeciles are enough,” not “one generation of imbeciles is enough.”*

Kenny Fries is the author of, most recently, “In the Province of the Gods.”

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Before the 'Final Solution' There Was a 'Test Killing'

Too few know the history of the Nazi methodical mass murder of disabled people. That is why I write.

By **Kenny Fries**

Mr. Fries is the author, most recently, of "In the Province of the Gods."

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My first visit to the Aktion T4 killing site at Brandenburg an der Havel was in autumn. My destination, where 9,000 disabled people were murdered as part of the Nazi "euthanasia" program, is embedded in the activities of the town — trams and buses, stores, a bank, a cafe.

The buildings that were once the old prison were mostly destroyed during the war. If not for dark gray letters painted on one side of the light gray building — GEDENKSTÄTTE, on one side, and its English translation, MEMORIAL, on another — the site could easily be passed unnoticed. From a distance, it looks prefab, temporary, perhaps an ad hoc extension to an overcrowded school or municipal department.

Though it was October, I was thinking of winter. At the Nuremberg "Doctors' Trial" in 1947, Viktor Brack — the economist, SS officer and head of the office of the Chancellery of the Führer who was in charge of Aktion T4 — testified that the first of the mass murders of disabled people happened "in snow-covered Brandenburg on a winter's day in December 1939 or January 1940." The exact date of this "test killing" has not yet been determined.

No documents from the "test killing" have been preserved. According to information at the memorial, "Who the murdered patients were and where they came from is unknown." What is known comes primarily from postwar testimony of those involved, or thought to be involved, in what took place that day.

Unlike the Holocaust, there are no T4 survivors. We know about T4 and its aftermath mainly through medical records and from the perpetrators. Aktion T4 does not have its Elie Wiesel or Primo Levi.

That is the main reason I write about what happened to disabled people during the Third Reich. I want to be what Susanne C. Knittel and other scholars call a "vicarious witness." Ms. Knittel describes this not as "an act of speaking for and thus appropriating the memory and story of someone else but rather an attempt to bridge the silence through narrative means." This is my way of bridging the silence, of keeping alive something that is too often forgotten.

I'm not surprised that some of the perpetrators' testimony is contradictory. In his diary, Dr. Irmfried Eberl, the medical director at Brandenburg, mentions Jan. 18, 1940, as the date of the "test killing." However, Dr. Horst Schumann, whom we know to have been present at the event, was on that day at Grafeneck, where he would oversee mass killings, the first of which occurred on Jan. 18. Another T4 employee said the murder of patients in Grafeneck started "about 14 days" after the "test killing" in Brandenburg. It seems Eberl mixed up the dates of the two killings.

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After he was arrested in 1959, Werner Heyde, a psychiatrist and the medical director of the T4 program, placed the "test killing" at the "beginning of January 1940." Heyde confessed only to being an observer.

The German Meteorological Office records the first major snowfall of the 1939-40 winter in Brandenburg on New Year's Eve, 1939; December had been relatively dry. Brack, in his testimony, was very clear about the snow on the ground at Brandenburg for the "test killing." By deduction, it seems that the first Brandenburg mass murder took place during the first days of January 1940.

Though the exact date is somewhat speculative, the words of those responsible for the murder of 70,000 disabled people in Aktion T4, and the 230,000 killed after the program's official end, clearly speak to the main cause for what happened: the disvaluing of disabled lives. Eugenics, which was rampant before and during the Reich, provided the rationale for the killings, stigmatizing those with disabilities as not human.

Dr. Albert Widmann, a chemist, forensic scientist and head of the chemical department of the central offices of the Reich Detective Forces, testified that he was asked to procure poison in large quantities. At a meeting with an unidentified representative of the Chancellery of the Führer, Widmann asked, "What for? To kill people?"

"No," was the reply. "Animals in the form of humans."

It was the police chemist Dr. August Becker who prepared the carbon monoxide gas for what he called the "euthanasia experiment." Testifying in the 1960s, Becker also echoed eugenic depictions of the disabled. He recalled looking through the gas chamber peephole and observing "the behavior of the delinquents," as the gas filled up the chamber and the victims' lungs. Becker's depiction likens disabled people to the immoral and illegal.

Becker described, in detail, the gas chamber as "a room similar to a shower room, lined with tiles about three by five meter[s], and three meters high in size." According to Becker, between 18 and 20 patients were led by nurses into this "shower room." These men had to "undress in an anteroom, so they were totally naked." Becker pointed to Widmann as the one who "operated the gas installation." But Widmann always denied taking part.

When interrogated in 1947, Richard von Hegener, deputy head of the killing of disabled children, named "the chemist in charge, Dr. Becker" as the one "who let the CO gas into the room." Von Hegener said there were 30 patients "dressed only in institutional clothing," who "were led in and they calmly took a seat on the benches in the room without any resistance."

Heyde stated there were "10, at most 15 — the figure was more than 10 — mentally ill patients." He said, "I don't really know who let the gas in."

According to Brack, there were "four such patients," all men, whom he described, in another eugenic nod, as "incurable." When asked about their ages or from which institutions they came he replied, "I really don't have any memory of that any more."

The more I learn, the more I understand the connection between Aktion T4 and what happened later to Jews and others deemed "undesirable." The Brandenburg "test killing" demonstrated that gassing was a "suitable" means for mass murder.

And as the text at the memorial emphasizes, "it also gave the future 'killing doctors' the chance to familiarize with the method." After recommending carbon monoxide for the mass murder of the disabled, Widmann developed the gas wagons that were used for the subsequent mass murder of Jews on the war's eastern front. Becker helped design these mobile killing units, including those used by the notorious Einsatzgruppen in the Nazi-occupied areas of the Soviet Union. Eberl later worked at the Chelmno and Treblinka extermination camps during Operation Reinhard, the "Final Solution."

Of those whose testimonies are highlighted at the Brandenburg memorial, Brack, in 1948, was the only one executed. Von Hegener was arrested in 1949 and sentenced to life imprisonment but was released early. Becker had a stroke in 1959 and was deemed unfit to stand trial. Heyde was arrested in 1959 and committed suicide before his trial. In both 1962 and 1967 Widmann was convicted to serve several years in prison but was released upon payment of a fine.

Outside the memorial building, there is no cemetery. Across a parking lot lies a large plot of gray gravel, interrupted only by the reddish-brown brick foundations of what was the prison barn, which housed the gas chamber. There are circles of piled leaves among the gravel — as if these random forms were gathered in a subliminal ritual of mourning.

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