

SUZANNE E. EVANS

FORGOTTEN CRIMES

THE HOLOCAUST
AND PEOPLE WITH
DISABILITIES



Suzanne E. Evans

Forgotten Crimes

*The Holocaust and
People with Disabilities*

With a Preface by Bengt Lindqvist



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Disability Rights Advocates is a nonprofit corporation run by people with disabilities for people with disabilities. With headquarters in Oakland, California, and an affiliate office in Budapest, Hungary, the organization's mission is to be an advocate for people with disabilities in order to ensure their full participation in all aspects of life locally, nationally, and internationally. DRA established the Disability Holocaust Project with several objectives: (1) to shatter the silence that has surrounded the fate of people with disabilities during the Holocaust; (2) to heighten public awareness about the current desperate plight of people with disabilities; (3) to utilize the shared history of the Holocaust as a vehicle for building greater cooperation between organizations of people with disabilities; and (4) to relate pre-Holocaust Nazi concepts to pernicious contemporary attitudes and enhance awareness of the existing stigmatization of people with disabilities.

As part of the Disability Holocaust Project, DRA interviewed Holocaust survivors and historians, surveyed materials available in major archives, and analyzed all of the

information currently available on Nazi-era atrocities committed against people with disabilities. This book represents a documentation of the horrors inflicted upon people with disabilities during the Holocaust and of the central role that the extermination and exploitation of people with disabilities played in Hitler's vision.

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Preface

DEHUMANIZATION of people with disabilities did not begin with the Holocaust. Nor did it end with the Nazis' defeat. While the actions of Hitler's Germany represent the most structured and far-reaching attempt to eradicate the class of people with disabilities, it reflects the treatment of disabled people throughout history. Unfortunately society has long segregated and marginalized people with disabilities, defining them as inherently nonproductive, or "useless eaters" in Nazi parlance. The labeling of people with disabilities as burdensome, noncontributing members of society then often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. As occurs in many forms of discrimination, the person is labeled inferior and on the basis of that label is then restricted in education, work, and life opportunities. Rather than recognize the attitudinal basis of the cycle, society then imputes these characteristics as intrinsic to the person, rather than a result of societal barriers and discrimination.

How did this process during the Nazi era become so extreme that people with disabilities became, in the eyes of the perpetrators, so unworthy of life as to become the target of categorical destruction? Holocaust scholars estimate the total death toll from the Nazi disability killings to number in the hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children.

What are the patterns of dehumanization that generate such actions?

These questions are neither historical nor academic. The propaganda used by the Nazis to stigmatize people with disabilities, the kinds of attitudes that pervaded the German medical profession, and the shameful regard of disability as abhorrent, all continue to be part of a pervasive and lasting historical legacy. They directly implicate the status of people with disabilities throughout the world today. Millions of disabled men, women, and children continue to be subjected to the same kind of isolation, exclusion, and negative stereotypes that allowed the “euthanasia” killings to occur.

Throughout the world, people with physical, sensory, and mental impairments now live largely without enforceable rights. They struggle to gain some measure of dignity in a world that is both figuratively and literally inaccessible to them. Negative attitudes create often insurmountable barriers to living independently, gaining an education or a job, and marrying and having children. Disability remains something to be hidden or fixed. At best, it becomes an object of charity or pity. Thus an analysis of the Nazi campaign against people with disabilities can inform our dialogue about contemporary issues and provide insight into the continued struggle of people with disabilities against segregation and marginalization.

The notion of “imperfect” human beings, and the unproductivity and unworthiness of people with disabilities, which played such an integral role in the Nazi programs, also lies at the root of current policy issues. They form the basis of ongoing debates involving such highly charged topics as gene testing, assisted suicide, and the rationing of health care. They creep quietly into policy debates and judicial decisions

concerning access to insurance and reasonable accommodation in the workplace. The discourse on each of these topics is fraught with assumptions about the inherent worth and potential contribution of a person with a disability. In a world where the deliberate medical killing of a newborn, solely because of the infant's disability, is a matter of serious discussion as an "ethical" issue among both academics and physicians, the Nazi experience cannot be ignored or forgotten. On the contrary, important insights and warnings can and should be drawn from the Holocaust, especially when scientists, academicians, or politicians begin to make judgments about the quality of human life.

It is against the background of this history, its shameful legacy and the unavoidable questions it generates, that we can begin to understand the nightmarish reality of the Nazi disability killings. This book, which presents a detailed history of those killings, contributes immeasurably to that understanding. Disability Rights Advocates is to be commended for producing this important work, which can help all of us understand and address the persecution and neglect of people with disabilities in all its forms. *Forgotten Crimes* is an important and very timely contribution to the debate on how the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedom by people, who happen to live with a disability, should be obtained. Above all the book presents convincing evidence that the human rights of persons with disabilities must be more effectively promoted, protected, and monitored.

BENGT LINDQVIST
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FORGOTTEN CRIMES

Introduction

BETWEEN 1939 AND 1945 the Nazi regime systematically murdered hundreds of thousands of children and adults with disabilities as part of its so-called “euthanasia” programs. These programs were designed to eliminate all persons with disabilities who, according to Nazi racist ideology, threatened the health and purity of the German race. The first category of people the Nazis began exterminating as part of their quest to build a master “Aryan” race was the so-called *Ausschusskinderer*, “garbage children” or “committee children,” who had been born with certain supposedly hereditary disabilities. Pursuant to a decree issued by Hitler in the fall of 1939, German doctors, nurses, health officials, and midwives were required to report, in exchange for a fee, all infants and children up to the age of three who showed signs of “mental retardation” or physical deformity. Based on this information, a panel of “medical experts” decided which of those children should live or die. The children selected for death were then transferred from their homes or home institutions to a pediatric killing ward. There, shortly after their arrival, they were killed by lethal injection or placed in so-called “hunger houses” where they died slowly and painfully from malnutrition.

Ridding Germany of children born with disabilities was central to Hitler’s vision of the *volkish* (people’s) state. Because children represented Germany’s future, Hitler considered the elimination of all mentally and physically “defective” children as a crucial step in his quest for racial purification.

Scholars disagree on how many children with disabilities were exterminated by the Nazi regime, but most agree that the number falls somewhere between 5,000 and 25,000.

With the extermination of Germany's disabled children under way, Hitler was asked by Dr. Karl Brandt and Philipp Bouhler, the two men in charge of the children's killing program, to sign a decree that would expand the authority of German physicians to provide a "mercy death" to all German adults suffering from "incurable" diseases and disabilities. Shortly after Hitler signed this order in October 1939, Nazi officials began disseminating questionnaires and registration forms to all German hospitals, asylums, and institutions that cared for the chronically ill. The forms required hospital officials to report all patients who were suffering from conditions such as schizophrenia, epilepsy, paralysis, encephalitis, Huntington's disease, and severe physical deformities. Based on the information provided on these forms, Nazi doctors decided, pursuant to procedures similar to those used in the children's killing program, which patients should be killed. The men and women selected for death were transported to one of six official "euthanasia" centers, where they were gassed to death in chambers built to resemble large shower or "therapeutic inhaling" rooms. Between January 1940 and August 1941, at least 275,000 Germans with disabilities were exterminated as part of the Nazi regime's "Aktion T4" euthanasia program, so named for the location of the program's central offices at Tiergartenstrasse No. 4 in Berlin.

Despite attempts to disguise the true purpose of the T4 program, the secrecy surrounding the killings eventually broke down. Some staff members spoke of the killings while