

Speech by Sigrid Falkenstein

Mr President,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is hard to speak after hearing such testimony.

“Without remembrance, the same thing can happen again at any time if circumstances worsen significantly.”

This is the message given to me by the author and sculptor Dorothea Buck. Dorothea, who will be 100 years old in April, was 19 when she underwent forced sterilisation because of her supposed “genetic inferiority”. She is still a tireless campaigner for humane psychiatry. She has my profound respect and admiration.

It now falls to those of us who were born afterwards to keep remembrance alive – for there can be no understanding of the present and future unless we remember the past.

This mass murder of hundreds of thousands of people – the vulnerable, the sick and the disabled – was committed by those who were supposed to protect, heal and care for them. The victims were not faceless entities. They were people, unique individuals who laughed and cried, felt joy and sadness, and who, like all of us, cherished hopes and dreams. Their memory was suppressed for decades, even in many of the families – a mirror image, as we have heard, of what was happening across the whole of society as it sought to suppress, hush up and deny these crimes.

It was a shock for me to come across the name of my aunt Anna Lehnkering on an Internet list of victims of “euthanasia” back in 2003. When I confronted my father, Anna’s younger

brother, with this discovery, he struggled to find answers. Clearly, remembering his sister was difficult and painful. And then he spoke about her for the first time:

“Aenne,”

as he called her,

“was such a kind and gentle girl. She loved playing with us children. Yes, she found learning difficult.”

Then all trace of her vanished in phrases like this:

“Some time in the 30s, she was sent to an institution and she died somewhere along the way, during the war.”

Bewildered by this apparent amnesia, I set out to find traces of Anna and managed to piece together her life from the tiny fragments of memory within our family but mainly with the aid of patient records and official documents.

Anna was born in the Ruhr region in 1915. According to the records, she developed normally until she was around four years old. Then her parents noticed that she was becoming very anxious, timid and unsettled. A doctor noted: “The child is extremely nervous and needs good nutrition and plenty of rest.”

There are notes about her school career as well:

“Was soon transferred from junior school to special school. Understands everything that is said to her. As for her character, [...] is amiable, willing, obedient and agreeable. Can read, write and add up, but performance in the latter is poor.”

Due to her learning disability, Anna is unable to take any vocational training. But according to the file: “She is quite proficient at helping around the house. She can also fetch groceries and run errands.” So after leaving school, she continues to live at home and helps her mother with the housework. My grandparents ran a public house and there was always plenty of work to be done.

I found very few photos of Anna, but one is a particular favourite of mine: it shows her smiling into the camera. She looks so carefree. It is very hard to make a connection between this young girl and the “Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases”, which was enacted soon afterwards.

As a result, in 1934, Anna is forced to undergo a highly dubious intelligence test. She cannot explain the meaning of words such as “loyalty”, “piety” or “deference” but she knows the prices of common foods and is familiar with money – which is surely far more important. And when she is asked: “What should you do if you find 500 marks?”, she answers quite pragmatically: “Hand it in at the office.”

The official medical report states that Anna’s is a case of “congenital imbecility”, a common term, at that time, for mental disability. According to the National Socialists’ genetic and racial ideology, this makes her a “parasite on the healthy body of the nation”.

Anna is one of several hundred thousand people who are sterilised without their consent simply because they fall short of the standard desired by society, because they are “different”. Many of them are later murdered in the “euthanasia” programmes.

In 1936, Anna is sent to the asylum at Bedburg-Hau. Looking at the entries in her patient records, it is obvious that the patient was viewed with contempt. It is only by reading between the lines that it becomes clear how much, and how desperately, Anna struggled

and suffered. At the end, there is nothing left of the young girl who, only a few years earlier, had smiled at the camera with such joy and such zest for life.

Her death sentence is a bureaucratic act. She is a perfect match, so to speak, for her murderers' selection criteria: she is considered to be incurable, she's a "burden" – I'm quoting directly from her file – and, above all, she doesn't perform any productive work, and that makes her a so-called useless eater, "unworthy of life". So she is condemned to die.

In March 1940, Anna is deported to Grafeneck as part of the "Aktion T4" programme. Grafeneck – the place where the systematic and industrial mass murder began, ultimately culminating in the Holocaust. Anna is murdered there, in a gas chamber fitted out like a shower room, when she is just 24 years old.

Weeks later, her mother receives a so-called "letter of condolence" with a fabricated cause and time of death. Did she really believe – did she perhaps want to believe – that her daughter's death was indeed a "release", in view of her supposed "severe and incurable disease", as the letter claimed? I have no answers.

Until 2003, no one in our family ever talked about Anna. This silence, I think, had a lot to do with shame. The degradation and exclusion of people with mental illness and disability were part of my father's formative life experience. His entire family was caught up in the machinery of genetic health policy. This is evident, for example, from a genealogical chart which covers 24 members of the family. Body type, physical and mental illness and social behaviour are all listed. The catalogue of characteristics is absurd, ranging from "slovenly", "thoughtless" and "idiosyncratic" to "genial" and "intelligent". As well as Anna, other family members are suspected of "genetic inferiority". Another relative is also sterilised without his consent. It is quite obvious that some of the information is based on denunciations and hearsay.

Regardless of how true or untrue these entries may be, to me, this genealogical chart shows that my family is a colourful mix of individuals with their own diverse traits, talents and inclinations, all shaped, of course, by countless external influences. And like every family, mine has members who have health weaknesses. That's not a flaw in our make-up! Nor is it a reason for shame or concealment, and it certainly cannot justify the immeasurable suffering inflicted on the victims.

That's easy for me to say today. For the generation directly affected, however, things were very different. The victims, the survivors and their families continued to suffer discrimination and stigma in both German states even after the war ended, whereas the perpetrators, in most cases, were able to continue their careers with impunity. The social, legal and political reckoning with the past was extremely slow to start and totally inadequate. The victims of "euthanasia" and forced sterilisation were not only excluded from public remembrance for decades. No, they continue to be denied recognition as victims of National Socialist persecution and lack equal status with other persecuted groups to this day.

In many families, the consequence of all this was, and still is, a vicious cycle of silence and denial. This is a taboo subject – one which evokes feelings of anxiety, shame and, yes, sometimes, perhaps, even guilt. Was there a lack of willingness, courage or opportunity to protect the daughter, the son, the sister, the brother from this bureaucratic machinery of murder? My grandmother suffered severe depression in later life. It is very likely that the suppression of her traumatic experiences within the family played a major role. Silence makes you sick. Talking about one's experiences can help.

In 2009, a stumbling stone – a "Stolperstein" – was laid for Anna. I could feel the tension in my father, by then almost 90 years old, as he faced the public; the colour drained from his face as he struggled to maintain his composure. On the day the stumbling stone was

laid, he finally admitted for the first time: “I had a sister who was mentally handicapped.” He died only a few weeks later, and it is comforting to think that for him, the reckoning with the past was not only a burden but also, in some ways, a kind of liberation. I wish he were alive today to experience this day of remembrance. It would have helped him so much.

Anna suffered unimaginable injustice, and part of that injustice is the silence surrounding her murder. Today, she has a firm place in our family memory. That is partly because I happened to come across her name on a list which, according to German law, was compiled illegally. Even today, the law still makes it difficult to publicly name the “euthanasia” victims. One of the reasons is that relatives might feel stigmatised. I ask you! That argument is reminiscent of the ideology of racial purity! It is time to break this dreadful continuity and to name the victims so that they can be included in family and collective remembrance. It would also go a long way towards removing the stigma suffered by people living with disability or mental illness today.

There are now many positive signs of a shift in Germany’s culture of remembrance. The memorials at the sites of the killing centres and at Tiergartenstraße 4, the efforts being made by the medical profession to deal with the past, the countless citizens’ initiatives and much more all bear witness to that. This is also encouraging more and more people to research their family history and to give their murdered relatives a name and face again.

In the political arena, too, calls for the victims of “euthanasia” to be commemorated are increasingly finding a hearing, as today’s ceremony of remembrance here in the German Bundestag shows. Remembering Ernst Putzki, Benjamin Traub and Anna Lehnkering in a setting which is so significant in our history is a very special, perhaps even a historic occasion. We say their names aloud for the many nameless victims and give back a piece

of their identity and dignity in an act of justice that is long overdue, albeit one which, for the victims, can only ever be symbolic.

What remains, then, apart from mourning and remembrance?

It is important to tell stories like Anna's, Benjamin's and Ernst's, and to tell as many as we can, for it is these individual life stories which illuminate abstract historical events. In the best case, they touch hearts and help to change minds. I tell Anna's story because I want us to look, listen and speak out whenever individuals or groups are judged by their usefulness, by their supposed value or their lack of worth. And it is not just about people with a disability or illness. I tell Anna's story because it can guide us as we give shape to a society that is rooted in respect for life in all its diversity and with all its imperfections.

So I would like to finish by quoting the words of Max Mannheimer, a survivor of the Shoah, who died last year:

"You are not responsible for what happened. But you certainly are responsible for preventing it from happening again."

| Thank you.