

**Day of Remembrance for the Victims of National Socialism
Ceremony of Remembrance at the German Bundestag
Berlin, 27 January 2017**

**Welcome statement by the President of the German Bundestag,
Professor Norbert Lammert**

Federal President,
Madam Chancellor,
Madam President of the Bundesrat,
President of the Federal Constitutional Court,
Excellencies,
Honoured guests,
Colleagues,

Today it is almost exactly 75 years to the day since 15 high-ranking representatives of the Nazi regime met in a Berlin villa in the west of the capital, in order to organise as efficiently as possible and with incredible contempt for humanity the murder of millions of European Jews, murder which at that point had been decided for some time and that was also long underway. Hermann Göring commissioned Reinhard Heydrich, “as supplement to the task which was entrusted to you in the decree dated 24 January 1939, namely to solve the Jewish question by emigration and evacuation in a way which is the most favourable in connection with the conditions prevailing at present” to “carry out all preparations with regard to organisation, the material side and financial viewpoints for a final solution of the Jewish question in the territories in Europe which are under German influence.”

The Wannsee Conference of 20 January 1942 reflects the very cynically technocratic inhumanity and ideologically dressed-up barbarity that struck Jews along with other

groups of innocents. It is these people, the millions who were deprived of their rights, who were tortured and murdered, that we remember today: the Sinti and Roma, the millions of enslaved Slavs, the forced labourers, the homosexuals, the political prisoners, the Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and all those who were declared to be the enemy, persecuted and destroyed by the National Socialist ideology as a result of their religious or political convictions. We also remember those who courageously resisted.

This year, we remember in particular the sick, the helpless, all those considered "unworthy of life" by the Nazi regime, murdered as part of what was known as the "euthanasia" programme: 300,000 people, most of whom had previously been forcibly sterilised and tortured in other ways. "Barbarity of language is barbarity of spirit", Dolf Sternberger once wrote, having compiled a "Dictionary of a Monster" in 1945. And indeed, the "euthanasia" began with the denunciatory dehumanising of its victims, who were reviled as "useless eaters", "soulless human shells" and who – in the words of the perpetrators – needed to be "eradicated". "Barbarity of language is barbarity of spirit" – and words became deeds.

There was a close connection between "euthanasia" and the genocide of the European Jews. Viewed now as a "test run for the Holocaust" the killing by gas first practiced on the "euthanasia" victims became a model for the mass murder in the Nazi extermination camps later on. There was a remarkable overlap in the people involved, too: over 100 doctors, nurses and other personnel involved in these murders, the first phase of which ended in 1941, continued their work without pause on inmates in the extermination camps.

The term "euthanasia" – "easy death" – is not a modern concept. It has been used since Antiquity and euphemistically describes the killing of those deemed unworthy of living. The term developed through evolutionary biological perspectives in the 19th

century into what came to be known as racial hygiene or eugenics – in many different countries. Under this theory, supposedly “advanced” peoples allegedly owed it to themselves to uphold their so-called “hereditary substance”, in order to prevail in the alleged “struggle for existence”. While initially the focus was only on promoting the healthy and the strong, voices refuting the right of the ill and the weak to life grew increasingly louder. The number of euthanasia supporters increased dramatically after the First World War, even in the liberal USA. The fact that doctors, judges and politicians there also became involved in discussions on eugenics was even used by German defence lawyers during the Nuremberg Trials as an argument to exonerate their clients.

Yet there is of course a significant difference between the debate and thinking on this in Germany and elsewhere. While degrading procedures did indeed take place in other countries, there was no deliberate – and certainly no systematic – killing, whilst in Germany all scruples were abandoned, resulting in murder on a scale of hundreds of thousands.

Preparations began as early as 1933. The “Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases”, passed in this first year of the Nazi dictatorship, allowed the dignity of disabled individuals to be brutally violated. This included forced sterilisations, which in no few cases led to the death of the patient, and which were indicative of the systematic murder campaign to come. This started at the outbreak of the Second World War, when doctors and nurses began using gas to suffocate people with mental disabilities and those in need of care, war invalids and mentally ill soldiers. Throughout the war, the perpetrators continued to widen the circle of victims of the escalating programme, in which death was also brought about by starvation, incorrect medication or lethal injection. Finally, they killed all those who Hitler and his accomplices considered guilty of what was referred to as behaviour deviating from

the norm, including those of no fixed abode, non-conformists, troublemakers, regime critics and prisoners of war.

Ladies and gentlemen, the slaughter continued after the end of the war. Medical criminals of conviction in institutions such as Kaufbeuren and Irsee were able to continue their cynical deeds until July 1945, by preventing the occupying powers from accessing the institutions, placing signs falsely claiming “Typhoid” at the entrance. This was just one of the many appalling elements of the “euthanasia” that have barely made it into the collective memory, along with the fact that these crimes were carried out in the heart of Germany. In dozens of so-called mental asylums and nursing homes, the medical staff carried out murders, worst of all in the six institutions with gas chambers in Hadamar in northern Hesse, Grafeneck near Reutlingen, Brandenburg an der Havel, Bernburg on the River Saale, Pirna-Sonnenstein and Hartheim near Linz in Austria. Patients were brought here after being selected for targeted killing by medical assessors.

There was little in the way of protest against the systematic taking of supposedly “unworthy” life – presumably because, among other reasons, fear and shame of presumed “abnormality” was widespread and supported by the convenient attempted justification that those affected were themselves tortured by their own existence, and that it could be considered doing them a favour by ending their alleged suffering. For those who deluded themselves in this way, no compassion was necessary – and they became complicit with the perpetrators.

Notable opposition came only from those people whose compassion was stronger than their fear of contact with people with disabilities. They were individual judges and relatives of the victims, but above all some individual representatives of the Christian churches. The names of the Bishop of Münster, Clemens August Graf von Galen or the Lutheran Evangelical Bishop of Württemberg Theophil Wurm represent

all those who acted out of charity and who had the courage to oppose the inhuman *zeitgeist*. Resistance was dangerous – but possible! And it did have some impact. The first official phase of killing, “Aktion T4”, was stopped directly after Galen’s sermons, in August 1941. The fact that the murders continued on a decentralised basis known as “wild euthanasia” does not diminish the importance of this resistance. And yet the haunting question remains: what could have been prevented if more people had protested and stood by their own ethical principles?

Ladies and gentlemen, the Hippocratic Oath has bound doctors to uphold the wellbeing of their patients since Antiquity. *“I swear”, it states, “that [...] I will use treatment to help the sick according to my ability and judgment, but never with a view to injury or wrong-doing. [...] Into whatsoever houses I enter, I will enter to help the sick, and I will abstain from all intentional wrong-doing and harm [...].”*

The involvement of German doctors in the Holocaust and the murder of sick and disabled people is in brutal contrast to this promise. Their actions were determined by arbitrariness, injustice and deliberate harm of those under their care. The National Socialist “euthanasia” perverted the Hippocratic Oath and made it a hypocritical one, as murder was artificially justified by the claim that it was for the good of all, including the patients. In truth, doctors became executioners, as Thomas Mann put it. They carried out medical experiments on small children and adults and committed mass murder out of conviction, without any respect for the victims.

After 1945, only a small number of the doctors, nurses and medical staff involved were brought to trial, many not until decades after their crimes. Proceedings frequently ended in acquittal due to the statute of limitations expiring or the accused being permanently unfit to face trial. If we take into account the fact that as a belated effect of the Nazi death machine, mortality rates in some institutions in 1948 were still

over 30 per cent, far above normal levels, the leniency of the courts remains to this day simply scandalous.

Also shocking are the years of indifference in the scientific community, the media and in politics. Reappraisal did not take place for a long time. Quite the opposite: former perpetrators were promoted to university professors, awarded orders of merit, their deeds suppressed and the victims forgotten. Here, too, shame would appear to be the principal motivation; shame for having done, allowed or approved terrible things. As a result of this suppression and denial, it took decades to bring about a change in attitudes. It was 2007 before the German Bundestag proscribed the Nazi regime's Forced Sterilisation Act, and it took until 2011 before we were able to bring ourselves to provide an appropriate framework with the help of public funds for a memorial to the Nazi's medical murder victims, which until then had only been made possible by private initiative. The resulting memorial and information centre at the site of the former program headquarters at Tiergartenstraße 4 in Berlin was finally opened in 2014.

The fact that remembrance became at all possible is thanks to the tireless commitment on the part of various individuals. We owe them all the more thanks, as for a long time they were considered "denigrators of their country" and subjected to intense criticism. Today, researchers, writers and film makers are continuing the pioneering work of Alexander Mitscherlich, Ernst Klee, Götz Aly and others and contribute to promoting remembrance that is long overdue.

The commitment of the 80 young people from 15 different countries participating again this year in the ceremony as guests of the Bundestag also makes a major contribution to this enduring remembrance, which is so necessary. As always, the young people have prepared for this topic intensively and discussed it with contemporary witnesses. They are involved in memorial work in their home countries

and show how knowledge about the past can successfully be passed on to the generations that follow.

Ladies and gentlemen, all these facts about “euthanasia” remain abstract unless we focus on the victims. It is only when we look at the individual fates of those tortured and murdered that we truly realise what was done to innocent people. By listening to and reading their stories, and allowing ourselves to be affected by them, we can at least give the victims back their dignity posthumously.

One of them was Ernst Putzki. Born in 1902, he came from Oberdüssel and was a labourer. In 1933, as a result of rheumatic complaints, he was sent to a mental asylum and nursing home in Wunstorf for a year and a half. In 1942, he was arrested by the Gestapo for writing and distributing letters with alleged “content hostile to the state” and committed to Warstein mental hospital for supposed “insanity”. In 1943 Ernst Putzki was transferred to a mental hospital in Weilmünster. From there, he wrote the following letter to his mother, which Sebastian Urbanski, an actor at the inclusive RambaZamba theatre in Berlin, will now read.

Sebastian Urbanski:

“Dear Mother,

It is 3 September 1943, and we have now been through four years of war. We have news! Your letter came on Sunday, 22 August. I didn’t get the gooseberries. The parcel which you told me you had sent finally arrived yesterday. It was probably brought on foot. Its contents – two pounds of apples and a mushy stinking mess of pureed pear – was consumed with ravenous hunger. My fellow candidates for death were fighting over the leftovers, too rotten to eat. No one believed my descriptions of Wunstorf, but what I am about to describe now must be believed, because anyone can see the truth for themselves: after I sent two letters to Paul and one to Paula

from Warstein, I sent you news – six days before the transport – of our transfer here and asked you to visit. The transport came on 26 July and I have been here for exactly six weeks as of Monday.

We were not transferred because of the aeroplanes but because in this sparsely populated area, we can simply be left to starve to death out of sight. Of the Warsteiners who came with me to this dying room, few are still alive. The people here are starving, just skin and bone, and dying like flies. There are around 30 deaths a week. Their skeletal bodies are taken away to be buried. There are no coffins. The images of starving people from India or Russia are my reality.

The food consists of two slices of bread a day - with jam, sometimes with margarine, sometimes with nothing. At midday and in the evening, we each get three-quarters of a litre of water with sliced potato and woody cabbage stems. The people become like animals; they eat anything they can snatch from others, even raw potato and fodderbeet. And yes, we would be capable of eating other things as well, like the prisoners from Russia. Death from starvation is hard on our heels and no one knows who will be next. Previously, the people here were killed more quickly and their bodies taken for burning at dawn. But this met with resistance from the locals so now we are simply left to starve. We live in squalid rooms with no radio, newspaper or books. There's nothing to occupy us. How I miss my handicrafts! We eat off broken crockery and have nothing but threadbare rags to wear. They don't keep the cold out – it's worse than in an entire winter in Hagen. We last had a bath five weeks ago and don't know if we will be given a bath again this year. Every 14 days, we are given a clean shirt and socks. That is socialism in action.

Yours, Ernst"

(Letter written by Ernst Putzki to his mother on 3 September 1943. Taken from the patient records of Ernst Putzki, Archive of the Land Welfare Association of Hesse (*Landeswohlfahrtsverband Hessen*), Best. 12, K 2274.)

Professor Norbert Lammert, President of the Bundestag:

In September 1944, Nazi doctors transferred Ernst Putzki to Hadamar, where patients had been killed since 1942 using overdoses, deprivation of food, and general neglect. Ernst Putzki died on 9 January 1945, just a few months after he arrived – allegedly of pneumonia. His medical records contained numerous intercepted letters to friends and family, in which he described the inhuman conditions in the hospitals. Ernst Putzki's letter from Weilmünster also never reached his mother.

The story of Norbert von Hannenheim, an artist, composer and star pupil of Arnold Schönberg, is no less nightmarish. His promising music career came to an abrupt end when the National Socialists came to power. Robbed of his options for creative expression, his psychological state increasingly deteriorated. In July 1944, doctors committed him to the asylum and nursing home in Obrawalde, leaving him at the mercy of the National Socialist medical murder machine. Norbert von Hannenheim died in September 1945, ostensibly of heart failure. Only 45 of his 230 compositions survived the turmoil of the end of the war, one being the adagio from piano sonata no. 3, which we will hear in a moment.

Not only musically, but also in the reflections of their relatives will we endeavour today to spare the “euthanasia” victims from being forgotten and give them back their personalities and their faces. First, Dr Hartmut Traub will speak about his uncle Benjamin, killed by the National Socialists in Hadamar in 1941. Sigrid Falkenstein will then remember her aunt Anna Lehnkering, who was murdered in 1940 in the asylum in Grafeneck. I would like to thank both of them sincerely not only for their willingness to provide an insight into the lives of their mistreated relatives, but also for describing

the taboo applied in reaction to these events by the families and the public for far too long.

Ladies and gentlemen, in Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "Death Experienced", Norbert von Hannenheim's musical setting of which will be heard at the end of this ceremony, life is represented as a piece of theatre. Death plays the role of the villain. People are his victims. We know today that the reality is more complicated. It is not death itself that is "evil", but rather those people who, disregarding all ethical principles, bring it about deliberately, intentionally and needlessly.

"Human dignity shall be inviolable. To respect and protect it shall be the duty of all state authority." So it is stated unequivocally in Article 1 of the Basic Law. Yet history has shown: human dignity *is* violable. Nowhere has this been made more apparent than in Germany. It is for this particular reason that Article 1 of our constitution must be and remain, without compromise, the guiding principle behind our actions, a categorical imperative, in order to never again allow people to be marginalised, persecuted and deprived of their right to life. We owe that to Ernst Putzki, Norbert von Hannenheim, Anna Lehnkering and Benjamin Traub, we owe it to all the victims that we remember here today.