

Speech by Dr Hartmut Traub

Mr President,

Ladies and gentleman,

Lives have long memories. That holds true for individual life stories and for shared history. The experiences captured within them may gradually be overlaid, or suppressed, put out of our minds, distorted or even shrouded in silence, but they cannot be undone.

Remembering is more than simply taking note. Anyone who remembers or is remembered brings to mind events and experiences from a personal and collective past, whether joyful or painful. In German, we say *Er-innern*; it conveys a sense of internalising, and that's very apt, for remembering touches something within us; it affects us because it is about us. Sometimes, remembering takes courage and perseverance. Sometimes, remembering is an obligation – one which is imposed upon us by the desire for justice and truth in place of guilt and failure.

Seventy years after the death of my uncle Benjamin Traub, my abstract awareness of his fate was transformed – by an external influence – into tangible recollection: recollection of his life and his suffering. Inspired by the “Stolpersteine” project, I spent two years searching for traces of Benjamin: in photo albums, in diaries, in archives, in personal and public documents, and in conversations. At the end of this memory work, I had gathered experiences and insights, but also questions, about my family and about our country. It changed my life.

“For human beings,”

Hannah Arendt wrote,

“thinking of past matters means moving in the dimension of depth, striking roots and thus stabilizing themselves, so as not to be swept away by whatever may occur – the *Zeitgeist* or History or simple temptation.”

Benjamin Traub, my father’s youngest brother, was born on 25 November 1914 in Mülheim an der Ruhr. He was a friendly, intelligent and musically gifted child. Beni, as the family called him, was a good student, involved in the parish and popular with neighbours, friends and acquaintances. To become a musician – that was Beni’s ambition. But in 1931, while chopping logs, he injured his hand with an axe: instead of splitting the wood, the blade severed part of his finger. As a result of this deeply traumatising experience, Beni suffered a breakdown. Soon, his family was only able to cope with his attempted suicides and emotional outbursts with the help of psychiatrists. In August 1931, Beni was diagnosed with “juvenile schizophrenia” and was sent to the asylum in Bedburg-Hau on the Lower Rhine.

Benjamin’s illness occurred at a turbulent time in German political history, which culminated in the election of Adolf Hitler as Reichskanzler, marking the start of National Socialist rule. By 1 January 1934, Hitler’s racist ideology of “hereditary health in the service of racial purity” had become law. Its purpose was to utilise “modern medicine [...] as a means of ensuring that anything that was apparently sick and genetically impaired, and therefore a continued burden, was declared unfit to reproduce, enabling appropriate practical action to be taken.”

In 1939, Hitler informed Karl Brandt, the Reich Commissioner for Health and Sanitation, that he now wished “to implement a specific solution in the matter of euthanasia”. This so-called solution extended “the powers of designated medical practitioners [...] so that persons who, as far as one can judge, are incurably sick [could], following a critical assessment of their condition, be granted a merciful death.”

From 1939, "Aktion T4" organised the mass murder of people with physical or mental disabilities or mental illness. The murders were carried out at six killing centres across the Reich. A mass propaganda campaign was launched to persuade public opinion that these sick people were depriving the state and society of economic resources that were urgently required for other purposes. They were termed "dead weight existences" – "life unworthy of life".

In line with the T4 criteria, my uncle was one of the patients destined for selection and deportation to a killing centre. On 13 March 1940, along with 60 other male patients, he was taken in a special compartment of the German Reichsbahn from Bedburg-Hau to the mental hospital at Weilmünster in Hesse. Weilmünster was a transit institution for Hadamar Euthanasia Centre. For one year to the day, Benjamin lived and worked at this institution, which was more like a foretaste of hell than a psychiatric hospital.

13 March 1941: For 64 patients at Weilmünster "hospital", this is the last day of their lives. All the possible reasons for excluding them from the death list now count for nothing. T4's machinery of murder is nearing its political goal: "Elimination for the sake of racial hygiene." Even this final stage in the destruction of "life unworthy of life" is organised down to the very last detail by T4's masterminds. "Death comes as a master from Germany," Paul Celan writes in his *Fugue of Death* in 1952. And *this* death comes in a very particular form.

In the yard at Weilmünster, grey buses are lined up waiting. They come from "Gemeinnütziger Krankentransport GmbH". This supposed "charitable ambulance service" is in fact a sub-division of T4, sent to collect the candidates for death. And as the institution's director later admits in his statement, these same people are happy at the thought of an outing. In fact, they even invite him to board the bus and join them for the day. Meanwhile, at Hadamar, everything has been prepared for the new arrivals. Unimaginable to us, and yet for the trained staff at the so-called "Charitable Foundation

for Institutional Care”, this is just a “normal” working day: a mass destruction routine – 60 patients every day. And it has been going on for months.

Benjamin and his fellow patients board the buses at Weilmünster, unaware of the fate that awaits them. They travel westwards for around 30 kilometres through the rolling landscape of the Taunus. After an hour or so, they reach Hadamar. The buses drive into the Centre’s cavernous garage and come to a standstill. The gates are shut behind them. And now at last, out of sight, the passengers are allowed to alight. The entrance is guarded: there is no escape. From the garage, they are taken along a passageway, built specifically for this purpose, which leads directly into the main building.

There, they undergo an initial examination. They are told to undress. A doctor arrives and gives them tranquillisers. Their patient records are checked, photos and notes are taken – the usual institutional procedure, or so it seems. Only the notes reveal what is really going on here: a fabricated diagnosis of a fatal illness for the death certificate that can be explained by the patient’s records; and notes drawing attention to gold teeth and diseases of so-called “scientific” interest.

The physical examination is over. All they need to do now, before they get dressed, is to take a shower. “Nurses and carers” usher the group down a dark, narrow staircase into the cellar, to a shower room, a white-tiled chamber around three by five metres in size.

Benjamin finds himself crushed into a tiny space alongside 63 other naked men. The doors are locked behind them. What thoughts will have crossed their minds as they stood there, captive? Do they feel fear, or panic? What can they hear? What can they smell? Who are the people pressed in beside them?

They have very little time to react.

The duty doctor, Günther Hennecke, opens the valve on the gas cylinder that has been placed ready just outside the room. Carbon monoxide is pumped into the “shower room” through a water pipe that has been modified specifically for this purpose.

Benjamin is overcome with nausea. He loses consciousness. A few minutes later, he and his 63 companions in suffering are dead – killed by the poisonous gas. The staff watch the process of mass murder through a spy hole. They later record what they see:

“I watched through the spyhole. After a minute or so, people collapsed or lay down on the benches. No one made a scene or caused any trouble. We left it another five minutes and then we ventilated the room.”

The “technical staff” now set about dragging the bodies out of the gas chamber. They are taken to a dissection room, where, after reference to the notes, the gold teeth are extracted from their owners and the brain is removed from so-called “cases of scientific interest”.

Meanwhile, the “stokers” – the men who operate the two incinerators at the Hadamar crematorium – have started work.

Hubert Gomerski, a “stoker”, first at Hadamar and then at Sobibor death camp for Jews, recalled during his interrogation in February 1947:

“Then I helped to burn the corpses. [...] There were around 40 to 60. They were loaded on a metal stretcher and taken to the incinerators. It took around 30 to 40 minutes to burn a body. People worked day and night until the corpses were gone.”

Benjamin's lifeless body is among those dragged out of the gas chamber and into the crematorium and burnt on 13 March 1941.

Between January and August 1941, the T4 programme of organised mass murder gassed 10,113 men, women and children in the cellar of death at Hadamar and burned their bodies in the crematorium's two incinerators.

For a full six months, a pall of black smoke rose from the crematorium at the killing centre on Mönchberg – clearly visible from the town.