



RELOADED Disability Studies Quarterly

Fall 2007, Volume 27, No.4

<www.dsqsds.org>

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Cultural Commentary: "Transferred to an unknown location..."

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I spent the summer haunted by a vanished population of people with disabilities. My encounter with these lost people was, as such relationships always are, elegiac and unsettling. I met these people, so to speak, through the traces left of them in the material world. Their remnants, like that of so many disabled people, are found in medical records. Traces of these people probably remain as well in memories and stories passed down within their families, where they are others, brothers, or aunts rather than schizophrenic, feeble-minded, or epileptic patients. But people like me do not have access to such family archives of memory. This is partly due to the closely guarded identities of these lost, persecuted people, stigmatized in life and in death by long-held and pervasive discriminatory attitudes about disability.

The lost people I encountered this summer are a small sampling of the several hundred thousand people with disabilities murdered between 1939 and 1945 by the Nazi program of extermination against people with disabilities. About 50 of these people came to me in the crumbling, yellowing, intricate files in the Bundesarchiv (German National Archives) in Berlin. A few more I found in the research archives at Hadamar Memorial, one of the six killing centers the Nazis established at inpatient medical care facilities within Germany in 1939. Hadamar is to this day a working care facility for people with psychiatric disabilities and a secure penal facility for psychiatric prisoners. In the basement of this active institution is a memorial to the people killed there. The memorial is crafted from the rooms through which thousands of people passed from life to death, including one room that is the prototype Nazi gas chamber with a fake showerheads and the tiled walls that lulled victims into believing they were being disinfected before a medical examination.

The terrible history of this attempt to exterminate the entire population of what the

Nazis termed "life unworthy of life" is documented by several well researched scholarly accounts, almost all of which focus on the individual perpetrators, the people with the power and status to enact these communal crimes. As with the mass graves to which the ashes of these disabled people were consigned, the victims remain an undifferentiated mass in the official history. They are nameless numbers, faceless multitudes, their individual terror and suffering unspoken and unwitnessed. What the medical records I studied yield is the people, one by one. Like penitents, they emerge gradually from these files, obscured at first by diagnostic categories, official documents stamped with the lurid Nazi swastika, and narratives of pathology.

Human details lie just beneath the documentation of illness. A copy of a frantic exchange of letters between the authorities and the anxious mother of an institutionalized and adored daughter are neatly typed in one folder. I find a dispassionate report about the incapacitating terrors that keep a World War One veteran from being able to work. The files document incontinence, hallucinations, confusion, seizures, abuse, criminality, unruliness, detachment, illness, desperation, and cheerfulness.

I must convert the medical documentation of these human ways of being through an act of willful empathetic imagination in order for the people beneath these files to come to me. Many of the files contain one particular document that vividly witnesses the humanity of these murdered disabled people: their photograph. The pictures are medical mugshots, their heads clamped motionless by a metal brace. Unposed and unprepared, most of the faces are disheveled, vacant, bewildered, or terrified. What is disturbing about these portraits is the absence of conscious self-presentation, which is perhaps the most salient quality of what we expect to see in a person's photographic portrait. The medical specimen masks the human being. Nonetheless, beneath the disconcerting expressionlessness, I can glimpse a mother, a friend, a child, a lover — someone like me and the people I love.

Taken together, these medical files document the formation of a community of people who began with no connection to one another, people who had ordinary lives embedded in far-flung and diverse networks of connections. The apparatuses of medicalization inexorably drew them together, first in myriad local institutions all around Germany. Starting in 1939 the Nazis brought them together into a community, not only by labeling them Minderwertig (Inferior), Erbkrank (Hereditarily Sick), Unheilbar (Incurable), but by transporting them in a convergence of their destinies into the tiled gas chambers of the six killing centers. Each medical file I studied traces this individual journey from ordinary citizen to life unworthy of life. Each file begins with a different place and time but ends somewhere between September 1939 and 1941 in precisely the same way: with the quickly scrawled or stamped final entry that reads "transferred to an unknown location." This seemingly innocuous bureaucratic record is code for "murdered."

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