

„Psychiatry in National Socialism – Commemoration and Responsibility –“

Excerpts of the speech of Prof. Dr. Dr. Frank Schneider, president of the German psychiatric association (DGPPN) and congress president, held on 26 Nov 2010 at the DGPPN Congress in Berlin:

Ladies and Gentlemen,

in the era of National Socialism psychiatrists have condemned people, have betrayed the patients entrusted to them in their trust and lied to them, stalled the relatives, let patients forced-sterilize and kill, and have killed personally as well. Injustifiable research was done on patients, research that damaged or even killed patients.

Why did we take so long to face these facts openly deal with this part of our history? On one side we are proud that the DGPPN counts to the oldest scientific medical associations of the world. On the other side far too long an important part of the history of this association has been blanked out, repressed. For this we are ashamed.

We are also ashamed because we, the German psychiatric association, not even stood on the side of the victims in the time after 1945. Even worse: We had our share in their anew discrimination and disadvantage. We are still missing the words, why an event like this has been only possible today.

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But this is not all: Independently of the research results, which we expect in the next years, I have to – late enough – ask for forgiveness at all victims and relatives for the suffered injustice and suffering, which has been done to them by German associations and their psychiatrists.

The German Association for Psychiatry, Psychotherapy and Neurology has decided to hold this commemorative event to set a clear sign, carried by the will to recognize the victims and stand at their side, to confess to the own history, and to learn from the past.

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Psychiatry was seducible and has seduced, has healed and devastated. It did not feel obligated to the single individual any more, but has ... mistreated and killed people by the masses – and has pushed disagreeable colleagues out of their offices.

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On 14 July 1933, only shortly after Hitler's „takeover“, so called by the NSDAP, the „Law for the Prevention of inherited sick Offspring“ was passed. Psychiatrist Ernst Rüdin, president of the psychiatric association in the years 1935-1945, then director of the German Research Institute for Psychiatry, co-authored the official comment to this law.

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All medical doctors were obligated to report these so-called „inherited sick“ to the authorities. Based on this law over 360,000 people were selected by medics and forced-sterilized. Over 6,000 died in these interventions.

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As president of our predecessor organization, Ernst Rüdin has argued several times for this [forced sterilization] at openings of the annual conventions of the GDPN [Association of German Neurologists and Psychiatrists].

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But there were not only forced sterilizations, there were also killings. ... It was a psychiatrist, Alfred Erich Hoche, who coined, in his 1920 book on the approval of the extermination of „life unworthy of living“, together with the jurist Karl Binding the term „ballast existence“ and who set up a catalogue of allegedly incurable mental illnesses, which he called „conditions of mental death“. In 1930 this became in the monthly national socialist magazines the demand: „Death to the life unworthy of living!“

Dated back to ... 1 Sept. 1939 Hitler commanded the so-called „Euthanasia“ action. As the medical director of this later called „Action T4“ was determined a psychiatrist and neurologist, the Würzburg ordinary professor Werner Heyde. At least 250,000 to 300,000 mentally and physically ill people became a victim of this action and of the following phases of killing of the ill after its official end, by the end of the war – and some weeks beyond.

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At the place of the former [T4] headquarters today is only an unimpressive commemorative plate in the surface of the ground, for the „Euthanasia“ victims, and a sculpture that has only afterwards been dedicated to the victims. There is still no central, national memorial for the victims of the so-called „Euthanasia“. This is not only for the survivors and their relatives an expression of continued repression and degradation, it is also a blind spot in the memory of our country and of German psychiatry. As a professional association we will support the current initiative for establishing an adequate national „T4“ memorial and information site.

Fifty chosen experts, among these renowned psychiatrists at their time, evaluated the report forms that were turned in by the psychiatrists of the clinics, selected and decided over life and death. Among these experts were also Werner Villinger, Friedrich Mauz and Friedrich Panse, three of the post-war presidents of our association. Friedrich Mauz and Friedrich Panse became later even honorary members of our society. Though every honorary membership of the DGPPN ends with the death of the honored person, we today condemn these honorary memberships and will also formally cancel them.

With grey busses, the pictorial symbol for the killing, patients were picked up from the mental and nursing institutions and brought to six psychiatric institutions, in which gas chambers had been established. Mental institutions became extermination institutions. Healing became extermination – and psychiatrists supervised the transport and the killing of the patients they were entrusted with. The six institutions were in the sequence of their establishment: Grafeneck, Brandenburg, Hartheim, Pirna-Sonnenstein, Bernburg and Hadamar.

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