

The death of a hospital: The Kraków Psychiatric Institute under German occupation

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Summary

The Nazi ideology considered mentally or physically impaired people to be useless individuals, “life not worth living” and a burden to the society. As the war approached the German Government took steps to rid the State of the burden and free the facilities for war-related use.

In August 1939 8 000 physically or mentally handicapped children were exterminated. Over 70 000 psychiatric patients were sent to converted mental hospitals, gassed and cremated between October 1939 and August 1941 (“Aktion T4”).

The systematic extermination continued in occupied Poland (Aktion Brandt). The German administrator of The Babiński psychiatric hospital in Kobierzyn, Kraków, exterminated hundreds of patients by starving them systematically. In August 1941, 91 Jewish patients were transported from Kobierzyn to Zofiówka, Jewish Psychiatric Hospital in Otwock near Warsaw. Subsequently they were sent to Treblinka camp and murdered together with most of the staff. The remaining patients in Kobierzyn were either shot or deported to Auschwitz in June 1942 and killed there.

The Babiński Hospital in Kobierzyn re-opened after the war; Zofiówka is abandoned but plans are made to turn it into a memorial center.

Introduction “Aktion T4”

In order to understand the fate of the of the Polish psychiatric hospitals under German rule one has to describe the attitude behind Nazi ideology toward congenitally disabled individuals and those suffering from conditions which were presumed to be genetically determined such as psychiatric illnesses. Such individuals were considered blemishes on the purity of the superior German race, useless for the struggle to assure German domination and a burden on the society. (The fact that Josef Goebbels himself was afflicted by a club-foot was conveniently overlooked). This attitude found its most extreme expression in the decision to rid the state of such “superfluous” citizens.

The extermination of psychiatric patients in Nazi Germany began in August 1939 when nearly 8000 children up to the age of three, born with physical or mental disabilities were systematically murdered. It was, however, only in October 1939 that Hitler issued a directive ordering the registration and eventual extermination of per-

sons whose lives were deemed “unfit to live” (“lebensunwertiges Leben”). According to some sources, his decision was prompted by a letter from the father of a severely disabled, probably retarded child, asking for permission to terminate the child’s life. The idea was not entirely new, however, since Hitler had already suggested in “mein Kampf” (p. 282) and at a Party meeting in 1939 that people born with incurable defects should be eliminated to free the society from such burden and he suggested that 70 000 such individuals “be disposed of” [1, 2]. Moreover, legislation to “protect the purity of the race from inherited diseases” was initiated already in 1933 and led to the forced sterilization of some 350 000 individuals.

The directive was backdated Sept. 1, to make it coincide with the outbreak of the war, and make it appear somehow as part of the supreme war effort. It was accompanied by intense propaganda in favour of “mercy killing”. Nevertheless, the program was carefully concealed from public eye and every person participating in it was sworn to secrecy. The reason was, among others, that under the law of the Third Reich killing people only because their lives were considered “unworthy” was murder.

Phillip Bouhler, chief of Hitler’s Chancellery (Prime Minister’s office), and Dr. Karl Brandt, Hitler’s personal physician, were appointed lead this operation. In a strange perversion of medical ethics, Brandt insisted that the killings be implemented only by or under direct supervision of a qualified physician. A number of prominent German psychiatrists joined the commission that drew the guidelines for extermination. Emphasis was placed not only on medical diagnosis and prognosis but also on employability and confidentiality (i.e. frequency of family visits).

The program was code named “Aktion T4” after the address of its headquarters, in Tiergartenstrasse No 4 in Berlin. It was carefully planned and divided into four phases:

- Preparation of the data base, i.e. registration of all psychiatric patients, including patients suffering from epilepsy, alcoholism, mental retardation, or “incurable social misfits” (mainly opponents of the government). Emphasis was placed on employment and family ties.
- Organization of transport
- Selection and preparation of the facilities (six in number), construction of gas chambers using carbon monoxide, and crematoria, as well as
- Selection of several “intermediate” large hospitals to serve as assembly centres and location for final decision as to placement on the death list. The main criterion for being spared or murdered was the economic usefulness of the patient. Jewish patients were automatically placed on the death list, other criteria notwithstanding. The actual implementation of the mass murder. The patients were told they were being transferred to a better hospital, loaded on converted postal buses and brought to a facility equipped with gas chambers disguised as showers, gassed with carbon monoxide and cremated. The families were informed that the patient died of “natural” causes.

It is important to note that the purpose of the extermination was not to protect the “pure” race from being “contaminated” by inheritable defects. Most of those patients had already been forcibly sterilized anyway. It was a cynical wish to get the state rid of unproductive citizens and to free some hospital beds for war casualties.

In a document found by the Allied troops an official named E. Brandt describes the accomplishments of the “Aktion” and calculates that murdering 70 273 patients saved the German government, over 10 years, 33 731 040 eggs, a saving of 3 710 414 German marks and 40 pfennings. Brandt calculated also the “savings” in vegetables and other provisions.

“Aktion T4” was terminated in 1940, allegedly because Hitler became concerned that rumours were leaking out and reaching members of the Wehrmacht. More likely, it was terminated when it reached the goal of 70 000 killings. About 100 Aktion T4 members were transferred to occupied Poland to assist in the extermination of psychiatric patients (“Aktion Brandt”) and run the death camps (“Aktion Rheinhard”). Three of them, Wirth, Stangl and Eberl, were the first commanders of Bełżec, Sobibor and Treblinka respectively.

Brandt was sent to the Eastern front to inspect the care of wounded soldiers and, going beyond his duties, he proved himself a skilful and dedicated surgeon. He was later assigned to concentration camps to assist with further exterminations. In the last days of the war he ran afoul of Hitler’s wrath and had to flee for his life. He was eventually apprehended by the Allies, put on trial in Nurnberg and hanged. Bouhler and his wife committed suicide in Emmerich to avoid capture.

The killing of patients, however, went on after the official termination of the program in 1940. In Germany many doctors were so identified with the goal of eliminating “undesirables” that they continued to kill individual patients, by starvation or lethal injections. Some of them were put on trial by the German authorities after the war but most managed to avoid prosecution [3, 4].

Extermination under occupation: the death of the Kraków Psychiatric Institute “Aktion T4” was terminated officially but in reality it continued in occupied Poland. The occupation authorities decided to shut down all psychiatric hospitals and put the facilities to a more “productive” use. That fate was also to befall the Kraków Psychiatric Institute, generally known as the Kobierzyn Hospital and re-named today the J. Babiński Hospital [5].

The extermination of the Kobierzyn hospital patients was implemented systematically by the German administration in three phases: starvation, deportation of Jewish patients and finally mass murder. There were more than 1000 patients in the hospital when the war broke out, living in 17 buildings. Medical staff was composed of 6 physicians, 3 graduates of medical school and 308 persons of additional staff. The German Army invaded the hospital on the 6th of September 1939 and left after two days, taking with them most of the office equipment and part of the medicines and health products from the pharmacy. The hospital was left to its own devices and carried on its activities as a self-supporting institution. There was no funding by the authorities, no coverage for treatment expenses or food re-supply. The team managed to provide the patients with the most urgent needs, thanks to thrifty management and dedication. The German authorities paid no attention to the hospital until November 20 of 1939, when Dr. Giller, the German director of St. Lazarus Hospital in Kraków came for one day, took over formally the control of the hospital, reviewed the Arian state of the employees and expelled one physician who did not meet the racial criteria. The identity of that

physician and his fate are not mentioned by Dr. Władysław Issajewicz, the hospital director, who described the history of German occupation [5]. The Germans expressed admiration for the Institute from the beginning and regretted “that it served such a non-productive” purpose as the care for the mentally ill. Dr. Issajewicz, the director of the hospital before the war, retained the responsibility for the medical care, the personnel remained and the life in the Institute did not change greatly. By the end of 1940 food stocked up in the hospital was used up, and hunger began to affect the patients. In May 1940 the Germans appointed a merchant named Zweck to be the administrator. He was replaced in November of the same year by an official from the Department of Health in Warsaw (“Gesundheitswesen”), named Alexander Kroll. Some witnesses refer to him as “Dr. Kroll” but apparently he was no physician, since the Medical Director of the Hospital, Dr. Issajewicz, continued to supervise the medical care of the patients. Nevertheless, Kroll took steps to liquidate the hospital and he did so by systematically starving the patients. Patients were fed mainly potatoes and cabbage. Till spring 1941 they received 100 gr. of horsemeat or beef three times a week, and from time to time an egg. The total daily ration of fat for over 1200 people was only 5-6 kg. The bread rations were reduced to 75 grams per day for Arians and 60 for Jewish patients. The total calories per day were 1200 for working patients and 1000 or less for not working ones. As a result, the number of patients was decreasing rapidly, in spite of continuing admissions. According to the hospital chaplain office, 957 patients died between the beginning of the war until the 17th of June 1942. The figures do not include Jews, as the chaplain kept a record only of Christian patients.

In August 1941 Kroll gave an order to prepare a list of all Jewish patients. They were taken by train to the Jewish psychiatric hospital Zofiówka which formed part of the ghetto of Otwock, near Warsaw. There were two transports: On September 8, 41 women patients were transferred and on Sept. 11, 50 more patients, mostly men, were deported. They were accompanied by one physician and by nursing staff from Kobierzyn.

In Otwock they were met by SS-men, accompanied by Jewish policemen, and taken to Zofiówka. Only 3 or 4 Jewish patients who were already dying were left in Kobierzyn.

Zofiówka was at that time a well-equipped and well-staffed, modern hospital, directed by Dr. Stefan Miller [6]. His wife, Irena, also worked at the hospital, as did six other Jewish doctors. There was, however, a desperate shortage of funds and supplies and patients began to die of starvation. To improve the situation, Dr. Miller opened a club and a rest home for wealthy Jews from the Warsaw and Radom ghettos.

In August 1942, a year after the transfer of the Jewish patients from Kobierzyn, the Germans began the liquidation of the Otwock ghetto. A Polish policeman, Pietras, warned Dr. Miller the day before. Dr. Miller ordered all hospital doors to be opened and told the patients and the staff to try to save themselves. About one hundred patients were shot on the hospital grounds. The Germans shot about 3000 people hiding in the ghetto and the rest, about 7000, including patients and staff of Zofiówka, were transported to Treblinka and murdered there.

Dr. Miller and his wife escaped to Mińsk Mazowiecki and apparently committed suicide there. The Zofiówka campus was taken over by SS-men and a contingent of Jewish policemen. The Germans intended it to become an institution for German war orphans, but the plan never materialized. Today, it stands abandoned but hopefully it will be restored and converted into a memorial facility.

In the meantime, Kobierzyn was also the target of Aktion Brandt, i.e. the “clearing out” of psychiatric hospitals. According to Dr. Issajewicz’s report, the Germans were looking for “a better use” of the Institute’s facilities. In May 1942 the Nazi Party took over the place and proceeded to liquidate the hospital and transform it into a training camp for youth. On June the 18th 1942 Dr. Issajewicz was ordered to move to Drewnica near Warsaw within 3 days. He and his colleagues were not allowed to enter the wards anymore. They were told that the care of the remaining patients would be assumed by German physicians. On June 22 the chaplain and the sisters were removed. On June 23 the German personnel, under the supervision of Dr. Werner Beck, a forensic pathologist, began to transport the patients to the railway station by automobiles and no employees or members of their family were allowed to leave their quarters. The patients that were too weak to be moved (about 30 from the nursing and infectious units) were killed on the spot. Their bodies were buried the same evening in a common grave at the hospital cemetery. Twenty five Jewish men from nearby Skawina ghetto were brought in to dig the grave, then murdered on the spot and buried on top of the patients in the common grave. The Germans never managed to make much use of the Kobierzyn facility as they hoped.

The Kraków Psychiatric Institute refused to die. Reopened after the war and renamed the J. Babiński Hospital, it is a modern, exemplary facility serving the community of Kraków and its district.

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