

# Reverberations of Nazi Violence in Germany and Beyond



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Disturbing Pasts

Edited by  
Stephanie Bird, Mary Fulbrook, Julia Wagner  
and Christiane Wienand

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## Autobiography, Moral Witnessing and the Disturbing Memory of Nazi Euthanasia

Susanne C. Knittel

In the decades after the Second World War, jokes featuring the figure of Blumepeter (flower-Peter) enjoyed great popularity in the southwestern German city of Mannheim. In these jokes, Blumepeter appears as a 'wise fool' who demonstrates the arbitrariness of social rules and laws. The humour surrounding Blumepeter is inherently anecdotal, often based on physical comedy, and usually follows the same pattern: Blumepeter is discovered performing some idiosyncratic or subversive act, for example illegally fishing in the Neckar river, is then accosted by one of the locals, for example a policeman who wants to give him a fine, upon which he provides a humorous punch-line, always in dialect, that gets him out of the situation and makes the others look silly, such as: 'Isch duh jo gar net fische, isch will bloß moin Worm baade!' [But I'm not fishing at all, I'm just giving my worm a bath!].<sup>1</sup> The somewhat naïve and clumsy but forthright Blumepeter has become a Mannheim legend and a symbol of the locals' character. To this day, countless jokes and prank stories about him circulate, particularly during *Fastnacht* [shrovetide]. In the late 1960s, Blumepeter was at the centre of a publicity campaign organized by the local newspaper *Mannheimer Morgen*. It was in this context that, in 1967, a Blumepeter monument was installed in the city centre and the first annual Blumepeterfest, a town fair, was held. Three years later, in 1970, the Bloomaulorden, a medal of honour in recognition of extraordinary achievements by citizens of Mannheim was awarded for the first time. The medal's name derives from a local term of abuse, *Bloomaul*, roughly equivalent to 'blowhard', that is, a boaster, who, in this instance, always gets the last word.<sup>2</sup> The medal bears the image of Blumepeter as the emblematic Mannheim *Bloomaul*.

Blumepeter's real name was Peter Schäfer. Born in 1875 in a small town near Mannheim, he suffered from congenital hypothyroidism, also called cretinism. Even as an adult he was diminutive and misshapen; he never went to school or learned a trade, and instead eked out a living selling flowers on the street and in bars around Mannheim, which earned him the nickname Blumepeter. The historian Eberhard Reuß has meticulously researched Schäfer's life, which has very little to do with the

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legends surrounding his witty and irreverent alter ego Blumepeter. Initially tolerated in Mannheim as a sort of clown or mascot, Schäfer was made fun of and put on display, especially during carnival, but once his disability became uncomfortable and he began to engage in obscene behaviour, he was locked away in a psychiatric institution where he remained until his death in 1940. Official records suggest that Schäfer died of cardiac arrest, which may or may not be true,<sup>3</sup> but in any case he would have been scheduled for transfer to the Nazi euthanasia killing centre at Grafeneck, where he would have been killed along with more than 10,500 victims of the 'Aktion T4'.

Tellingly, this aspect of Schäfer's biography does not form part of the popular legend of Blumepeter. This can be clearly seen in the local media coverage of the inauguration of the monument in 1967. These reports exhibit a complete lack of interest in or knowledge of the historical figure of Peter Schäfer, suggesting that the true aim of the monument to Blumepeter has very little to do with the actual human being and quite a lot to do with a self-congratulatory performance of the ostensibly non-conformist and hence humane identity of the Mannheimers. This becomes especially clear in the following quote from the *Abendschau*, a nightly television news programme broadcast on the Süddeutscher Rundfunk (SDR): 'The flashes of wit that have been ascribed to the little flower seller prove that even someone who is poor in intellect can be lifted up by the voice of the people and placed on a pedestal.'<sup>4</sup> Here we can see how the commemoration of Blumepeter simultaneously constitutes an act of forgetting. In casting Schäfer as the embodiment of the subversive and anti-authoritarian voice of the people, these stories obscure the fact that he was an individual who lived and died at a specific time in German history and that his death is intimately bound up with the difficult and troubling legacy of discrimination, exclusion and murder of people with disabilities and mental illnesses. Moreover, the legend of Blumepeter also obscures the city's complicity in his death. The *Abendschau* quote is an example of a kind of self-stylization that goes along with placing the weakest in society on a pedestal, which has the conscious or unconscious effect of absolving one of wrongdoing, when in fact it was also the 'voice of the people' that denounced Schäfer in the first place.

Among the victims of Nazi euthanasia, Schäfer is unique in that he has been afforded any form of public commemoration, but this memory has been purged of almost everything relating to Schäfer himself, most importantly the circumstances of his death. Blumepeter is not remembered as a victim of the Nazi euthanasia programme. Thus, the public narrative that survives is essentially a fabrication. Moreover, through this false memorialization, Schäfer's own voice has been silenced – bitterly ironic, given that he is remembered as someone who always had the last word. As Reuß rightly observes, 'the case of Peter Schäfer is symptomatic of our way of dealing with our guilty conscience and the discomfort we feel in the face of our own history.'<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the mechanisms of silencing and repression that have defined the commemoration of Blumepeter are paradigmatic of the memory of Nazi euthanasia as a whole. In the landscape of German post-war memory, Nazi euthanasia stands out as particularly disturbing, in large part because of the uncomfortable fact that the prejudices that gave rise to it have not gone away. The systematic elimination of people with supposedly hereditary cognitive disabilities and mental illnesses has traditionally not formed part of the discourse and memory of the Nazi crimes, even though it was part and parcel of



the Nazis' plan to 'cleanse' the German race once and for all of all its social, racial and cultural 'ballast'.

There are a number of different yet interrelated reasons for this omission. On the one hand, the almost total lack of survivors has meant that there was hardly any witness testimony to draw public attention to these crimes, and moreover, the victims bore the stigma of mental illness, which served to disqualify them from testifying to these crimes,<sup>6</sup> and made their relatives and descendants reluctant to speak out, for fear of drawing this stigma upon themselves.<sup>7</sup> In general, people with disabilities or mental illnesses have not been seen as agents of memory. More problematic still is the lingering assumption that in contrast to the racially and politically motivated persecution of Jews, Sinti, Roma, and other minorities, the policies behind the euthanasia programme were in some way medically justifiable. According to this logic, people like Peter Schäfer were victims first and foremost of their disability and only secondarily of the Nazi regime. This uncritical and usually unacknowledged assumption tacitly affirms the eugenicist logic at the heart of the euthanasia programme itself, namely by viewing impairment, disability and 'abnormality' as something that needs to be cured or eradicated rather than accommodated. To a significant extent, the estimation of a person's value to society still hinges on his or her ability to be assimilable and productive, in a socio-economic sense above all, and that thus the difference between society's attitudes towards people with disabilities then and now is ultimately one of degree, not of kind.

The memory of Nazi euthanasia is disturbing precisely in the triple sense under discussion in this volume: firstly, it forces us to confront our ambivalent relationship to disability and mental illness and to recognize continuities between Nazi eugenic thinking and contemporary attitudes; secondly, by placing the Holocaust in the broader context of the international eugenics movement, it disturbs the established notion that it was a predominantly Jewish catastrophe and our preconceived ideas about who its victims were; and thirdly, it disturbs the assumptions and methodologies underlying the field of memory studies (mainly the reliance on survivor testimony). The way that this past intrudes on the present, rendering familiar concepts and practices strange, contributes to making the memory of Nazi euthanasia a salient example of what I have elsewhere termed the historical uncanny.<sup>8</sup>

In what follows, I will illustrate these three aspects of the disturbing memory of Nazi euthanasia by analysing some of the few existing testimonies, written by people who were confined to psychiatric institutions, subjected to racial hygienic policies such as coercive sterilization, or witnessed the deportations of their fellow patients. These testimonies are important first and foremost because they allow the victims' own voices to be heard. I will focus on three texts in particular, each of which illustrates a different facet of the Nazi treatment of people with supposedly hereditary illnesses: firstly, coercive sterilization, as represented in *Ich, die Steri*, written by Elisabeth Claasen; secondly, life at a Nazi *Kindererziehungsheim* (reform school) and children's euthanasia in Vienna, as described by Alois Kaufmann in his autobiography *Totenwagen. Kindheit am Spiegelgrund* [Death Cart: Childhood in *Spiegelgrund*]; and thirdly, life at a psychiatric institution and the miraculous escape from death in the gas chamber at the Brandenburg euthanasia killing centre, as related by Elvira Manthey (née Hempel) in her book *Die Humpelsche. Das Schicksal eines deutschen Kindes, das 1940 vor der*

*Gaskammer umkehren durfte* [The Hempel Girl: The Fate of a German Child Who Was Allowed to Turn Away from the Gas Chamber in 1940].<sup>9</sup> All three texts not only give insight into the discriminatory attitudes of the general public towards people who did not conform to society's standards and expectations, but also present unique accounts of the inhuman conditions in German institutions in the 1930s and 1940s and the interconnection between racial and social persecution. Moreover, their authors relate their continuing struggle against discrimination and stigmatization, which is mirrored in the publishing and reception history of their books: each of these texts was initially self-published, and it took several decades until two of them found a publisher – Manthey never did. Kaufmann's autobiography is the only one still in print, in a version that was edited by the poet Mechthild Podzeit-Lütjen and furnished with an afterword by the historian Peter Malina. In spite of their status as unique testimonies, these texts have so far been largely ignored by scholars and the broader public. This chapter represents a first step towards filling this gap. Before turning to these texts, I will briefly sketch the historical background for the Nazi euthanasia programme and the repression of its memory after the war.

### The social question

The question of what to do with those perceived as weak, sick, unproductive and unassimilable, in short, with everybody who was different and unwilling or unable to work or contribute to society in a useful way, was not unique to Nazi Germany. The 'social question' is a key feature of modernity and continues to pre-occupy societies today. The 'final solution' to this problem, as elaborated by the Nazis, was no doubt the most radical and totalizing approach, but that doesn't mean that the ideas were entirely unprecedented or that the fundamental question disappeared with the downfall of the Third Reich. It is crucial to see the Nazi euthanasia programme as part of a trajectory that partakes of the theory of eugenics, and thus has its scientific roots in the nineteenth century, and that continues, albeit in a different guise, to this day.

The nineteenth century marked a radical shift towards the medicalization of the social question. Advances in medical science and the growing confidence in medicine's ability to cure illnesses of all sorts led to the creation of a complementary category for people with 'incurable illnesses'. Since there was no hope of reintroducing such people into the workforce, the legislature in Germany and elsewhere began to discuss the possibility of passing laws regarding sterilization and the legalization of suicide and mercy killing. The first draft of a sterilization law was debated in Germany as early as 1914, but the outbreak of the war prevented its ratification. Five more drafts followed before the Nazi law in 1933.<sup>10</sup> In the meantime, as a result of the general food shortage during the First World War, a different 'solution' to the social question presented itself: rations for patients of mental institutions and asylums were lowered to such an extent that the death rate was as high then as during the Nazi euthanasia programme.<sup>11</sup> Such a politics of planned starvation would be one of the key factors in the Nazi policy of eliminating the 'useless eaters' from society. From 1933 onwards, the Nazi politics of 'healing' the *Volkskörper* by excising the sick elements followed an increasingly

radicalized and accelerated trajectory that led in quick succession from coercive sterilization, marriage prohibition, to the gassing of people with 'hereditary' disabilities and illnesses at six killing centres in Germany and Austria between 1939 and 1941. During this centralized phase, known as the *Aktion T4*, about 5,000 children and more than 70,000 adults were killed.<sup>12</sup> After 1941, the killings continued in a decentralized manner, and over 200,000 people were killed by lethal injection or starvation at more than 100 institutions throughout Germany and Austria. The systematic killing of the ill and weak was extended to the occupied territories in France, Poland and Russia.<sup>13</sup> In all, approximately 300,000 people fell victim to Nazi euthanasia between 1939 and 1945.<sup>14</sup> Even after the end of the war, patients continued to die in large numbers from starvation. Meanwhile, the medical staff remained largely the same, indicating that neither the Allies nor the Germans felt the need to improve the conditions for these people.<sup>15</sup>

On the part of the medical professions in Germany and abroad, there was no soul-searching to speak of regarding the roots of the Nazi 'solution' to the social question. Instead, it was opportune to treat the Nazi regime and its medicine as an aberration and bracket it off from the larger social and cultural context.<sup>16</sup> This was further facilitated by the decision to exclude Nazi euthanasia from the purview of the Nuremberg trials, which served to reinforce the idea that these killings were not crimes against humanity but rather specifically medical issues, a distinction that was preserved in all subsequent trials. The absence or avoidance of a public engagement with the role played by the medical profession in the euthanasia crimes, coupled with the continuities of eugenic thinking and the medicalization of disability, hindered a proper politics of compensation. The victims of coercive sterilization and of the euthanasia programme were excluded from the 1953 Law for the Compensation of the Victims of National Socialist Persecution because they were not considered victims of this specific form of racial, religious, or political persecution. The victims themselves or their relatives and descendants were not consulted on this matter – evidently they were not considered legal subjects who could speak for themselves. Furthermore, when these victims tried to sue for compensation, the experts called upon to evaluate their claims were often the same doctors who had pronounced them deficient in the first place.<sup>17</sup> This discriminatory politics has only changed in the last decade, when steps were taken to grant these victims equal rights: the Nazi Sterilization Law from 1933 was officially declared unconstitutional in 2007 (!), and in 2011 financial compensation and official acknowledgement was finally granted to the victims.

## The memory of Nazi euthanasia

This belated granting of equal victim status coincided with a growing public profile of the euthanasia programme in German memory discourse and its recognition as a part of the Holocaust. A major milestone in this process of de-marginalization was the inauguration in September 2014 of a national memorial at Tiergartenstraße 4 in Berlin, the former headquarters of the euthanasia programme. While the past two decades had seen an increase in the attention towards this topic at the local and regional level,

mainly as a result of successful memory work at the sites of former killing centres, the more recent leap towards bringing the memory of Nazi euthanasia to a national and even international public was largely due to the work of memorial artists and authors.<sup>18</sup> Memorials such as Gunter Demnig's *Stolpersteine* [stumbling blocks] and Horst Hoheisel and Andreas Knitz's *Denkmal der Grauen Busse* [Monument of the Grey Buses] physically return the traces of Nazi euthanasia to public spaces, whereas writers such as Sigrid Falkenstein, Helga Schubert and Hans-Ulrich Dapp are above all concerned with recovering the names and stories of some of these forgotten victims. To meet the challenge of the overwhelming lack of first-hand documents of these victims, biographers have drawn on a variety of different literary genres, such as the biographical sketch or literary case history (psychopathography), for example, Reuß's biography of Peter Schäfer,<sup>19</sup> and family memoirs, written by descendants or relatives of victims.<sup>20</sup> There is also a set of more hybrid texts written by authors who have no direct connection to the victims and who approach the biographies more creatively or philosophically, reflecting on the process of reconstruction in a more overtly fictional and metafictional way and considering the victims' stories and the authors' own practice in the light of contemporary critical questions about autobiography, moral philosophy, psychoanalysis and social science.<sup>21</sup>

All of these authors have become advocates for the memory of the victims of Nazi euthanasia and have taken on the difficult task of witnessing on behalf of those whose voices are irrevocably lost. The act of bearing testimony by proxy, or vicarious witnessing, as I have called it, is a key issue and critical problem for memory studies.<sup>22</sup> While trying their utmost to reclaim the memory of these victims from the documents, the basic problem of these biographies remains: the victims cannot speak for themselves. All of these literary or documentary texts constitute, essentially, an act of speaking *for* the victims, which, ultimately, silences them yet again. By no means do I want to diminish the important recuperative work done by the vicarious witnesses – on the contrary, especially in the context of marginalized memories such as that of Nazi euthanasia, it is crucial that artistic, fictional, biographical, historical representation take place, particularly if it is forthright and self-conscious about its own limitations. But it is nevertheless notable that this recent wave of victim biographies has not resulted in a re-discovery of the small number of *autobiographies* written by victims of the Nazi euthanasia programme. To be sure, scholars working on the memory of Nazi euthanasia and sterilization have drawn on them as documentary sources or evidence,<sup>23</sup> but they do not discuss their status as works of testimonial literature: as self-conscious acts of representation that reflect on the difficulty of remembering and of bearing witness. A thoroughgoing study of these texts thus needs to address not only the facts of these victims' suffering, but also their status as 'moral witnesses', in Avishai Margalit's sense, namely as people who have experienced crimes against humanity first hand, and who feel a moral obligation to testify to these crimes, despite, or precisely because of the public's reluctance to hear their testimony.<sup>24</sup> Primo Levi, the paradigmatic moral witness, for example, was confronted with almost universal reluctance to publish his memoir *If This Is a Man*. This resistance becomes a facet of the testimony itself, which reflects explicitly on the difficulty of representation. Moral witnessing is hence always 'untimely', and directed at a 'moral community' to come or

existing 'in another place or another time [...] that will listen to their testimony'.<sup>25</sup> In the same way, the three authors I consider in this chapter, all of whom were excluded from their communities and singled out for persecution, direct their testimonies at just such a moral community. Concomitantly, each of them is highly aware of the fact that they are testifying also on behalf of the thousands of other victims who did not survive or who are either unwilling or unable to speak for themselves.

### Elisabeth Claasen: *Ich, die Steri*

Elisabeth Claasen's memoir, *Ich, die Steri*, is dominated by the loss of her family, which happened early in her life, and her unfulfilled longing to compensate for this loss by founding a family of her own. Her sterilization at the hands of the Nazi doctors is the axis around which her autobiography turns because this intervention foreclosed any possibility of continuing the family line. Claasen was born Elisabeth Herrmann in 1910 in Königsberg (now Kaliningrad). Her mother was a piano teacher, her father a shopkeeper. As Claasen describes it, the happiness and love she knew in childhood is disrupted by the death of her brother and, shortly thereafter, of both her parents. Her hopes of finding a husband are repeatedly dashed when the men she is interested in don't return her affection and instead marry friends of hers. Still single in her twenties, she begins to attract unwanted attention from older men. The loss of her family and her constant sense of rejection, coupled with her extreme poverty, hunger, and a thyroid condition, ultimately lead to a nervous breakdown. She seeks help at a psychiatric institution, but instead of receiving the care she needs, she is treated like a lunatic, given strong medication that exacerbates her anxiety and emotional instability, as a result of which she is officially labelled 'abnormal'. Following her release from the institution, she applies for a marriage permit; instead she is marked for sterilization. Her efforts to get her diagnosis revoked are unsuccessful and in the end she is forcibly sterilized.

Claasen's description of her experiences in the clinic and her encounters with the doctors and nurses form the critical core of her text. She presents the psychiatric system as a machine that produces the very symptoms it purports to treat. The patients' every word and action is documented and used against them as evidence of madness:

Everything was quickly written down. Until the files were one long list of crazy thoughts, megalomania, paranoia, relationship fantasies. They would often ask you if you didn't realise you were sick. You didn't dare answer, and so you decided to keep your mouth shut [...] The windows were barred, the doors bolted, and you started to rummage around fearfully in your mind trying to think what you might have done wrong. (40)

The dehumanizing and depersonalizing effect of this machinery is emphasized by the use of the passive voice and the impersonal pronoun 'man' to describe both the staff and the patients. In addition to the terror of being treated like a criminal without having committed a crime, the patients suffer constant humiliation and insults. In the case of Claasen, it is the mocking way the doctors and nurses draw attention to the

fact that, post-sterilization, she is now 'available' for casual sex without worrying about falling pregnant. This continues even after her release from hospital: everybody knows about her 'condition', and people either avoid and exclude her – for example, in the air raid shelter, her gasmask is given to a more 'deserving' person (45) – or approach her with requests for casual sex.

The memoir consists of short evocative vignettes interspersed with black and white illustrations and poems. A recurring theme is the reciprocal relationship between the outside world and her state of mind. The effect of social and political circumstances on her well-being is mirrored in changes in nature. The structure of the narrative is also cyclical, but rather than being a natural cycle of rebirth, Claasen's memoir leads inexorably back to the traumatic moment of her sterilization. The book opens with a scene of her waking up in the hospital after her sterilization and with her demand that it be undone. The short episodes that follow this opening chapter recount scenes from Claasen's life in roughly chronological order, leading up to this traumatic event, which thus frames the entire narrative. The four concluding chapters contain impressions of her life after the war. These are less narrative and more oneiric, albeit punctuated by stark, emotionless statements such as: 'a restorative operation was carried out on me, which gave me hope for a short while [...] But my fate won't let me go. I remained alone' (60–61). The final chapter is made up of three enigmatic images of spring passing through summer and into autumn. Here, again, Claasen inscribes her own story into the cycle of nature, but the implication for her is that it is by now too late for her to live a second spring. The autobiography thus ends on an ambiguous and disconsolate note.

The title of Claasen's memoir clearly marks it as an act of testimony, a work of autobiography with a speaking subject front and centre, signing this document in the manner of a last will and testament. Furthermore, in identifying herself so emphatically with the phrase 'die Steri' (short for sterilized), the derogatory name the doctors and nurses at the clinic used to call her, Claasen reclaims her identity from her persecutors in a defiant gesture of re-signification. The title of the memoir must be seen in relation to the name of the author, which is a pseudonym – Claasen being a family name on her mother's side. The book was initially self-published in 1969, under the name Ria Claasen and, following her death in 1984, it was republished by the Psychiatrie Verlag under the name Elisabeth Claasen. The illustration on the cover of both editions, by Claasen herself, depicts a tree that has been snapped in two, the top hanging down at an angle. On the branches of the broken-off section there are blossoms, while the branches on the trunk are bare. The tree clearly symbolizes Claasen's own life, and her fertility cut off in its prime, but it may also be seen as a representation of her family tree. As such, her decision to adopt a name from an earlier generation may represent a desire to return to an identity in which the lineage is still intact.

In the preface, Claasen lays out the threefold function of her book. Firstly, her writing constitutes an act of testimony on behalf of herself and others who have suffered the same fate: 'perhaps I will even help someone else who has suffered the same fate' (5). Thus, she inscribes herself into the tradition of testimonial literature and invokes a community of victims and, indirectly, gestures towards a future community of memory. Secondly, her text is a critique of the hypocrisy and mendacity of 'civilized' society that values only appearances and conformism: 'people are often so primitive; if

they cover their dirty fingernails with red nail polish, or put lipstick on their unwashed lips, they are seen as cultivated' (5). She invites the reader to question or even invert the values attached to binary oppositions such as primitive and modern, irrational and rational. Thirdly, she shows how the distinctions between binaries are mobilized in order to enforce conformity and punish difference. She refers to the distinction between a ladder and a staircase, which formed part of intelligence tests used to determine the mental capacities of children and anyone entering the psychiatric system. The tests consisted of general knowledge questions, basic mathematical problems and questions regarding the similarities and differences of certain terms. If you were unable to correctly articulate the difference using terms such as 'steps' and 'rungs', you were labelled impaired and slated for sterilization or euthanasia.<sup>26</sup> The emotive and impressionistic style of her book can be seen as an indictment of the violent suppression of non-rational forms of intelligence and expression. It can also be seen as embodying the desultory and fragmented nature of memory.

### Alois Kaufmann, *Death Cart*

Of the three authors discussed here, Kaufmann is the only one to have published other literary works besides his memoir and whose work has received some acknowledgement.<sup>27</sup> Kaufmann describes himself as 'author, biographer, survivor', and regularly gives readings and visits schools to tell his story, thus clearly presenting himself as a moral witness.<sup>28</sup> *Totenwagen* has had a complicated publication history: the 2007 edition is a revised and expanded version of a 1993 text entitled *Spiegelgrund, Pavillon 18 – Ein Kind im NS-Erziehungsheim*, which in turn was an expanded and substantially revised version of the original self-published 1986 text. The main differences between the versions consist in the scope of Kaufmann's narrative: the later versions include chapters about the post-war period, reflecting on issues of memory and trauma, and critiquing society's forgetting of the victims and the rehabilitation of the doctors. Both the 1993 and 2007 versions contain additional material by the historian Peter Malina, who supplies the historical background and sketches the particular situation of children as the victims of Nazi pedagogy. The 1993 version also contains an interview with Kaufmann, conducted by the journalist Peter Lachnit, in which Kaufmann describes the motivation for writing his memoir: in 1978 he came across a newspaper article about Dr. Heinrich Gross, who was one of the psychiatrists at the Spiegelgrund institution and who enjoyed great popularity as a forensic psychiatrist in post-war Austria. This article initiated a long overdue discussion about the crimes committed at the Spiegelgrund and it brought Kaufmann's repressed memories back. He decided to write down his story, as a means of coping with the traumatic past, but also as a memorial to his dead friends.

*Totenwagen* narrates Kaufmann's experience at the institution in the form of short chapters, each devoted to a specific theme, describing everyday life there (e.g. 'The Assistant Director', 'Hunger', 'The Christmas Party'). Kaufmann also thematizes the book's previous incarnations and the belatedness of its appearance by setting up a series of frame narratives. The first consists of a very brief segment written in the present

tense and describing a sleepless night the narrator suffers as a result of his traumatic memories. This fragment is addressed to a 'you' sleeping soundly beside the narrator. At the level of the narrative, this 'you' presumably refers to the narrator's partner, but placed at the beginning of the memoir, it also implicitly addresses the reader as someone whose dreams are not troubled by these traumatic memories. This opening also stages the ensuing narrative as part of a dialogue, in which the interlocutor is silent, and hence the reader thus addressed is invited to respond. This opening section ends with the narrator hearing a voice whispering: 'Do you still remember ...' (7). The reader turns the page to find a blurry black and white photograph, presumably of Kaufmann himself as a child and one expects to find the beginning of the narrator's reminiscences of his childhood. Instead, there follows a preface by the author, entitled 'It's very late, but not too late', in which he describes the aforementioned publication and reception history of the book. Following this interruption, the narrative indeed continues with an account of Kaufmann's childhood. The text thus effectively begins three times, echoing the three attempts Kaufmann has made to tell his story. Evidently, the 'you' addressed in the epigraph has still not responded.

Kaufmann's biological parents could not look after him, and so he was placed in foster care, where he was poorly treated, both by his foster parents, and by a neighbour, who sexually abused him at the age of four. He grew obstreperous and began to play truant, refused to attend Hitler Youth meetings, and was generally disobedient and 'difficult'. As a result of this misbehaviour he was sent to the reformatory *Am Spiegelgrund*, part of the Steinhof psychiatric institution in Vienna, where he remained until 1945. In this institution, Kaufmann was at the mercy of the Nazi system of 'Heilpädagogik' [curative pedagogy], which, as Malina observes, was really a 'Straf- und Verfolgungspädagogik' [punitive and persecutory pedagogy] (110). Here, 'difficult' children were to be beaten into good, productive citizens, while those who were not 'reformable', or deemed hereditarily ill, were 'weeded out' in weekly selections and euthanized.

The narrative voice oscillates between description and reflection, between retrospective and immediate experience. The text is written predominantly in the past tense, with occasional commentary on Kaufmann's experiences and development at the institution, but the almost total lack of historical or political context anchors the narrative in the perspective of a nine-year-old. On other occasions, the narrative voice focalizes the doctors and teachers. In these passages, the narrator imagines the thoughts and motivations of his tormentors. Thus, in the chapter entitled 'The Assistant Director and the "Jewboy"', the reader is given access to the head physician's plans to keep Herbert, a Jewish boy, around as a sort of alibi in case the Germans lose the war: 'If the final victory never comes [...] then, well then this "Jewboy" would be excellent evidence of his humane disposition' (35). Other figures are cast in a more sympathetic light, for instance, one of the teachers, Clara Grüner, who clearly cares for the children, and voices her disapproval of their maltreatment and murder – an act of insubordination that lands her in the Gestapo prison and ultimately leads to her execution. The narrative thus also presents a nuanced portrait of the perpetrators, and of the combination of external circumstances and personal choices that have led them to this institution. Emotionally, however, it centres on the moving stories of a few individual children, whom Kaufmann admired for their unbreakable spirit and



who together present a typology of the victims of this cruel and dehumanizing system. One is the Jew Herbert, who, after standing up to a sadistic teacher is taken away by the Gestapo. Another is Martin, a bed-wetter who is bullied by the other children to the point where he snaps and stabs one of them with a knife. The central scene, to which the title of the memoir refers, is Kaufmann's discovery of the dead body of Karl W., one of the children in his class, in the green 'death cart' outside in the courtyard. Whereas previously he had experienced the weekly selections and noticed the regular disappearance of the weakest and most intractable children, he now becomes an eyewitness to their murder. In calling his memoir *Totenwagen*, he transforms the means by which the Nazi doctors disposed of their victims into a metaphorical vehicle of memory. Kaufmann's memoir thus serves as a memorial to these boys, none of whom survived.

### Elvira Manthey, *Die Hempelsche*

*Die Hempelsche* is a truly unique text, not only because it tells the singular story of a girl 'who was allowed to turn away from the gas chamber', as the subtitle has it, but also because of its form and materiality. The book is self-published. Because it is written in Manthey's very own matter-of-fact style, and is at times rather colloquial, the publishers she approached insisted it be thoroughly edited. In effect, they wanted to erase Manthey's unique voice and substitute it with a more polished, 'sanitized' narrative. She refused, and in the end, she and her husband printed a few thousand copies of the book themselves, in their own home, between 1994 and 1997.<sup>29</sup> It has a simple grey paper cover with the title and subtitle printed in an imitation cursive script font. Each copy is signed and dated by the author. The book is dedicated to Manthey's younger sister Lisa, who died in the gas chamber in Brandenburg in 1940, shortly before her fifth birthday. The dedication page features a portrait photo of Lisa at age 2, which is glued onto the page by hand. The following page contains the first paragraph of the German constitution, 'The dignity of man is inviolable' (6). Throughout the text, a number of drawings (by Elli Koll) and a few blurry photographs serve as illustrations to the events narrated. Most strikingly, however, Manthey has included photocopies or transcripts of documents relating to her 'case': during the Nazi period and afterwards. Thus, the text contains medical and legal files, deportation lists, intelligence test results and her entire official correspondence regarding her repeated and unsuccessful requests, in the 1990s, to have her name cleared of any suspicion of 'hereditary feeble-mindedness'. The documents in the text function not only as evidence, giving the story the weight of authenticity, but also as a meta-narrative illustrating the frightening continuities in the cold and dehumanizing language of bureaucracy during and after the war. Set against this impersonal language is Manthey's own narrative of emancipation from an object of Nazi persecution and imprisonment to a subject who takes control of her life, claims her rights, and becomes the author of her own autobiography.

In contrast to Claasen's memoir, the title and subtitle of Manthey's text do not enact a self-proclamation as subject; instead, *The Hempel-Girl* invokes the dismissive appellation of the local community. The adjectival form, 'Hempelsche', denies her

individuality and casts her as the embodiment of a specific type or set of (negative) characteristics. It pre-supposes a degree of notoriety, which, however, when coupled with the subtitle, transforms *Die Hempelsche* into an almost proverbial figure, the stuff of popular legend. The title thus presents Manthey's story as a moral lesson, in which her singular fate stands symbolically for the thousands of other German children like her, who were less fortunate. Notwithstanding the documentary component, the early sections of Manthey's memoir read like a children's book, an impression that is reinforced by Elli Koll's black and white illustrations. The text is written in the first person and mostly in the past tense, although the narrative shifts to the present tense during especially emotional or pivotal scenes, a device which heightens the immediacy of these traumatic memories. The sentences are short and unadorned, and Manthey preserves the perspective of a child with limited insight into the events narrated. In the later sections, the narrative voice becomes more self-reflexive, as her understanding of her past grows.

Elvira Hempel was born in 1931 to a poor family. Under the Nazi laws, the family were termed 'asocial' and her parents 'work-shy'. The children were forced to sell scrap metal to make ends meet instead of going to school regularly. As in Claasen's case, it was the appeal for help from the state that set in motion the machinery of Nazi medicine: Elvira's mother asks the child welfare service for support, and as a result the children are taken away and placed in various reformatory institutions, where they are mistreated both physically and mentally. Elvira becomes a bed-wetter. In 1938, she is taken to a doctor who certifies her as hereditarily feeble-minded and transfers her to the Uchtsprunge psychiatric institution in Sachsen-Anhalt, a sort of 'transit' institution for the killing centres at Brandenburg and Bernburg. Here she meets her younger sister, Lisa, who was born in 1935 and who has spent her entire life in homes. Uchtsprunge turns out to be an even worse place than the reformatory, because the disobedient children tend to vanish. Even though more and more children arrive, their number keeps dwindling. This is when Elvira begins to become a close observer of the goings-on at the institution. Having witnessed the psychological toll that the constant beatings and neglect have on the other children, she resolves to find something to occupy herself so that she won't lose her mind. She starts helping the nurses with simple tasks and polishes the floors. In this way she gets access to all the rooms and wards in the clinic and notices how certain children are given injections and then disappear. She sees the 'Totenmann' [death-man] come in every day, who wraps more and more children into sheets and puts them on his cart: 'Every day children are given injections, and I notice that whenever the children get injections, the next day they are usually dead' (46). One day, all the remaining children are deported to Brandenburg. Manthey describes these scenes in the same detached and matter-of-fact style that characterizes the book as a whole: 'Outside there are four buses. We have to get on [...] The windows are painted blue from the inside so that no one can see in or out. I have scratched a tiny hole with my fingernail and can see a bit' (68). Here, as elsewhere, Manthey emphasizes her ability to see and to witness these events, even though her perspective is necessarily limited. When they reach their destination, they are led to a windowless room. She describes this room in great detail and a drawing by Koll provides a bird's-eye view of the layout of the room. By the entrance there are piles of clothes and shoes. In one corner a group

of doctors are seated at a table. On the right-hand side, there is a heavy iron door. One by one, the children are led through this door, until Elvira alone remains in the room.

The room is empty, all the children are gone. [...] They shout, telling me to hurry up and get undressed. I'm wearing an ugly red dress with many buttons. I undo them very slowly and throw the dress on that mountain [of clothes]. I can tell I'm being watched from behind, by the people sitting at the table. [...] Once I am fully undressed, someone grabs my left arm and pulls me toward the table. There I am asked my name and age. I answer. The man leafs through a file. Then I am allowed to get dressed again. I don't have to go through that iron door. (68–70)

Manthey never discovers the reason why she was turned away from the gas chamber, and so her miraculous escape constitutes an *aporia* in her narrative, which drives her investigation into her past many decades later. Her search for an explanation also leads her to become a moral witness to her fate and that of the children who did disappear behind the iron door. But, like Claasen and Kaufmann, her memoir bears witness not only to the crimes of the Nazis but also to the on-going discrimination against her and other victims of Nazi eugenic policies after the war.

Having been deprived of an education through her institutionalization by the Nazis, Manthey was unable to find work after the war and was forced to resort to stealing and other petty crimes in order to survive. It was not until 1965, when she met Heinz Manthey, that she achieved any degree of stability and happiness in her life. But this newfound security was disrupted by the return of her memories of her childhood trauma. Manthey writes how she opened up to her husband, telling, for the first time, the story of her experiences during the war. In addition to the uncertainty as to why she was spared, she also didn't know where this room with the iron door had been – not until she saw it again in a television documentary about the Nazi euthanasia programme. She and her husband travelled to Brandenburg to revisit this site, and this was the first step on her quest to understand what had been done to her and to seek official compensation.

*Die Hempelsche* presents a forceful critique of post-war German bureaucracy, medicine and memory culture. Her correspondence with the various institutions, politicians and ministries shows how her case is being treated as a bureaucratic 'problem' and everything possible is done to delay, obstruct and ignore her pleas to have her files handed over to her and her name cleared. The psychiatric institution argues that the original medical records must remain with the institution. The reluctance of institutions such as Uchtspringe to make patient files publicly available, often on the grounds of doctor–patient confidentiality, has been a major hindrance to public working through of the memory of Nazi euthanasia. This reticence extends even to publishing the names of victims, also out of consideration for their families – thus perpetuating the taboo and secrecy surrounding these crimes. Yet, as Manthey compellingly argues in her letters, her file is in fact based on a false and unlawful diagnosis, and hence it cannot legitimately be treated as a medical document. Instead, it must be seen as a document of social persecution, and as such, it belongs to her. After six years of petitioning and waiting in vain, she writes on the last page of her

book: 'Perhaps this will be the page where, hopefully soon, I will be able to report the restitution of my human dignity' (300). The reference to human dignity recalls the first article of the German constitution, quoted at the beginning of the book and serves as an indication that Manthey's story is not yet over. The page opposite is blank, but numbered, and there is thus space for her story to be completed in the future.

## Conclusion

When the German constitution was drafted in the immediate aftermath of the war, a fundamental concern was to prevent a repetition of the atrocities that had just been committed. For this reason, the absolute inviolability of the dignity of man was enshrined in the first article of the new constitution. The dual imperatives of Holocaust memory – 'never forget' and 'never again' – thus formed the backbone of the new German republic, and Primo Levi's exhortation to 'ask yourself if this is a man' became the guiding concern for post-war memory culture and the field of memory studies in particular, which, perhaps more so than any other recent field, has been committed to a humanist conception of the subject. In light of post-structuralist critiques of subjectivity, however, it is becoming apparent that the question, 'if this is a man,' must be coupled with an interrogation of the category of the human itself. It is here that the memory of Nazi euthanasia begins to disturb established categories and assumptions within the field as a whole. The exclusion of the victims of Nazi euthanasia from the discourse on the Holocaust reflects unexamined prejudices concerning who is or can be an agent of memory, and inadvertently reproduces the Nazi stigmatization of these people with physical and mental disabilities as not fully human. It is therefore all the more shocking that it has taken over half a century for these victims to receive official recognition from the very institutions put in place to guarantee the human dignity of the victims of Nazi crimes. Regardless of any latent prejudice against people with disabilities, a major contributing factor to the marginalization of the memory of Nazi euthanasia has been the lack of survivor testimony. A cornerstone of Holocaust memory has been the privileged place given to the voices of the victims, who, by telling their own stories in their own words, can reclaim the humanity that was denied to them by the perpetrators. The ability to say 'I', to speak in the first person, is the condition of possibility for claiming subject status and affirming one's humanity. Conversely, the first step in denying another's humanity is to deny them the ability to speak for themselves. And it is for this reason that the three autobiographies examined in this chapter are of such singular importance. All three authors discussed above were labelled hereditarily feeble-minded, but none of them would be considered cognitively disabled by contemporary standards. Nevertheless, their texts have been ignored as Holocaust testimonies and, more importantly, they have not been seen as authors who have authority over their stories and themselves, and who have something to contribute to society or memory culture. It is telling that both Claasen's and Kaufmann's memoirs should have been published by psychiatric trade presses, which effectively frames their narratives as psychological 'case studies' and limits their audience. There are two

conclusions to be drawn from this: firstly, that the pathologization of difference still holds sway in cases of supposed mental illness, regardless of all evidence to the contrary. As Manthey and Kaufmann emphasize, the disciplinary and punitive machinery of the Nazi regime effectively produced the very conditions it then claimed to cure. Hence, secondly, it shows how little we know about the actual victims of Nazi euthanasia, and how readily we reify them into an anonymous and homogeneous group with ‘incurable’ conditions, instead of seeing them as individual human beings.

## Notes

- 1 [http://www.kurfas-net.de/blumepeter/witze\\_alt.htm](http://www.kurfas-net.de/blumepeter/witze_alt.htm) (accessed 20 September 2015).
- 2 Eberhard Reuß, *Erinnerungen an den ‘Blumepeter’. Ein Mannheimer Schicksal* (Heidelberg: Wunderhorn, 2007), 94.
- 3 As Reuß points out, ‘cardiac arrest’ was one of the official formulations used by Nazi euthanasia doctors to conceal the true cause of death, that is, gassing, starvation or lethal injection. In addition, Reuß found many inconsistencies in Schäfer’s medical record: the last four entries, covering Schäfer’s last six months, were all written in the same hand and apparently in one sitting, after Schäfer’s death. The medical record was lost for ten years and it is likely that parts of it were taken out and destroyed. Reuß, *Erinnerungen*, 79–85.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 90.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 99.
- 6 Klaus Dörner, *Tödliches Mitleid. Zur Sozialen Frage der Unerträglichkeit des Lebens* (Neumünster: Paranus, 2007), 90; Ute Hoffmann, ‘Aspekte der gesellschaftlichen Aufarbeitung der NS-“Euthanasie”’, in Stefanie Westermann, Tim Ohnhäuser and Richard Kühl (eds), *NS-‘Euthanasie’ und Erinnerung: Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung – Gedenkformen – Betroffenenperspektiven* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2011), 67–75, 69.
- 7 Götz Aly, *Die Belasteten. ‘Euthanasie’ 1939–1945. Eine Gesellschaftsgeschichte* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2013), 9–11.
- 8 Susanne Knittel, *The Historical Uncanny: Disability, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Holocaust Memory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).
- 9 Elisabeth Claasen, *Ich, die Steri* (Bonn: Psychiatrie-Verlag, 1987 [1969]); Alois Kaufmann, *Totenwagen. Kindheit am Spiegelgrund*, ed. Mechthild Podzeit-Lütjen (Wien: Mandelbaum, 2007 [1986]); Elvira Manthey, *Die Hempelsche. Das Schicksal eines deutschen Kindes, das 1940 vor der Gaskammer umkehren durfte* (Lübeck: Hempel-Manthey, 1994). All references to these three texts will be given in parenthesis in the main text. There are other texts that deserve to be studied in this context, but which the spatial constraints of this chapter do not allow. These include: Norbert Ney, *Ich bin sterilisiert. Informationen. Protokolle* (Hamburg: Buntbuch, 1979); Josef Muscha Müller, *Und weinen darf ich auch nicht ...: Ausgrenzung, Sterilisation, Deportation – eine Kindheit in Deutschland* (Berlin: Parabolis, 2002); Dorothea Buck-Zerchin, *Lasst euch nicht entmutigen. Texte 1968–2001* (Norderstedt: Anne Fischer, 2002); Dorothea Buck-Zerchin, *Auf der Spur des Morgensterns. Psychose als Selbstfindung* (Neumünster: Paranus, 2005); and Dorothea Buck, *Ermutigungen. Ausgewählte Schriften* (Neumünster: Paranus, 2012).
- 10 Dörner, *Tödliches Mitleid*, 41 and 66.

- 11 Heinz Faulstich, *Hungersterben in der Psychiatrie 1914–1949: Mit einer Topographie der NS-Psychiatrie* (Freiburg: Lambertus, 1998).
- 12 Cf. Ernst Klee (ed.), *Dokumente zur 'Euthanasie'* (Frankfurt/M: Fischer, 1985); Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); Michael Burleigh, *Death and Deliverance: 'Euthanasia' in Germany, 1900–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Henry Friedlander, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Thomas Foth, *Caring and Killing: Nursing and Psychiatric Practice in Germany, 1931–1943* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, Universität Osnabrück, 2013).
- 13 H.-W. Schmuhl, 'Die Patientenmorde', in Angelika Ebbinghaus and Klaus Dörner (eds), *Vernichten und Heilen. Der Nürnberger Ärzteprozess und seine Folgen* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2002), 295–328, 297.
- 14 Margret Hamm (ed.), *Lebensunwert – Zerstörte Leben. Zwangssterilisation und 'Euthanasie'* (Frankfurt am Main: VAS, 2005), 7.
- 15 Faulstich, *Hungersterben in der Psychiatrie 1914–1949*, 712–717; Schmuhl, 'Die Patientenmorde', 316.
- 16 Cf. Dörner, *Tödliches Mitleid*, 88; Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell, *Cultural Locations of Disability* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 101–104; Stefan Köhl, *Die Internationale der Rassisten. Aufstieg und Niedergang der internationalen eugenischen Bewegung im 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2013).
- 17 Dorothea C. Roer, 'Erinnern, Erzählen, Gehört werden. Zeugenschaft und "historische Wahrheit"', in Hamm, *Lebensunwert*, 183–197, 192.
- 18 I have written extensively about some of these art projects and collaborative memorials in Knittel, *The Historical Uncanny*, 33–71.
- 19 Other book-length biographies include Hellmut G. Haasis, *Heisel Rein, der gscheite Narr. Schwänke und Ermordung eines schwäbischen Eulenspiegels* (Reutlingen-Betzingen: Freiheitsbaum, 2008); Robert Domes, *Nebel im August. Die Lebensgeschichte des Ernst Lossa* (München: cbt, 2008). For two collections of shorter biographical sketches of victims see also Hamm, *Lebensunwert*; Petra Fuchs, Maike Rotzoll, Ulrich Müller, Paul Richter and Gerrit Hohendorf (eds), *Das Vergessen der Vernichtung ist Teil der Vernichtung selbst: Lebensgeschichten von Opfern der nationalsozialistischen 'Euthanasie'* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007).
- 20 See also Susanne Knittel, 'Beyond Testimony: Nazi Euthanasia and the Field of Memory Studies', *The Holocaust in History and Memory* 5 (2012), 85–101, 93–99; Knittel, *The Historical Uncanny*, 106–133.
- 21 For example Helga Schubert, *Die Welt da drinnen. Eine deutsche Nervenlinik und der Wahn vom 'unwerten Leben'* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003) and Tino Hemmann, *Der unwerte Schatz. Gegen das Vergessen. Über die Kinder-Euthanasie im NS-Staat. Erzählung einer Kindheit* (Leipzig: Engelsdorfer, 2005).
- 22 Knittel, *The Historical Uncanny*, 106–133.
- 23 See, for example, Eberhard Gabriel and Wolfgang Neugebauer (eds), *Von der Zwangssterilisierung zur Ermordung. Zur Geschichte der NS-Euthanasie in Wien* (Wien: Böhlau, 2002); Karl Cervik, *Kindermord in der Ostmark. Kindereuthanasie im Nationalsozialismus 1938–1945* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2004); Snyder and Mitchell, *Cultural Locations of Disability*; Dörner, *Tödliches Mitleid*; Stefanie Westermann, *Verschwiegenes Leid. Der Umgang mit den NS-Zwangssterilisationen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Köln: Böhlau, 2010); Uwe Gerrrens, *Medizinisches Ethos*

- und theologische Ethik: Karl und Dietrich Bonhoeffer in der Auseinandersetzung um Zwangssterilisation und 'Euthanasie' im Nationalsozialismus* (München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2010); Aly, *Die Belasteten*.
- 24 Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 150–165.
- 25 Ibid., 155.
- 26 Similar intelligence tests were also used after the war in rehabilitation hearings, in which victims were sometimes confronted with the exact same questions, and were re-traumatized as a result. See Westermann, *Verschwiegenes Leid*, 157–166.
- 27 In 2006, he published a collection of poetry about his traumatic experiences during the Nazi regime, entitled *Dass ich dich finde: Kind am Spiegelgrund* [So That I May Find You: Child at Spiegelgrund] (Wien: Theodor Kramer Gesellschaft 2006); and most recently a collection of short stories, entitled *Wahre Unwahrheiten: Kuss des Schattens* [True Untruths: Kiss of the Shadow] (Berlin: Novum, 2010).
- 28 See the author's website at <http://www.aloiskaufmann.at/>.
- 29 Wolf Thieme, 'Die Mordmaschine', *Potsdamer Neueste Nachrichten*. Available online: <http://www.pnn.de/dritte-seite/673114/> (accessed 17 January 2015).