

The Value of Life

**A Play for
UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
and the exhibition**

Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race

by
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April 7, 2006

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The Value of Life

I -- WHERE WERE THEIR VALUES?

ERIC

WALKS ON STAGE. TAKES PAPER AND READS.

Hmmm. What's this? A Nazi speech. HE RUNS UP TO TOWER AND SPEAKS IN A FORCEFUL WAY WITH NAZI ACCENT:

Meine sehr geehrte Damen und Herren,
In mental institutions in the Reich there are incurably ill patients who are completely useless to humanity; they are nothing but a burden, their care creates endless expense, and there is no possibility that these people will ever become healthy or useful.

NARRATOR

COMING DOWN STEPS FROM STAGE LEFT, SAYS OVER TOP OF HIS LINES

Whoa. Stop. Whoa. You can't do that here. This is not what we rehearsed. This is a memorial to the Holocaust. You can't give voice like that to the Nazis. This is hard enough to do without you fooling around.

TO AUDIENCE Good afternoon. GOES OVER TO DESK AND SITS I am troubled.

I've been writing a play for the Museum based on the exhibit *Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race*. It's right over there. Have any of you seen it? What did you think? LOOK FOR SOME REACTIONS FROM AUDIENCE. GET VISITOR RESPONSES. KEEP THEM BRIEF. LOOKING FOR A RESPONSE TO MIRROR NARRATOR'S RESPONSE OF "TROUBLED"

I've been staying up late, trying to read about it, but it's not easy. – GOES TO DESK TO PICK UP BOOKS Here's one book: *By Trust Betrayed: Patients, Physicians and the License to Kill in the Third Reich*. – Doesn't that sound frightening? And one of the most disconcerting -- *Authorization of the Destruction of Lives Unworthy of Life*

Not exactly what you pick up to read before drifting off to sleep.

Much of this material is unsettling. Let me give you an example of one speech that I found. Eric, would you do that speech properly. TO AUDIENCE Now listen to this. It's from a Nazi official and it sets the scene nicely -- and it gives me the chills.

ERIC

In mental institutions in the Reich there are incurably ill patients who are completely useless to humanity; they are nothing but a burden, their care creates endless expense, and there is no possibility that these people will ever become healthy or useful.

If we must make preparations for maintenance of healthy people, then it is necessary to eliminate these beings. They must be packed into very primitive special asylums. Nothing must be done to maintain these patients; on the contrary, everything must be done in order to have them die as quickly as possible

NARRATOR

The Nazis had this notion that they were going to create a society of pure Aryans through eugenics, a popular scientific idea in the 1920s and 30s that said that through control of reproduction you could improve the genetic qualities of a population – just like breeding roses.

ERIC

The Nazis believed that the German race could be cleansed by encouraging the most “fit” people of “pure” German background to have lots of children, and stopping the less desirable people from having any children -- through forced sterilization.

NARRATOR

But sterilization was too slow. The Nazis developed a plan, called T-4, to kill their own disabled German people under the cover of war. They began by gassing them and then burned the bodies.

ERIC

Deaths were in the thousands, then the tens of thousands, and word leaked out. They stopped the gassing but continued murdering by starving them or giving them drugs. Later they applied what they learned about gassing to the Final Solution, the Holocaust – leading to the deaths of millions of Jews -- men, women, and children.

NARRATOR

And that brings up what troubles me. How could these people do such atrocities? Where were their values? That’s what I want to explore today. Let’s look at that idea of values for a minute – because I think that is really important. Eric, would you get that definition over on the desk?

ERIC

GETS PAPER FROM DESK HANDS TO SOMEONE IN AUDIENCE, WHO READS Would you read this?

The beliefs people have about what is right and wrong and what is most important in life, which control their behavior.

TAKES BACK PAPER Thanks

NARRATOR

Values – what is right and wrong – and how we behave because of our values. All right, then, what are some values that some of you have? ERIC HANDS NOTEBOOK TO AUDIENCE MEMBER. Could you help us by taking notes and writing down these values?

GET SOME REACTIONS FROM AUDIENCE -- (USE “CHOCOLATE” HERE?) IF NECESSARY PROMPT AUDIENCE: “SOME PEOPLE HAVE SAID THAT _____ IS AN IMPORTANT VALUE TO THEM. CAN YOU TELL A VALUE THAT YOU WERE TAUGHT AS A CHILD THAT IS IMPORTANT TO YOU?”

Those values make sense, but this is what troubles me about what happened to values in Nazi Germany. Someone had to do the actual killing, but someone also had to decide who was going to be killed, someone had to drive the bus full of patients to the killing centers, someone had to guide patients to the death chamber.

ERIC

Someone had to work in the office keeping records – all these people, and many more, had to do their jobs to make the killing happen.

NARRATOR

How could these men and women do it? Where were their values?

ERIC

At some point in their lives they must have had values that would have made them recoil at the idea of such killing. But their attitude changed. Did they change their values, or ignore their values?

NARRATOR

Or.....are values so transitory, will-of-the-wisp that they can vanish overnight?

What might get someone to change his, or her, your values?

GET RESPONSES FROM AUDIENCE (POSSIBLE QUESTIONS: REFER TO VALUE MENTIONED ABOVE AND SAY “WHY WOULD SOMEONE BEHAVE DIFFERENTLY THAN THIS VALUE?”)

Values -- that’s what this play is about.

ERIC BEGINS SETTING UP FOR NEXT SCENE

Here's the first scene. Let's look at how someone's values might get undermined. This scene is about a nurse working at Eichberg, one of the institutions where children were killed, and an encounter she has with her husband. He works nearby at Hadamar, one of the six killing centers.

By the way, this is all based on information I found out doing my research.

Oh yes, and since you are already watching a play, you can pretend that I am a German nurse. You can do that, can't you? SHE SLIPS ON HER COSTUME AS SHE TALKS AND PULLS OUT A FEW PLATES, ETC FOR PROPS.

II – A QUANDARY AT HOME

WOMAN IS ON STAGE, MOVING AROUND THE TABLE AS IF IN PREPARATION OF DINNER.

MAN

ENTERS FROM ABOVE Eva? Are here? Are you home yet? I hope so, because so am I, and I'm hungry. SHE DOES NOT ANSWER OR RESPOND. HE WALKS TO HER. I am so glad to see you. It's been too long. HE TURNS HER TO FACE HIM. You're crying. What is the matter?

WOMAN

I don't know....it's nothing.

MAN

Come, tell me. Let me take a look at you. HE LOOKS HER OVER, SEES SHE DOESN'T LOOK WELL I believe that you're not feeling well. Or is it me?

WOMAN

No, no it's not you. Don't be silly. It's just....

MAN

Is it work? Is it the Institute? Is it that mean Doctor again?

WOMAN

No, I mean yes. Today....SHE CAN'T HANDLE REMEMBERING. SITS DOWN

MAN

Come, sit down. What happened today?

WOMAN

SHE IS HAVING DIFFICULTY WITH THIS.

Well, as you know I had gotten permission to come back here for the weekend, and I was walking home. I was tired; I had many busloads of patients over the past weeks. I walked past some boys playing in the street, and one of them yelled at the other "You're an idiot. You'll be sent to bake in Hadamar"

MAN

Don't pay attention to the children. What do they know?

WOMAN

I heard them call the buses that bring in the patients, "murder houses" and "killing crates." They see the buses come in filled with patients, and later they see all that dark smoke rise out of the chimney. They can put two and two together.

MAN

Well, what if they can? They know what's going on here, you know what's going on here, I think everyone knows what's going on here. You load them on the buses at Eichberg and we eliminate them here.

You know how I feel. We are disinfecting -- removing useless mouths that cost us money and can only drag the German people down. "Murder houses," indeed. We should receive a medal from the Führer.

No more will these worthless creatures dilute the German race and bloodline. We are clearly disinfecting.

WOMAN

NOT LISTENING; NOT CONSOLED

But, he yelled at me!

MAN

Who? One of the children?

WOMAN

No, not the children. Dr. Schmidt, at work.

MAN

The Doctor yelled at you? Why? What happened? HE DOESN'T LIKE THE SOUND OF THIS

WOMAN

He ordered me to give four to five grams of Veronal to one of the patients who was agitated -- one of the children.

MAN

HE'S CONCERNED NOW. Well, what did you do?

WOMAN

I gave two doses of one-half gram each.

MAN

And....

WOMAN

He seemed to calm down.

MAN

Good..... But, then why did he yell?

WOMAN

Because I didn't do exactly as he ordered! He screamed at me that I was just a nurse and had to administer what the doctor ordered. I tried to tell him that the patient had been sedated with the smaller quantity. He wouldn't listen. SHE PAUSES. GOES ABOUT HER BUSINESS

MAN

Yes – and what happened next.

WOMAN

SHE DOESN'T REPLY. SHRUGS.

It was at that moment that I realized what the doctor intended with that high dose of Veronal.

.MAN

CAUTIOUS What do you mean?

WOMAN

He wanted me to ... to give the child enough so that he.....died

MAN

EXASPERATED Of course, that's what he wanted.

WOMAN

SHE IS TAKEN ABACK. But I had never given a shot before, not like that. And I had gotten that promotion to the new special pediatric unit, and I had hoped it would be different.

MAN

Just what did you think they were going to do with the children? Did you think it was going to be a pleasant getaway for the summer?

WOMAN

No, I didn't, but I just hadn't thought about it. I thought that it might be better, since I was in the special pediatric unit – and those children need special help – I just hoped I wouldn't have to load patients on the buses anymore. It's getting so hard to get them on the bus – they fight us or cry. They've heard rumors, talk. They're afraid.

I just wanted to be back here. With you, even if it's just for a short time. They want me to...

MAN

Now, now, you're here. You're going to be fine.

WOMAN

I'm just glad to be here, I'm so tired. SHE TAKES HIS HAND
I didn't know what was going on with the buses for a while. We'd get the buses in ... we'd try to make the patients comfortable. HE DROPS HER HAND AND HE SHAKES HIS HEAD IN AMAZEMENT AT HER FOOLISHNESS I know—most are beyond any help, but some of them, even though they just aren't right in their heads or something is just wrong with them – I like some of them. I gave one woman a postcard to send me when she got settled in, wherever she was going on the bus. I know now it was here to Hadamar, but the postcard never came. And the patients never come back. I would sometimes wait for them, see a bus returning and hope one of my favorites would be on it. There was one elderly gentleman – I really liked him. SHE SMILES He made laugh. He had to wear special shoes – but he could never keep them tied, and then the shoes were returned. I saw them in a big pile of clothes that got unloaded from a bus coming back from here – from Hadamar -- and I know he would never have left them. He was dead – all of them were. I know people like him cost the state money – but he wasn't "life unworthy of life" or whatever that the Führer says. SHE PULLS HERSELF TOGETHER And then I didn't want to even think about it. I just did my job – I put them on the bus.

MAN

But you must have known what was happening when the patients started arriving and then leaving in a day or two on the buses.

WOMAN

But I never *saw* anyone die, or had to kill them. I just loaded them on the bus.

MAN

GOES TO HER TO CONSOLE HER. Now, dear, everything will be fine. But something else happened, didn't it? I know you too well. What else happened?

WOMAN

Later today Dr. Schmidt told us we had to help the senior nurses with the injections – for the children. It was too much for the doctors to do alone.

At first I refused. He said that there was no point in it because, I was a civil servant, had been one for years, and I would perform my duty -- especially in times of war. He said it would soon be a law that people like these were to be released from their suffering.

And that's what I'm to do. Release the children from their suffering. Euthanasia he calls it.

MAN

Did you do what he ordered?

WOMAN

It happened right before I left. I begin as soon as I return. Then, coming here, I saw those children talking about burning at Hadamar. I looked back and saw the smoke, coming from the chimneys. And then, I just, started crying and walking here as fast as I could.

MAN

My dear. The work you do is very difficult. But it is also very important. Our goal should be to sacrifice as necessary for the greater good. This is one of those times when you have to do what is right – what the Führer wants and what Germany needs.

And when you get back, what will you do, my love? HE'S A LITTLE CONCERNED You'll do what they ask, won't you?

WOMAN

I don't know what I'll do.

MAN

What do you mean, you don't know. I will tell you what you will do. Everything they ask. You'll do it efficiently and without emotion. Good – I am going upstairs – and I want you to fix my dinner and get it on the table. HE EXITS.

WOMAN

BECOMES NARRATOR AS SHE REMOVES COSTUME. I'm glad I don't have to face choices like that nurse in my life.

Let's take a look at that last scene. I wanted to explore what happens at home with someone, like the woman, who is probably a hard-worker, good-hearted, not political, and yet part of the killing. There were thousands of people like her.

The man in the last scene – he seemed to be in favor of the killing. Did you catch any of the reasons he used to justify the killing of certain people? LOOKING FOR RESPONSES LIKE “LIFE UNWORTHY OF LIFE” ETC.

But the nurse didn't seem to always agree. Did you notice any reasons why? LOOK FOR RESPONSES ABOUT NURSES REACTIONS TO MAN WITH SPECIAL SHOES WHO MADE HER LAUGH,

Yet, even though in those instances when she saw the value of these people, she was still part of the whole process.

As I read about all the killing, I began to wonder – didn't anyone say “This is not right?” What about the churches? Well, some leaders did speak out. Bishop von Galen delivered a blistering sermon against euthanasia on August 3rd 1941. Eric, can you help us out here and give us a bit of that sermon?

ERIC

AS VON GALEN For the past several months patients who have been suffering from incurable diseases have been forcibly removed from homes and clinics. Their relatives are later informed that the patient has died, that the body has been cremated and that the ashes may be claimed. There is little doubt that these numerous cases are not natural, but often deliberately caused, and result from the belief that *it is lawful to take away life which is unworthy of being lived.*

The opinion is that since they can no longer make money, they are obsolete machines, comparable with some old cow that can no longer give milk or some horse that has gone lame. What is the lot of unproductive machines and cattle? They are destroyed.

Here we are dealing with human beings, with our neighbors, brothers and sisters, the poor and invalids . . . unproductive—perhaps! But have they, therefore, lost the right to live? Do you, do I have the right to live only as long as we are productive, as long as others acknowledge that we are productive?

A curse on men and on the German people if we break the holy commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ which God our Maker imprinted on the human conscience from the beginning of time!

NARRATOR

Now there’s an argument for values – thou shalt not kill. But even that argument carried no weight.

It’s time to take a look several months into the future from our last scene. The Nazis have raised the stakes. Deaths are up, troops are expanding to the east to the Soviet Union, and all-out killing of Jews is underway. It’s now August 1941 at Hadamar, the killing center mentioned earlier, and the staff is having a party.

But this is not any party. It’s a boisterous party with beer and wine celebrating the murder of Hadamar’s 10,000th victim. This really did happen.