

To not forget: Stolpersteine and other tributes

7 April 2015: Extensive and much needed efforts have been undertaken in Germany to address the country's Nazi history and counter the calls of some politicians to simply draw a line under it all and move on. Currently a lot of this work is happening on a local level. There is now a waiting list of months to get an appointment with Cologne sculptor Gunter Demnig to lay one of his *Stolpersteine* or "stumbling blocks", small memorial cobblestones set into the pavement in front of the former homes of victims of the Nazi regime. Hundreds of these stones have been commissioned by neighborhood groups, schools and relatives to ensure that the lives of the murdered are remembered across Germany month after month, year after year. The importance of this kind of remembering becomes clear when visitors from overseas ask about the stones. While it might seem like a small gesture, the memorials are of great importance. Stumbling over the cobbles as we go about our days, we are prompted to think of the mass murders and reminded to keep reflecting on this part of Germany's history. A few months ago I was in the Heinrich Roller Straße in Berlin with some friends at the unveiling of a memorial stone for Emma and Elia Spet. Recording a video of the event, which was to be transmitted to relatives of the couple in the USA, it was brought home to us how much these tributes can mean to the relatives of those who were killed.

Other important local history projects are underway in Buch, a former Nazi "euthanasia" site in Berlin. Over the last five years various ways have been found to commemorate those people who were considered "unworthy of life" and who were murdered in the sanatoriums in Buch and elsewhere as part of what was known as the *T4 Aktion* (named after Number 4 Tiergartenstraße, the headquarters of the Nazi's euthanasia project). These memorials were organized not by the state or medical authorities but by various local initiatives connected with 83 year old Rosemarie Plumb. Plumb, a retired occupational psychologist, has spent years researching the roughly 3,000 people who were transported from Buch to be gassed at death camps.

A multimedia exhibition that opened recently in the library in Buch – a place that still serves as a major medical care hub – focused on the perpetrators of the euthanasia program. Hitler's 1939 orders to kill could not have been realized without the collaboration of thousands of doctors and medical personnel charged with caring for those who would later be murdered. The general population also contributed by looking the other way. The complicity of the doctors, the continuity of the underlying ideologies and the impunity of the perpetrators in West Germany after 1945 are described in the books of journalist Ernst Klee. No prosecutions were ever taken for the crimes at East Berlin's Buch either; East Germany was also opportunistic in its approach to Nazi criminals. This was the prevailing impunity that for instance allowed Dr. Wilhelm Bender, one of the euthanasia program's inner circle, to become head of the psychiatric center at Wuhlgarten after the war.

While Rosemarie Plumb was long denounced as being a "nest besmircher" intent on stirring up local wrongs, her efforts have had success in recent years. A permanent exhibition was established at the Hufeland Hospital and a memorial erected in a nearby forest for the children of forced laborers who died of neglect in Buch's hospitals. In 2012 a blog and film project on the history of euthanasia in Buch by pupils at a school in Hufeland received a special award

from the state of Berlin (<https://rechercheberlinbuch.wordpress.com>). The movements that emerged from the work of Rosemarie Plumb have finally brought about a discussion – 70 years overdue – on the ethics of the medical profession during Nazi rule.