

# Resistance Conversations: Behind the Scenes

Written by Liz Crow

In the early stages of the Resistance projects, the three actors in Conversations, along with Director Liz Crow, visited two of the death centres in Germany. Below are extracts from Liz's diary.

## Memorial in Berlin

So two days from now, I should be in a hotel in Berlin. I no longer have any idea what to expect, what my reactions might be. Will Bernburg and Hadamar just be big old dark buildings, each with a white-tiled room? Or will I know – feel – that this is how people were ushered in, this was the sound of the door shutting and the sensation of panic rising, this was the floor they fell to? I wondered if, after so much thinking about it, it might be the first and then I caught sight of photographs of the spaces on the web the other day and found my heart accelerating with the truth of them.

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I'm in Berlin.

We went to the T4 memorial on Tiergartenstrasse, where the T4 bureaucratic headquarters was based. Opposite is a long swathe of woodland, which must have been a delightful prospect from the front offices.

The memorial is cast metal, weathered bronze, with small swirls and patterns of blackened bronze. It is a few paragraphs of text eloquently setting out what happened, ending in "Those who were killed were many. Those brought to justice, few." It is sited flat on the pavement, about 2.5 to 3', close to the Philharmonic Hall ("by the Philharmonic" is what I'd read). More accurately, it sits just in front of a bus terminus. Given the large role served by buses in T4, I wonder how ever that could have happened.

Until our driver wandered over, we missed that the concrete sculpture bus plonked centrally in front of the mechanical buses was another memorial. Apparently, there is a counterpart bus touring the six killing sites. Which I like as the idea for a memorial; just that it's a little lost, a touch ambiguous, in its present location.

The plaque is touching. It's also small, inadequate. As Sophie says with irony, "Look, they're walking all over it". It was when we went to Potsdamer Place to the memorial for 'the dead Jews of Europe' that it became insulting. The Jewish memorial is truly monumental. It's a spectacular, contemplative, grave and very beautiful, the light reflecting from the top surfaces, all different heights, and so in a constant state of shift. Great slabs of stone, all sizes, undulating brick paved paths, a maze of tombs, genuinely a tribute. People were sitting on the outer slabs and some were tomb hopping; technically against the rules, but it felt right that the space should be inhabited.

The scale of the piece is appropriate – simply that the scale of the T4 one is minute, disingenuous. If you want to play a numbers game, on proportion and relativity, it's too damn small. It's as though someone thought to cancel the debt and check us off the list; job done.

The T4 memorial was put there in 1989 (and probably took enormous effort from those who campaigned for it), the same year as the Wall came down, presumably eclipsed by world events. Germany was divided by communism for less time than it took to put up a plaque for disabled people.

## Another holocaust

Yesterday Berlin, today Bernburg.

On the way to Bernburg, I feel my stomach lurch at the normality of all the surroundings, of everyday life. We eat breakfast, join the autobahn, in the backseat of the van there's a conversation about pinching out tomatoes, a lot of the time the passengers sleep. We travel through flat landscapes, thick forest giving way to green crops, and then we find ourselves in Bernburg, an ordinary mid-sized town with its killing centre just across the river.

We laugh a lot. I asked Frau Hache, who showed us round Bernburg, and was extraordinarily helpful and generous and very accepting of the different ways people need to respond to the space, how does she manage that work, year after year and twelve years on. We laugh a lot, she said. They are a close team and understand if someone has had too much and needs time away.

But what does it mean to have that as your local landmark? As your 'tourist attraction', even? Of course people carry on. They'll cycle past, call out to friends, children will laugh and play. Except they won't, because it's still a functioning psychiatric facility on the rest of the sprawling site. So they'll drive past, but they won't stop unless they have business there. But amidst all the avoidance and the carrying on, is the knowledge of its history still deep within the psyche or even just below the surface? There have to be surviving perpetrators or just surviving townspeople who saw the smoke, smelt the burning, watched the death buses arrive full and depart empty day in, day out. 9000 people in Bernburg's eight months of murder, but when the museum asks people who were involved to come forward, unsurprisingly no one does. There are moments of recollection, she says, during informal conversation, the subject broached side on and with enormous sensitivity, but nothing official, nothing that can be documented as academically verifiable evidence. Soon that generation will be gone and so will any possibility of first hand testimony.

From the disabled people caught up in all this, there can never be any testimony. Approaching one museum about hosting the Resistance installation, we were told they want first-hand testimony. No testimony, no coverage. Well, disabled people arriving at a killing centre never left alive; the day you boarded that bus was the day you died. So disabled people remain invisible. There won't be testimony, as there is for the Jewish holocaust; the 'rules' are not the same. What we face is a hidden history remaining until museums and historians are prepared to take a different approach from other holocaust studies.

Even second-hand accounts are scarce. There was a point today where I felt so angry. We asked about the portraits in little clusters on the crematorium walls, these beautiful faces with boundless untold stories; what were their names, their histories? She was able to tell of us five people, all women, whose families had consented to their being named. Where people in concentration camps were classed as prisoners and so their details are public, these were patients and their details are to be kept secret. The medical system that conspired to murder them retains a conscience when it comes to patient confidentiality.

Here are five:

Bertha Walley, aged 43, the perfect Aryan hausfrau with six children, aged from four to ten. Her beloved husband committed suicide. She was overwhelmed and admitted herself to the psychiatric institution. After two years, she was released, but readmitted because she could not cope. She was there for a further five years and so became a priority candidate. Her children went into care.

Else was 32 and engaged to a Jewish man. When he fled the country, she had to choose between him and her family. She stayed, but unravelled. She refused admission to hospital. Diagnosed with 'youth schizophrenia', the state killed her.

Ludiya was a teenager who fell from a ladder, resulting in neurological impairment – epilepsy, some learning difficulty, some walking impairment. Her family loved her. She was registered at a hospital because of her accident and at 16 was sterilised. A year later, she was removed from her family and killed.

Clare was 52. She had run the family shop. When it went broke, she fell apart. She was a patient for nine years, so high on the list.

Another woman, name unknown, was 86. Living in her own world, she plucked flowers from the wallpaper. She had no family, no relationships; she was too old and too confused to be considered useful. The photograph showed an intelligent, proud woman dressed in black, a large bonnet on her head. I would say a woman of means.

9,348 people killed at Bernburg, from a four-year old girl to this 86-year old woman, in a space of eight months.

I'm not really interested in the perpetrators; don't want to flatter them with my attention. I want them to be non-people. Of course their names are far more readily known. Heinrich Burke worked in a senior role at Bernburg and died of natural causes in 1981 after a long and lucrative career as a gynaecologist. Years after the war, he was found guilty of aiding the murder of 9200 people and was sentenced to three years. He was released after 16 months, considered too old and frail for prison, though youthful and fit enough to return to medical practice.

Upstairs, on the ground floor, was where paperwork was dealt with: death certificates and letters to relatives. 137 people worked at Hadamar, half of them clerical staff in four offices. When the first phase finished and the hospitals decommissioned for that purpose, boxes of files were shipped back to Berlin. Some were scattered in the bombing, but the paperwork – the evidence – was not intentionally destroyed. Papers have continued to be found up until just three years ago.

How is it that the concentration camps were so public, yet the Nazis tried to conceal the evidence, whilst Aktion T4 was supposedly secret, yet no attempt was subsequently made to hide it. And even so, the history is practically invisible.

On the road from Bernburg to Hadamar, we pass a 'tourist' sign to Buchenwald.

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At Bernburg we toured the cellars – people were led downstairs once they had been processed (stripped, photographed, 'examined' to decide a plausible 'cause' of death for the certificate; marked with an 'X' to indicate gold fillings or pathological interest) in a pseudo-medical but nominally, familiarly-reassuring routine. Once down the stone steps, they were assembled, then led into and locked into the gas chamber. The chamber was a smallish room, say 2.5 x 3.5 metres, cream tiles on the walls, black and white checkered tiles on the floor, three showerheads on the ceiling connected into lengths of 'water pipes'. By the entrance door was a small rectangular window to check the dying were dead. Two other doors allowed for the majority of victims, covered in faeces and blood, faces and bodies contorted in pain and terror, to be dragged (all so efficient) to the crematorium, where they were stacked and burned, whilst those with crosses were taken to the next room along.

I had seen so many images of the 'shower room' that there were no particular 'surprises', just a deep feeling of wasteland inside me. The next room along held a dissection room, crudely built on red brick stanchions with a white tiles top, a butcher's block. I'd seen photographs of this before too, but my reaction was visceral. I wonder if it has to do with the final desecration, that up to that point at least people could protest (sure, with no actual change to

the outcome, but a possibility of kicking, screaming, yelling, lashing out, whatever) but at that point, there was not even a possibility of that. And that they were worth more dead because of the gold in their fillings.

## Same difference

When we came back to the main corridor of the cellar and Frau Hache was answering our questions, I felt a deep, sinking melancholy – at the enormity, the hopelessness and the continuing resistance in museums, education, etc to acknowledging that this was not only a Jewish holocaust.

I am sickened by the numbers game, even as so much of the ‘holocaust industry’ draws us into it. I dispute the estimate of disabled people murdered – not counted are the Jewish people who never made it to the ghetto but were exterminated for being too old or having impairments; not counted are the Jewish, Gypsy and ‘asocial’ people and the gay men, selected early for gassing because they could not fulfil a work details or who were killed during the marches because they couldn’t keep up. Post-war photographs of artificial limbs piled high in concentration camps make it clear that disabled people were targeted beyond Aktion-T4.

In the end, the reeling off of numbers, quantifying of distinct groups – this many Jews, this many Romanies, this many Jehovah’s Witnesses, etc – makes the holocaust so huge and hopeless that we cannot approach the humanity of it. Here, at last, I am confronted with people. When you are faced with imminent death, do you think, here I am another [name your group] added to all the others dead? No, you think ‘my life, my loves, my family, my loss...’

What am I trying to say earlier about numbers? It is as though, in killing six million, the experience was somehow worse. But for each individual, it was life, their life. The numbers imply that the intent behind the murder was somehow worse, where the intention against all groups was obliteration. Same difference.

We divide ourselves at our peril. Pastor Martin Neimöeller said it best in his 1946 verse: “First they came for the sick, the so-called incurables

And I did not speak out – because I was not ill....

Then they came for me.  
And there was no one left  
To speak out for me.”

Aktion T4 enabled the Nazis to hone the machinery of The Final Solution, ultimately shipping the kit and fully trained staff wholesale to the concentration camps. If more people had connected themselves with these first targets, if more people had spoken out, then the course of this particular episode of genocide would surely have changed. At the very least, they'd have been less efficient at killing in such numbers. It might not have been six million and more. It might even have been stopped.

An expression in German, *wehret den anfängen* translates to beware the beginning.

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And so to Hadamar. Up to three buses arrived at a time and drove into the wooden garage where the doors were shut behind them. Passengers were unloaded and taken through a short tunnel to the building, so that they were hidden from the public in the town below. The routine was the same – undress, photograph, examination, marking up, heading downstairs. Today the ground floor, like Bernburg, is seminar rooms and an exhibition space: modern lined walls and strip lights, bright and bland. I don't know if I was less prepared than the previous day, perhaps the contrast of upstairs and downstairs accentuated it. The cellars stole my breath. If Bernburg was a butcher's, then Hadamar was an abattoir. The very building was raw, the remains of paint flaking off unfinished walls, stone block and red brick crumbling dust. As I sit here now on my comfy sofa, sun streaming in, the window open and a gentle breeze and the voices of children playing, and bring the feel of it to my mind, pictures and sensation, I ache.

The stone steps are a little worn in this building, now 102 years old. A handrail on either side, roughened metal and black paint, is worn smooth by 10,000 pairs of hands. I ran my hand over one of the handrails and wondered how many of the victims tried to steady themselves as they made their way down.

At a stretch it is possible to believe those at Bernburg might have been lulled into a false sense of security until the doors clanged

shut on the gas chamber – this is what statements from the death centre staff claim – but it is hard to believe that anyone reaching the top of those steps at Hadamar could have been deceived.

The process was the same as at Bernburg – descend, congregate, chamber, then cremation, with possible detour to the dissection table. The ‘shower room’ was a little smaller than Bernburg’s, tiled in the same way on walls and floor. A drain, set into the centre of the floor continued the illusion but was cosmetic. At the end of each killing session, bodies removed, the floors and walls were sluiced. On the floor is a track of limescale and residue showing the path of cleaning. The dissection table was stone, a solid shallow trough, angled slightly for drainage.

In the ‘shower’ at Bernburg, was a window near to the ceiling, the glass painted white, the frame blocked by vertical bars painted cream. When we were there, there were splashes of sun on the tiles. At Hadamar, the window was blocked with brick. It was opened up post-T4, possibly at the point where the hospital recommissioned the rooms for art therapy and basket weaving...

The rooms and corridors were dimly lit (the original fittings still working); the chambers were without light. Once the doors were sealed, it must have been pitch black.

## All the years

I left the group partway through the tour, having absorbed enough of facts and wanting to get closer to the people. I moved from room to room, space to space, paced the route they would have taken. I sat on the floor in the chamber and closed my eyes, my arms round my knees, my head resting on them, and felt this tremendous, physical pressure.

Hadamar operated for eight months in the official phase of Aktion T4: 10,000 people, an average of 44 murders per day. In the second, unofficial phase, the ‘wild phase’, it stayed open, the staff killing patients one to one by injection and starvation. And where no one survived the official A-T4 programme, there is one survivor of Hadamar’s ‘euthanasia’ actions. As an inmate, he was found to be useful for carrying bodies up the hill to the mass graves. (Gravestones were installed at regular intervals to make it all look legitimate from the town.) Now in his 80s, he doesn’t speak, but

dreams vividly. I presume he cries out in his sleep, because this is how the people who take care of him have learned of his life. All these years since the end of the war and he has endured the knowledge of it throughout. The tragedy/crime/pity of it tumbles into infinity.

At Hadamar, a school trip was all chattering voices and laughter; jarring. They went in through the main entrance, we up the ramp at the rear. As we passed them, there was a lull and several stared, but not one would meet my eye or smile. I know, I know – chattering, laughing, not looking properly at adults; they were teenagers. But. What does it mean to go to a memorial like that, know what happened was appalling and still not be able to meet a disabled person face on?