

The State Mental Hospital and Nursing Institution in Heppenheim – A Place of Deportation

Founded in 1866, the local mental hospital and care institution was initially regarded as a reform clinic, as it followed the treatment principle of “non-restraint” (avoiding the use of mechanical devices such as straitjackets). However, from 1933 onward, treatment of patients had little to do with progress. With the rise of the National Socialists, the intention to heal faded into the background, and the systematic murder of people with illness and disability was put into practice.

From 1934 onward, numerous people with various hereditary diseases, such as hereditary blindness or severe physical deformities, were forcibly sterilized. The regime euphemistically referred to this as “racial hygiene.” Legitimated by the “Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring,” more than 400,000 people across Germany were forcibly sterilized by the end of the war in 1945. The exact number of forced sterilizations carried out in Heppenheim remains unknown today because no records have survived.

Jewish life in Heppenheim in particular changed drastically under Nazi rule. In the summer of 1938, the Reich Ministry of the Interior issued an order requiring Jewish patients in state institutions to be housed separately, supposedly to counter the “danger of racial defilement.” Here too, corresponding records on the implementation of this measure in the Heppenheim institution are missing. The dehumanization of Jewish citizens became even more extreme when, in the same year, they were forced to adopt compulsory family and first names. From then on, all Jewish men were called Israel and all Jewish women Sara, unless they already had a typically Jewish name. At the Heppenheim institution, this affected 12 out of 14 Jewish patients.

After years of discrimination, the first targeted killings of Jewish patients took place in the summer of 1940 as part of “Action T4.” Today, this “action” is commonly known as “euthanasia,” cynically translated as a “good death.” This euphemistic term, of course, does not do justice to the brutal crimes committed by the National Socialists against the elderly, the sick, and Jewish people.

To record patients, institutions were required to fill out so-called registration forms. The “Euthanasia Headquarters” defined four groups of patients who had to be reported. These included

mentally ill individuals with limited ability to work, patients who had been institutionalized for at least five years, or those classified as criminally insane. The fourth group included all people who were not of German nationality or “related blood.” Selection was not based on the severity of illness or ability to work; for the regime, belonging to the Jewish “race” was reason enough. In Heppenheim, this affected 287 patients, including 24 Jewish individuals. The victims were first transferred to intermediate institutions and eventually deported to Hadamar, a killing center in northern Hesse. Only weeks later did relatives learn of the deaths of their loved ones, who were said to have died of “pneumonia” or “circulatory failure.”

From 1941 onward, the Heppenheim institution itself served as a “collection center” for deportations to Hadamar. Jews from large parts of Germany, for example from Weinheim or Konstanz, were brought to Heppenheim to await their transport to death. Here, too, the exact number of Jews held in this collection facility is unclear.

On February 4th, 1941, the deportation of all Jewish patients took place, carried out by the “Charitable Patient Transport Company.” The relatives received news of death from a psychiatric institution in Poland that no longer existed. In addition, they were required to pay the full care costs, which were charged far beyond the actual date of death.

After all Jews in German mental institutions had suffered the same fate, mentally ill Jews were only allowed to be housed in the Jewish institution in Bendorf-Sayn. From there, they were deported to extermination camps in 1942. The published number of at least 1,000 Jewish victims of the National Socialist “medical murders” is now clearly considered too low, especially when taking into account that more than 100 Jews were deported from the Heppenheim “collection center” alone.

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