12 Opposition and Resistance to Nazi Euthanasia

In spite of secrecy, the euthanasia killings carried out in the Third Reich could not be concealed from the public indefinitely. The killing of the sick became known and led to resistance from the inmates and their families. The most vehement resistance against the euthanasia program came from the inmates' closest relatives, who could hardly count on any support from the doctors or nursing staff. The very first deportations from Steinhof led to demonstrations in front of the institution, to which the authorities reacted by deploying police and SS forces. A flier distributed by the Graz branch of the illegal Communist Party condemned the deportation and murder of the Steinhof patients. Even the Allies took notice: the Royal Air Force dropped fliers in September 1941 that reported on Dr. Jekelius' murderous activities at Steinhof. Anna Wödl, a nurse and the mother of a handicapped son in the clinic at Gugging, fought with determination, but without success, for her son's life. She forced her way into the Reich Chancellery and the Reich Ministry of the Interior and urged a number of her relatives to send letters of protest to Berlin, where, indeed, "basketfuls of mail" arrived from Vienna. Wilhelm Roggenthien saved his girlfriend, Wally Hartung, who had been transferred from Hamburg to Vienna-Steinhof, from certain starvation. He himself had escaped from the clinic at Alsterdorf to rejoin Wally. At Steinhof he passed himself off as a relative and, after some tug-of-war, obtained her release. Massive protests against euthanasia came from the Catholic Church, which, in keeping with its tenets, advocated the protection of human life. Thus, Clemens August Graf von Galen, bishop of Münster, openly denounced in a sermon on 3 August 1941 the killing of mentally sick and physically handicapped people as murder. Also St. Pölten Diocesan Bishop Michael Memelauer did not conceal his disapproval in his 1941 New Year's sermon. Anna Bertha von Königsegg, mother superior of the religious order of the Barmherzige Schwestern in Salzburg, tried in vain to prevent the deportation of the patients in her care; she was arrested by the Gestapo and expelled from the Gau. The protests by the Church contributed to the official termination of "Operation T4" by Hitler, but they could not prevent the continued killing of patients in the institutions.

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