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Life unworthy of life – eugenics of “deteriorated” people in the Third Reich

Życie niegodne życia – rzecz o eugenice osób „niepełnowartościowych” w III Rzeszy

Abstrakt:

Już w 1933 r. władze III Rzeszy uchwałyły *Ustawę o zapobieganiu narodzinom potomstwa obciążonego dziedzicznie*. Na podstawie tego aktu prawnego pozbawiano życia osoby upośledzone zarówno psychicznie, jak i fizycznie. Ponieważ ci chorzy byli często podopiecznymi katolickich lub ewangelickich zakładów opieki, nieunikniona stała się konfrontacja między kościołami chrześcijańskimi a reżimem nazistowskim. Kościół katolicki potępił nazistowski program eugeniczny w oparciu o encyklikę *Casti connubi*. Natomiast kościoły ewangeliczne nie zajęły w tej kwestii wspólnego stanowiska. Dlatego też protestowali jedynie pojedynczy pastory.

Słowa kluczowe: III Rzesza, eugenika, polityka, kościoły chrześcijańskie, eksterminacja

Abstract:

The *Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring* was enacted as early as in 1933. Based on that law, people with mental or physical disabilities got deprived of their lives. The ones in question were frequently the patients of social welfare facilities run by Catholic or Evangelical churches. Therefore, the confrontation between Christian churches and the Nazi regime became inevitable. The Roman Catholic Church condemned the Nazi program of eugenics, based on the *Casti Connubi* Encyclic. Evangelical churches, however, did not come to the common ground and there were only isolated pastors who protested against the idea.

Key words: Nazi Germany, Eugenics, Politics, Christian Churches, Extermination.

Introduction

The term eugenics comes from the Greek word *eugenes* – “well-born.” Its authorship is attributed to a 19th century doctor Francis Galton, who was a cousin of Charles Darwin. He was a physician dealing also with psychometry, statistics, and even meteorology. The concept of eugenics was based on reproduction of individuals with the desired physical and mental characteristics (positive eugenics) and/or permanent sterilization of individuals who did not have such characteristics (negative eugenics). Eugenicists built their concept on the

basis of Darwin's theory of natural selection. In a linear manner, they translated the laws governing the world of plants and animals to interpersonal relationships, which undoubtedly was a reversal of the hundreds of years of the development of humanity. Edmund Osmańczyk (1946, p. 72) wrote: „*There was among the primitive tribes the trend to kill the weak, that is, the crippled, the elderly, the sick. That law, governing in nature, condemning the weak ones to death to promote the development of those who are strong, has been imbued with the human souls since the primal times up to this day, despite the popularization of Christ's revelations*”.

The German Nazi eugenic program

Two years before the introduction of the 'Nuremberg laws' – on July 14, 1933 – the first legal regulation announcing the application – on a scale hitherto unknown – of the methods of so-called negative eugenics (from the Greek *eugenes* – “well-born”), namely *The Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring* (*Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses*) was passed. The number of supporters of eugenics had increased significantly in Germany during World War I, when it was argued that the sick occupied the beds in hospitals that were needed for wounded soldiers, and received food rations, while the rest of the population was starving (Hagemann, 2000). The Nazis returned eagerly to that 19th century concept, perceiving it as bringing various benefits (such as savings in the state budget, the possibility of relocation of the medical personnel to other health care institutions, which would be of particular importance in the event of war, as well as the chance to “breed” a Nietzsche's “superhuman”). Hitler (1941), even before coming to power, wrote about that in his *opus vitae*: “*Der Kampf um das tägliche Brot läßt alles Schwache und Kränkliche, weniger Entschlossene unterliegen (...)*” [The struggle for the daily livelihood leaves behind in the ruck everything that is weak or diseased, and less determined].

For the sake of justice, it should be pointed out that the Third Reich was not the first country in the world to translate the theory of eugenics into the legal regulations. Subjects with genetic diseases were sterilized in 26 States in the United States, Denmark, Swiss canton Waadt and the Canadian province of Alberta (Zaremba, Bielawski, 2011), though of course not on such a scale as in Germany, where – in addition to the genetically diseased individuals – also the enemies of the regime were eliminated with the use of such methods. a German historian, Hans-Walter Schmuhl (1987, p. 130) points out that “without the establishment of the National Socialist regime such a process of radicalization would not be likely to occur”.

The first attempts to draw up rules to regulate the births, and more precisely: to sterilize the individuals who, according to the state, were unworthy of reproduction, took place in 1932, still in the times of the Weimar Republic. The draft law was developed by the Prussian State Health Council (*Preußischer Landesgesundheitsrat*). It contained provisions on

eugenic sterilization, but voluntary, with the consent of the person concerned (ibid.). The law did not come into force, because the Reichstag passed a much more radical one, applicable throughout the Reich, i.e. the aforementioned *Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses*. The person responsible for the preparation of the relevant provisions was the Minister of the Interior Wilhelm Frick. For this purpose, he appointed a special advisory body, comprising, among others, people involved in the so-called. "racial hygiene" (*Rassenhygieniker*) such as Ploetz, Rüdin, Lenz, Burgdörfer, the President of the Reich Physicians Association – Wagner and the senior activists of the Nazi party – Himmler, Darré and von Schirach (Sipowicz, 2016). Work on the law progressed at a rapid pace. The team was formed on June 2, 1933, and 26 days later, Frick presented to the other members the basic assumptions of the new regulations (Neliba, 1992). He argued that 20% of the population of Germany was genetically diseased, and that type of subjects – in his opinion – reproduced two or even three times more often than the outstanding individuals, moreover, he pointed to the alleged 30-percent decline in the number of births (Schöne, Luger, Krull, 2014).

The ready draft of the law went to a meeting of the Government on July 14, which also approved the Concordat between the Reich and the Apostolic See. The only member of the cabinet, who strongly opposed the eugenic aspirations of Hitler, was his deputy, Franz von Papen (Richter, 2000). His opposition was mainly motivated by fear of the reaction of the Vatican, with a focus on that adverse coincidence. The Vice Chancellor advocated the Prussian solution, i.e. voluntary sterilization (ibid.). Although Papen's *votum separatum* led in fact to mitigation of the individual provisions, in practice it did not alter significantly the sinister plans of the Nazis. The law introduced sterilization of genetically diseased subjects if, in accordance with medical knowledge, their offspring would be (with a high degree of probability) handicapped physically or mentally (*Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses*, [in:] *Reichsgesetzblatt*, 1933, I, p. 529, art. 1, para. 1.). Among the diseases eligible for such surgical intervention, the following medical conditions were included: debility, schizophrenia, manic-depressive disorder, epilepsy, chorea (also called St. Vitus' disease), severe physical deformities, but also blindness, deafness and severe alcoholism (ibid., art. 1, para. 2 and 3). The person affected by one of those conditions or, in the case of minors and mentally disabled, their legal guardian could apply for sterilization (ibid., art. 2, para. 1.). Other persons authorized to submit such a request (to judicial institutions specially set up for that purpose) were appointed doctors and heads of hospital establishments, prisons, nursing homes and therapeutic facilities (ibid., art. 3, para. 1 and 2). Authorization of the latter was restricted to the residents of the listed agencies. In practice, the proportion of voluntary applications was ok. 4%, of those submitted by appointed doctors – 78% and by managers of the establishments listed in the act – the remaining 18% (Baader, Peter, 2018). Thus, the Nazi government legalized *de facto* the compulsory and irreversible mutilation of its own citizens

who did not fit into the vision of the “Thousand-Year Reich” inhabited by the tall, blue-eyed, blond-haired Aryans, healthy and physically fit.

It did not take long to find out that the state authorities often took advantage of that legal instrument. Only in the year 1934 over 30,000, and from 1934 to 1945 400,000 people were subjected to sterilization (Schmuhl, 1987).

After two years of the applicability of the Act – on 26 June 1935 year – the authorities of the Third Reich decided to revise it, expanding the catalog of compulsory surgical procedures by adding abortion. It was, therefore, the transition from “prevention” to active destruction of “life unworthy of life” (*lebensunwertes Leben*) (Nitschke, 1999). The fetus could be aborted if a woman who was to undergo sterilization by an order of the appropriate court became pregnant before it was performed (*Gesetz zur Änderung des Gesetzes zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses*, [in:] *Reichsgesetzblatt*, 1935, I, p. 773, art. 2, para. 1.). The procedure could be performed before the sixth month of pregnancy and required *de iure* the consent of the woman. In practice, however, the doctors or the courts enforced such consents, or, in general did not request it at all (Friedlander, 1995). It is estimated that such a practice took place in approx. 30,000 cases (*ibid*). The new rules do not mean the legalization of common abortion, to which only the woman’s request would be sufficient. The termination of pregnancy remained prohibited under penalty of a fine or imprisonment, and the case-law in this type of offences was much stricter than before Hitler came to power. On 4 February, 1936, the wording of that law was changed once again, by introducing the seemingly “cosmetic” changes. The term “surgical procedure” was replaced by a “medical procedure”. Thanks to the new formulation, the range of medical abortion techniques was extended by induction of artificial abortion by means of X-rays and radium (Kravetz, 2019).

The eugenic issues were resolved directly by the *Führer’s* Chancellery, the head of which was Philipp Bouhler, which was addressed at the beginning of 1939 by a professor of pediatrics, Werner Catel, from Leipzig. He reported to Hitler a case of his patient, a child handicapped physically and mentally. He recommended that the parents should apply to the Chancellor with the request for his approval to – *par excellence* – kill the child. The *Führer* upheld the request of the Knauers, ordering to proceed in the same way in similar cases (Sipowicz, 2016). Thus, the Third Reich legalized the euthanasia of children, although without the enactment of a special law, as the practice was confidential. It should be noted that Hitler’s decision related only to children staying in their family homes. The other minors who had been in the different types of care facilities, were murdered according to the principles set out in the laws described above and on the basis of the *Führer’s* secret regulation signed by him in October 1939, and then backdated to September 1st of that year (Biesold, 2011).

The euthanasia campaign was given the codename “*Aktion T4*”, taken from the address of the central institution supervising the course of action, located in Berlin-

Charlottenburg at Tiergarten Street no 4. In 1940, only in one extermination camp established in the castle of *Grafeneck* (Baden-Württemberg) approx. 300 children (patients of the care facility in Emmendingen) were killed in gas chambers (ibid.). The “experience” (techniques of killing, logistics, etc.) gained during that time served the Nazis during the Holocaust, especially considering that under the euthanasia program it was intended to implement the first massive scale murders of the Jewish population. To this end, in the summer of 1938, the Aryan residents of care facilities were separated from the Jews, who (both adults and children) were transferred to specially created concentration camps (initially located mainly in Brandenburg), where were brutally killed in gas chambers (Bergman, 2012). Starting from 1940, the Jews residing in psychiatric facilities were treated in the similar way.

„*Aktion T4*” was so effective that at the beginning of 1941 the head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, asked Bouhler to lend him the doctors involved in this action, to “examine” the most severely ill prisoners in the concentration camps (Vellguth, 2014). Euthanasia of those prisoners was code-named “14f13”, where “14” meant death in a concentration camp, and “13” the type of death, i.e. killing with gas. “Specialized” doctors visited the camps in Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Auschwitz, Flossenbürg, Groß-Rosen, Neuengamme and Niederhagen to qualify the prisoners previously selected by the SS prisoners to *Sonderbehandlung* (“special treatment”), i.e. “14f13”. Initially, that group consisted of people unable to work, and therefore completely useless from the Nazi point of view. Over time, the criteria were extended to include “asocial psychopaths” whose “disease” was only belonging to, or supporting, the communist movement. The Nazi officials did not even conceal that fact, writing in the “Symptoms” box bizarre statements, such as “a confirmed communist” or “known KPD officer” (Klee, 2010). The selected prisoners of these camps were not killed there, but were transported to special extermination centers (so-called *Tötungsanstalten*) – created previously within in the framework of operation “T4” – among others in Sonnenstein, Bernburg and Hartheim. The people sentenced to death were told that they would be transferred to another camp, where they would receive better medical care. As a result of the implementation of the “14f13” extermination program, approx. 20,000 people lost their lives (ibid.).

Euthanasia has always been opposed by the Catholic Church, standing on a position that only the Creator can decide on the life or death of a human being. That standpoint was expressed by the Pope Pius XI, announcing on December 13, 1930, the *Casti connubii* Encyclic, which presented the contemporary threats to the Christian marriage. However, the attitude of Catholic priests to this issue was not so equivocal. Among the German clergy there were supporters of voluntary sterilization, such as a Jesuit Friedrich Muckermann or a theologian Joseph Mayer, who in the year 1927 openly supported the legalization of eugenic sterilization for the reasons of so-called racial hygiene (Schmuhl, 1987). It should be noted that despite his declaration Muckermann was a strong opponent of national socialism, which

forced him into exile. He published at that time an anti-Nazi magazine of Catholic profile *Der deutsche Weg* (Besier, 2010).

The Fulda Episcopal Conference received the signals concerning the eugenic legislation planned by the government. The response of the bishops was immediate: On the 1 May 1930, they conspicuously criticized the draft of the law (ibid.). However, it did not change in any way the position of the government, which – as already mentioned – led to the imminent enactment of the new legislation. In those circumstances, the hierarchs of the German Church adopted as their goal the exclusion of Catholic medical personnel (especially nuns) and Catholic judges from participation in the implementation of the sterilization program. The idea was expressed in the memorandum that was sent by the President of the Conference, cardinal Bertram on September 12, 1933 to Minister Frick (Conroy, 2017). The aftermath of that *“aide-mémoire”* was delegation of the Archbishop of Freiburg Conrad Gröber and bishop Berning to negotiate with the national administration in respect of the exemption of those people from the implementation of the provisions of the Act. The authorities agreed that the Catholic managers of care facilities would not have to apply for sterilization for their charges, but still maintained the obligation to notify the appropriate state authorities of patients eligible for the surgery in their centers. Therefore, the concession granted by the regime was only symbolic. In addition, the Holy Office, despite earlier objections of German ecclesiastical authorities, gave their consent for the presence of nuns during the sterilization procedures on July 24, 1940, provided that the replacements for them did not give sacraments to the patients (Weingart, Kroll, Bayertz, 1992).

The strongest objection against the *Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses* was expressed by the Archbishop of Münster, Clemens August count von Galen, who published a pastoral letter on January 29, 1934. The document annoyed Frick to such extent that he sent an official protest to both the episcopate and the Vatican (Schüler, Flammer, Wolf, 2007). The attitude of von Galen was, however, an exception among representatives of the higher clergy in Germany. Undaunted by that fact, the Archbishop of Münster tried to convince Bertram to take decisive steps in defense of the lives of people who were unable to stand up for themselves (ibid.). However, the Wrocław Cardinal remained adamant. Bertram sent the requested letter to the head of the Third Reich Chancellery, Hans Lammers, as late as August 11, 1940 (Trautmann, 2010). That intervention, which, anyway, did not have any effect, was, above all, of a confidential nature, and therefore the criminal practices of the Nazis were not known to the wider public. H.-W. Schmuhl (1987) explains the behavior of the German episcopate by the desire to protect “their own interests”, and thus not to expose themselves to persecution by the regime.

Despite the passive attitude of his fellows, von Galen decided to denounce expressly the program of euthanasia. He chose initially the official legal route, submitting to the public prosecutor's office in Münster a notice of a possibility of committing a crime by the

government authorities (Schüler, Flammer, Wolf, 2007). Anticipating that it would not bring the desired results and motivated by successive reports of patients transported away from health care facilities (e.g. in Mariental), the Archbishop decided to share his opinions with the congregation. That is why he delivered on August 3, 1941 in the *Lamberti* church in Münster a sermon, which has passed into history. Von Galen pointed out that another human being must not be treated like “a machine that does not work, a horse that is irreversibly lamed or a cow which no longer gives milk” (Hagemann, 2000, p. 67). Besides, he added that a similar fate befalls the disabled workers, tuberculosis patients and the elderly and called for social ostracism of people taking an active part in this practice.

The text of the homily was later read in other churches and very quickly became known among the German population (including the front soldiers), and even beyond the borders of the Third Reich. In addition, it was dumped in the form of leaflets by the Royal Air Force (RAF). Fortunately, Archbishop von Galen escaped repression in respect of his activities, although prominent NSDAP activists (such as the gauleiter of Westphalia Alfred Meyer) called for placing the undisciplined priest in a concentration camp (Trautmann, 2010). The *Führer* decided to postpone the resolution to this problem until the post-war period. Hitler's decision can be explained in two ways: first, he did not want to escalate the conflict between the state and the church, and hence have the German Catholics against him; secondly, von Galen's echoed widely in the world, so his potential arrest had to be reckoned with strong international opposition, in particular on the part of the Vatican. However, the “ordinary” priests could not count on a similar treatment. This is confirmed by the case of four clerics from Lübeck, who were condemned to death by the People's Court (Volksgerichtshof) for distributing von Galen's sermons. They were three Roman Catholic priests from the Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish (*Herz-Jesu-Kirche*): E. Müller, J. Prassek, H. Lange; and one Evangelical pastor from Luther church, K. Stellbrink (Conway, 1969). They were executed on November 10, 1943. Three months earlier, the same fate befell a student of law, Maria Terwiel, who had also distributed the homily through an anti-Nazi (pro-Soviet) organization *Rote Kapelle* (“Red Orchestra”), centered around the *Luftwaffe* officer, captain Harro Schulze-Boysen (Schad, 2010). The words of the Archbishop of Münster had also affected the Scholl siblings, who, having founded the anti-Nazi *Weißer Rose* (“White Rose”) group, fought against the regime with the use of propaganda methods (ibid.). Von Galen realized that his speech against the eugenic practices contributed to the loss of life by many people:

“ (...) because they repeated my sermon, I put many of my best priests through concentration camps and even death” (ibid., p. 109).

It should be added that von Galen received full support of Pope Pius XII, who even after the end of World War II cited extensive fragments of sermons of the “Lion of Münster” (Trautmann, 2010).

The Nazi response to the first attempts of hierarchs of the Catholic Church to halt the eugenic program was the radicalization of activities directed against them. Over the years 1935/36 mass processes for currency offences were initiated against representatives of the clergy. Strict laws, prohibiting the export of foreign currencies from the country, were applicable in the Third Reich, whereas many ecclesiastical institutions had financial commitments abroad, which led to violations of these restrictions (Ryszka, 1962). The “hunt” for currency offenders was escalating, not avoiding even the former Papal Nuncio in Munich, Alberto Vassallo di Torregrossa, whose status after decommission of the Apostolic Nunciature was not specified (Besier, 2010). Despite the protests of the diplomat, the building of the former Apostolic Nunciature was searched in September 1936. As a result, the Italian liras as well as materials for encryption and decryption of messages and files were found. Nuncio Orsenigo filed a formal complaint on the proceedings of the authorities in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and then conducted negotiations with the head of the Political Department of the Ministry, Ernst von Weizsäcker (ibid.). The aftermath of that diplomatic intervention was permission for Vassallo di Torregrossa to leave the territory of Germany. It is noteworthy that, contrary to the practice applicable in similar processes, the Nazis kept the investigation against the Vatican diplomat in full secrecy. In addition to foreign currency-related processes, many investigations concerning crimes against morality were initiated (mainly against monks). The cases of homosexual contacts were disclosed during the search of the monasteries, organized in order to find foreign currencies (Schwartz, 1962). That fact was publicized by the Nazi propaganda exaggerating the scale of the phenomenon. The official newspaper of the SS, *Das Schwarze Korps* wrote about the “hordes of sex offenders” presenting the convents as “lair of debauchery” (Sipowicz, 2016). Goebbels, the minister of public enlightenment and propaganda, spoke in a similar tone, pontificating about the “sexual plague” rampant among the clergy.

“It was aimed at complete terrorization of the clergy, weakening their influence in Catholic population, and on this occasion, destruction of all and any, even the alleged centers of opposition against the regime” (Piwarski, 1960, s. 80).

As in the case of the Catholic Church, the eugenics legislation turned out to be a real challenge, both ethical and political, for the Protestant churches. It led to a controversy among the pastors. Some of them already in the late 1920's and 30's advocated taking into account the demands of “racial hygiene” in Evangelical care institutions (Conway, 1969). One of the key characters of this trend was the Secretary of the Joint Association of the German Evangelical Therapeutic and Nursing Facilities (*Geschäftsführer des Gesamtverbandes der deutschen evangelischen Kranken-und Pflegeanstalten*), Hans Harmsen, who initiated on January 31, 1931 the Evangelical Specialist Conference for Eugenics (*Evangelische Fachkonferenz für Eugenicist*) (ibid.). At its first meeting, which was held four months later in

the village of Treysa (currently Schwalmstadt in Hesse), Harmsen asked a rhetorical question:

“We grant to the state the right of killing criminals and taking human life during the war. So why do we deny it the right to eliminate disruptive lives?” (Klee, 2010, s. 107).

Further pronouncements of that “scholar” advocated social coverage (including medical care) only for those people who held promise to return to full productivity. Therefore, he regarded humans only as a labour force, which in the event of illness, not giving much chance for complete recovery, was not even worth receiving a treatment. Thus, he anticipated the principle of profitability, which was imposed by the Nazi regime on the managers of all care centers. The Nazi eugenic program found supporters among the pastors associated both with the German Christians (sterilization and euthanasia as a means of ensuring the racial purity of the German people included in the guidelines of that religious movement in 1932), and with the Confessing Church. This unanimity across division was explained by H.-W. Schmuhl (1987, p. 306) as the desire of the clergy to combat the socio-cultural phenomena, which constituted according to them “the epitome of the Weimar Republic”, manifest in “resentments towards socialism, democracy, liberalism,” pulp fiction“, “degeneracy of art” and moral decadence“. These resentment were expressed also in the acceptance of racial hygiene propagated by the new administration. The Protestant organization dedicated to social assistance, so-called Inner Mission, clearly endorsed the Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring, with the only reservation that each eugenic procedure had to be performed with the consent of the person concerned (Conway, 1969). a similar standpoint was represented by the Provincial Synod of Westphalia, dominated by the members of the Confessing Church, which approved that law on December 15, 1933. It should be emphasized that in the situations where the Nazi eugenic plans went far beyond the ethical objections of Protestant churches, they remained passive, expressing only a strange fear that the sterilized individuals will be prone to “sexual promiscuity” (Kühl, 1994). The number of patients undergoing sterilization procedures in the care facilities run by the Protestant community grew gradually: in 1934, 2399 such surgical interventions were performed, and in the first half of the year 1935 – already 3140 (Bergman, 2012). Although the Evangelical Church did not approve of forced sterilization and abortion, but in 1936 the year the Reich Church Committee (Reichskirchenausschuss) recommended to all of the pastors not to hinder implementation of the eugenic program by the state authorities, and even more – to encourage the residents to agree to the treatment voluntarily (Conroy, 2017).

The first facility in Württemberg subordinated to the Inner Mission whose charges were subjected to euthanasia was the care center for epileptics in Pfungstweide. On February 1, 1940, it was left by thirteen residents, whose lives – in the opinion of the authorities, “were not worthy of life” (Klee, 2010). In the same month, the management of that facility made an

official protest to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Württemberg, in particular that the criterion for the selection of patients was alphabetical [*sic!*]: the Nazi officials decided to kill the epilepsy patients in the order of their names beginning with the letters from “B” to “H” (Biesold, 2011). The local hierarch Wurm and the bishop of Baden Julius Kühlewein were informed about the incident. The former of them issued on July 19, 1940 a letter of protest to Frick, where in addition to objections theological in nature, he deplored the “procedure”, “scale” and “conspiratorial character” of the euthanasia program (Neliba, 1992). In fear of potential repressions, he emphasized at the same time that it was not his goal to act against the Nazi regime. His prayers for the success of German soldiers at the front and prayer of thanksgiving for the victory over France were intended to provide the evidence of his loyalty.

Therefore, the author of the letter probably found it bewildering when his appeal became known to the public opinion as an “underground” publication. Despite that, he did not confine himself to that intervention, addressing other letters to Lammers, Goebbels and the Minister of Justice Franz Gürtner (Friedlander, 1995). Other Protestant pastors tried to involve the Wehrmacht in the inhibition of the euthanasia operations, arguing that the victims of those practices were often soldiers returning to the country for treatment, in particular those suffering from nervous disorders. However, both civil and military authorities ignored in fact the protests of the pastors, which is illustrated by the case of a Württemberg facility in Stetten im Remstal, managed by Rev. Ludwig Schlaich. Although he supported the idea of “racial purity”, he was trying to prevent the extermination of his charges, who were repeatedly “transferred” to other facilities, and actually transported to the place of execution (Schöne, Luger, Krull, 2014). On May 30, 1940, 70 residents were deprived of life in this way (*ibid.*). Despite the letters of protest sent to Hess, in September another group of 150 people was murdered. That fact prompted Schlaich to undertake subsequent interventions, writing among others to Goebbels, Lammers, Gürtner and Frick, which proved to be totally ineffective, since on October 16, the authorities designated the next group of 92 patients with a view to their elimination (Nitschke, 1999). Then, the manager of the facility in Stetten im Remstal sought the help of a well-known Protestant theologian, Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, who along with pastor Paul G. Braune was appointed to examine the issue of euthanasia in the facilities subordinated to the Inner Mission, the institution founded in the 1840’s in Wittenberg, was responsible for the care of orphans, the crippled and the poor. The support of the clergyman from Bethel brought a partial success: the Ministry of Interior agreed to postpone the planned transport, which only delayed the execution by less than a month. In total, a half of all residents of this institution were subjected to euthanasia (Baader, Peter, 2018).

The approach adopted by bishop Wurm, limited to confidential letters addressed to prominent politicians, proved ineffective. The hierarch, driven by falsely understood loyalty

to the state authorities, chose not to denounce publicly the euthanasia practices. a completely different position was represented by a representative of the Confessing Church, Hermann Diem, who believed that the main weapon was raising objections in a way that was completely open, so as to keep the public informed about the practices of the Nazis and to gain their help for the Church to end these practices. Not only did the concept of Diem find no understanding in the German Evangelical churches, but also his native community failed to develop a common position in this matter. Therefore, many pastors took individual initiatives, like Ernst Wilm, who urged his fellows to inform their congregations from the pulpit on the methods of implementation of the eugenic program. Besides, he postulated that the care facilities should send their patients back to their families, which indisputably would prevent death of many of them. Wilm's activity led to his arrest in 1942. Then he was placed in the concentration camp in Dachau, where he survived until the end of the war (Conway, 1969).

It should be noted that von Bodelschwingh did not share the opinions of the aforementioned clergymen, especially that the facilities run by him were most likely intentionally bombed by the German air force on the night of 18 to 19 September, 1940 (Schöne, Luger, Krull, 2014). As a result of that incident, twelve children and a nun were killed, and many residents suffered serious damage to health. There are indications that the bombing was not accidental, and on the contrary it was intended to punish the undisciplined priest from Bethel, who strived to protect his charges, sometimes with success. On May 10, 1940, pastor Braune, who was the head of the facilities in Lobetal owned by Bodelschwingh, managed to thwart the export of 25 girls (Biesold, 2011). The time of probation came in mid-June, when the facility in Bethel received the application forms, which meant an indication of the patients to be exterminated. To prevent this, Bodelschwingh made a bold decision, informing the appropriate authorities of the state that his facilities would not complete those forms (Schmuhl, 1987).

It was only the September incident that forced him to change his position, but the change was not equivalent to approval, because the pastor from Bethel had set a condition that he would not sabotage the euthanasia operation if it was regulated by the law, which would involve the adoption of specific criteria, on the basis of which patients would be qualified for euthanasia in terms of medical indications, which would probably reduce the size of the extermination (Weingart, Kroll, Bayertz, 1992).

Conclusion

The reaction of the Evangelical Churches to the Nazi eugenic program – in contrast to the Catholic Church – was not institutional in character, and took the form of individual protests of individual pastors.

Eugenics causes polarity of positions in social discourse also in our times, although referring to the phenomenon as “eugenics” is avoided, using rather its component parts, i.e. euthanasia, abortion and sterilization instead. Fortunately it is no longer a part of the criminal regime, and remains a matter of the conscience of each of us. However, as rightly pointed out in the studies of Dagmar Herzog (2018) – the Nazi eugenic program has had a pervasive impact on the perception of people with disabilities both in Europe and on other continents.

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