

# Die Sonne: The Sun

## David Appleman

It was while photographing psychiatric hospitals in Eastern Germany that I first heard of the name Sonnenstein (pronounced Zonnenstein) and its association with Nazi euthanasia centres. Up until this point the small idyllic town of Pirna in the heart of the Saxony region was a singular identity and quite unconnected with my interest in hospital institutions. Yet it was at another hospital that of Arnsdorf that I was to be introduced to the reality of the hidden and secret past of Sonnenstein.

I had already visited this hospital some four months earlier and photographed the many ward buildings with their overtly Germanic, geometric figures. On returning to my car I noticed out of the corner of my eye a memorial plaque that I had not remembered seeing on my first encounter with Arnsdorf. The plaque, possibly recently erected had the name Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler inscribed in gold letters on it. A date 4.12.89 - 31.7.40 and the name Sonnenstein accompanied the inscription. Standing in front of this epitaph I decided to find out more of Sonnenstein and who Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler was and why she had died there.

Whilst researching at the Deutsches Hygiene Museum in Dresden and by referring to original journals I traced Sonnenstein back to 1922 when as a Heil und Pflegeanstalt (care and cure institution) it had originally housed 672 psychiatric patients. Sonnenstein's history over the decades like the other hospitals, Großschweidnitz, Arnsdorf and Bühlau that it shared its pages with, seemed at first glance unassuming enough. But then I noticed that it had suddenly closed in 1939. A year later Sonnenstein reopened its doors and by order of The General Foundation for Welfare and Institutional Care (Die Gemeinnützige Stiftung für Heil und Anstaltspflege), a state run medical agency, Sonnenstein became a special hospital to undertake medical experimentation and euthanasia.

Early in 1940 an organisation called T4 visited every mental hospital and psychiatric clinic in Germany to 'observe' each patient for evaluation and selection for the now in place euthanasia centres.<sup>1</sup> Sonnenstein was not unique as five other main centres were also by now staffed and operational.

Elfriede I learnt had been a patient at Arnsdorf, when one day a group of T4 specialists arrived at the hospital. Few staff and patients would have suspected the true identity of the visitors and the real reason for their journey, nor the eventual outcome of their mission. On inspection of the hospital register she too was among those selected for observation. Under the Nazis ideology of 'life unfit for life' thousands of individuals, those viewed as a 'burden to society' and therefore a drain on resources, the mentally ill and mentally handicapped as well as the elderly and those with incurable illnesses were to be taken from the many institutions and transported to the awaiting death centres. Elfriede was one of up to 100,000

individuals (the true figure is unknown) removed from Germany's hospitals.

I left Dresden (the birth place of Elfriede) where I was staying, and embarked on the thirty kilometer drive to Anstalt-Pirna that would roughly trace the route taken by those expelled from Arnsdorf some sixty years ago. At this point I still did not know if the buildings at Sonnenstein were still standing or even what had become of it over the years. While travelling my emotions seemed to heighten and become more aware. Lucid images of those confused at leaving their only refuge or for some the excitement of a promised holiday that was not to be, flowed uncomfortably through my mind.

As the winter sun flickered between the buildings of each successive small village that passed, I wondered, had they seen what I was seeing and had they known what I already knew? I was later disturbed to read that the windows on the buses in transport were blacked out. And unlike those from the institutions on route to Sonnenstein I knew where this journey would end.

At first on arrival at Pirna, I failed to spot the large buildings which lurked in the background of a protective village and resembled a stately home much less a killing centre. It looked so inconspicuous, but there it was, Sonnenstein. I climbed a series of stone stairs into the small estate which was surrounded by about four or five main buildings. It was a strange looking structure, the front profile was fortified like a castle yet at its rear the ground levelled out and was accessible by a small road which provided a natural terminus directly in front of the main buildings. This is where, several times a week, those arriving from catchment areas such as Sachsen, Thuringen, Franken, Schlesien, the Sudeten area, as well as transports from East and West Prussia would have disembarked.

I approached a doorway at the nearest building, which I was surprised to find was unlocked for some reason. So I entered Sonnenstein. The building I found myself in had been empty for many years, nevertheless it had been preserved much as it had been left. The long ashen coloured corridors with their lofty ceilings trailed into the distance and were sporadically interspersed by thick archways. Small windows illuminated the passageway and led to each of the individual rooms, which were also large and capacious. Over all it looked functional and purposeful.

I spent over two hours walking around Sonnenstein's airless interior trying to uncover its past, but the ghosts had long left this place, covered up to be forgotten. The lifeless building, no longer sentient, held few memories of what had once taken place here back in 1940. What had I really expected to discover and what of Elfriede who was the reason for my searching of Sonnenstein in the first instance? It all seemed so delusive trying to identify one single person where so many were held, yet all are now unreachable because there are no records, no witnesses



that they have ever existed. I knew that for all the men, women and children who entered this building, there was simply no trace.

Six months had passed since I had returned home somewhat disappointed that Sonnenstein had failed to yield its former secrets. I was frustrated to have abandoned my story unfinished, when one morning I received a news paper article from Dresden which described the plans for an exhibition and a workshop for the disabled which had recently opened at Sonnenstein. As part of the exhibition, biographies of 22 former inmates were to be displayed. At the foot of the feature was printed the name of one patient: Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler.

I realised that although I had been in the Sonnenstein centre, I had not entered the sections known as C 16. These parts of the building by agreement have remained unused and are rarely visited. It was within one of the disused rooms of C16 that the mobile gas chamber and crematorium (which would have been screened off from the eyes of the victims) had operated.

Yet with innate clarity one could envisage how nearly 15,000 people had been murdered in the solitary three story building of C16. One would be surprised to realise how little space is required to facilitate the killing of so many people. The whole operation which required technical specialists, support staff, administrators, clerks, carers, doctors, nurses and the special command (police) at the institution's gate amounted to no more than a mere 100 staff. As I reflected on the empty room I could see them rapt, silently working away, the smooth cotton of their white coats concealing the coarseness of their grey regulation uniforms.

This gives one an insight, incredulously as it may seem into the Nazi process for extermination and just how proficient it actually was. It could be argued today that the difficulty for many people (albeit few would deny) in accepting the sheer scale of the actions of the Nazis is the fact that whether statistically or in reality; conceiving of these things is still difficult for many.

Sonnenstein was closed in 1941 after the cessation of the official euthanasia program. Wild euthanasia, especially of children continued until 1945.<sup>2</sup> This was not before a secret directive from Berlin, known as 'Aktion 14f 13', committed to death by euthanasia thousands of mental defectives, the incurably ill / insane, criminals and Jews



FAR LEFT:  
Elfriede Lohse-  
Wächtler, 1920  
CENTRE LEFT:  
Elfriede Lohse-  
Wächtler, 1922  
NEAR LEFT:  
Elfriede Lohse-  
Wächtler, 1928

who had been sent via the various concentration camps.<sup>3</sup> It was the chilling first step in the collaboration between the euthanasia centres and the concentration camps, and the progression towards what would become the systematic execution of millions in the new extermination camps.

The seemingly unimaginable number of deaths, estimated somewhere between 11 and 15 million (which became the holocaust) proposed by the Nazi Government had also been potentially realised through the research carried out within the euthanasia programs. The methods or more so the aptitude for killing which had been devised, developed and tested in the euthanasia centres were in 1942 transferred to the secret, purpose built extermination camps of Poland. In Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka (Chelmno & Auschwitz were already operational) the technological legacy of euthanasia (gassing) would be further perfected to that of mass genocide on an unimaginable scale.<sup>4</sup>

It is generally accepted that the sequence of events that we now refer to as the holocaust were premeditated, to be initiated by powerful bureaucrats in the Nazi hierarchy and delivered by the party elite: the SS - Schutzstaffel (protection squad). The killing system had to be flexible and in practice relied far more on the individual personalities and the dispositions of those involved than any rigid system. It is only when we view these separate stages of the holocaust that we can see an overall plan.

It is no mere coincidence that from the close of the main euthanasia centres around 1941, the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA) then began its biggest campaigns against civilians. Poland's mental hospitals, institutions and sanatoriums had already been cleared by the Einsatzgruppen (SS death squads), who followed closely behind the main occupational troops.<sup>5</sup> One year into the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941; 750,000 civilians had been killed.

As in Poland, Russia's hospitals were also ransacked and its patients disposed of by the SS and former T4 operatives.<sup>6</sup> In Russia, the gas vans that proved so instrumental in the euthanasia program and the deaths of the mentally ill now drove a 'new victim' relentlessly for miles, until they were dead. The final death toll of (Russian) Jews would be in the millions. Most were shot but the increased use of gassing as a chosen means of extermination had played an active part; and would continue to do so.

In January of 1942 at the Wannsee conference, Ministers and Nazi leaders proposed a final solution draft to the 'Jewish problem'. Their decision culminated in Operation Reinhard. In May of 1942, the same year as Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka II, Chelmno (Kulmhof) and Auschwitz Birkenau came into being, the SS battalions of Operation Reinhard were mobilised.<sup>7</sup> Assisted at times by the Wehrmacht (army) the Einsatz Kommando units started to round up, with systematic intent, the millions of individuals who would be transported (or killed on the spot) to the awaiting extermination camps. Albeit the numerous 'aktionen' were intended primarily to drive the



Jewish populace to the death camps; tens of thousands of people from other ethnic and social groups also became victims of the SS purges.

All the camps that had the euthanasia centers (whose sole objective was to kill) used gas as the agent to dispatch its victims. Appointed as heads to the camps at Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka II, Chelmno and Auschwitz Birkenau were those who had previously worked in T4. Absorbed and then consumed in the inferno; whole communities, their culture, history and (most precious) their lives were lost forever to the dictator regime.

Are we guilty too in forgetting them and not seeing our fellow human being? Of course we are not. But it was designed by the Nazis that we should. As with the euthanasia centres and extermination camps it was the intention to erase all traces of the individual, their actual death and in many cases even the person's past identity. When one views the monochrome photographs of the Nazi camps, these anomalous images of bodies hardly recognisable as our own, and notes their impersonal titles—'victims', 'removing the dead', 'survivors'—one sees another dimension of Nazi philosophy: their deliberate desire to not only destroy the human being but also the human spirit.

Yet these holocaust deaths do not stand alone as a single genus or a single event nor were the violations perpetrated solely by one individual group against one distinct individual. The largest group of individuals to have suffered from the racial policies of National Socialist doctrine were Jewish (approximately 6 million deaths). One of the lesser groups and often the least remembered were those identified as disabled, elderly, handicapped and mentally ill.

In the post war years with the focus firmly fixed on the anti-Fascist hero and the ensuing

Cold War, Sonnenstein's victims were quickly forgotten. The future generations were not told of individuals such as Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler and the thousands of other murdered (psychiatric) patients. Obscured by the secrets of a dark past, their identities have remained hidden.

Although my thoughts are of Elfriede and it is she I search for, I feel that we have lost her forever. For from within the shadows of that spiritless room in C16, a multitude of unidentified and unnamed faces clamber through my mind. I am engulfed by the pleas of their lament which pursues me from their darkness, and whose (own) voices ask with a defenceless whisper; 'what about me?' Although I now realise that I will never find her, it is with Elfriede (who initially, yet unintentionally led me to the story of Sonnenstein) that I will conclude my story.

Elfriede was born in 1899, into the comforts of a respected middle class family. Her father, Gustav Adolf Wächtler, a salesman had high hopes for his cultured daughter. Elfriede's hunger to pursue a serious artistic career developed during her teenage years, much to her father's frustration. Gustav Wächtler disapproved of his daughter's choice of career. Elfriede nonetheless enrolled at the Dresden School of Applied Art in 1915 to study fashion design. Quickly changing her course, she joined the department of applied graphics. As a young artist, Elfriede swiftly escaped from the control of her father and started to explore her new life. In 1916 (still only seventeen) she moved into her own apartment. The short bob hairstyle and the unorthodox manly apparel (cap and pipe) worn by Elfriede soon got her noticed among her peers. Her relationship with her father however had practically ceased. Elfriede would only visit her family when he was not present.

A talented artist of astute character, Elfriede



continued her profession under the guidance of Oskar Georg Erler (professor of art) and produced work in many media, including porcelain pendants and lithographic greeting cards, which she sold to finance her studies. Adopting the pseudonym 'Nikolaus' in an attempt to promote her reputation, Elfriede mingled with the avant garde of her generation and made significant connections with such established artists as Conrad Felixmüller, Otto Dix and Otto Griebel. She met Kurt Lohse (an art student) through one such encounter with Johannes Baader (Dada movement) and Lohse practically moved in with Wächtler. Married in 1921, Kurt struggled to provide for Elfriede, and her disappointment in Kurt weakened an already temperamental relationship.

The couple lived apart while Elfriede worked in other cities and then later by choice. Albeit married to Elfreide, Kurt fathered three illegitimate children between 1927 and 1930. Kurt resented Elfriede's independence and craved a subordinate wife, who would stay at home and produce a family. Increasingly isolated by Kurt and by the couple's friends, who rallied to Kurt's side, Elfriede's marriage and her mental state started to fall apart. Kurt on his part further dis-

played his indignation towards his wife by giving her finished canvases to his art students to paint over.

In 1929 while residing in Hamburg, Elfriede, troubled by her relationship worries and personal debts, suffered a serious nervous breakdown and was hospitalised. (Always the artist) Elfriede produced a series of sketches portraying psychiatric patients. She emerged two months later to start (according to many) the most successful period of her career as an artist. Elfriede's resilient nature fortified her and in May of 1929, she held her first major exhibition (a collection of her hospital portraits) at the Kunstsalon Marie Kunde. Lacking funds, Elfriede economised and worked in water colour and pastel. She produced a large volume of work from allegorical fantasy scenes to the reality of life in Hamburg's notorious red-light district.

More exhibitions and favourable reviews followed but her success was short-lived. Germany was sunk in economic depression and about to face the politics of a new era—that of Nazism. From the early 1930s, until her admission to a mental hospital in 1932, Elfriede's life was one of near poverty and periodic homelessness. Alone and vulnerable, she returned to her parents'

home.

In June of 1932 Elfriede was committed (on her father's request) to Arnisdorf psychiatric hospital, and subsequently diagnosed as having schizophrenia.<sup>8</sup> During her formative years at the institution (she found hospital life quite unbearable), Elfriede remained optimistic towards her future and continued with her sketches.<sup>9</sup> Between 1932 and 1934, she frequently wrote to her parents in the hope that they would request her release from Arnisdorf.

In May 1935, the institution became Elfriede's legal guardian. Refusing to be sterilised, the hospital no longer permitted her to visit her parents which she had done for one week each year. Hence in 1935, Elfriede was forcibly sterilised by order of the 'Law for the prevention of Genetically Defective Offspring' in Dresden Friedrichstadt, a general hospital. Her human spirit broken by the sterilisation, Elfriede ceased her art work. Seven months later Kurt Lohse divorced her.

From 1939, Elfriede's only meals were thin soups. Coupled with the hospital's lack of care towards its patients and suffering the effects of malnutrition due to her starvation diet, Elfriede's physical health deteriorated. Despite this, she remained mentally resolute and on the 5th March 1940, sent an Easter postcard (which she had drawn) to her mother. Elfriede's Easter card entitled *Blumenstück* (the flower arrangement) read: "Don't be afraid anymore, things will be fine again". "I'm also looking forward to your visit." On the 31st July 1940 (five months later), Elfriede died in the gas chamber of Pirna-Sonnenstein. Many of her sketches drawn at Arnisdorf were destroyed as degenerative art.

Today we have the paintings and sketches drawn by Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler; whom as a young woman dared to be different and dream of artistic acclaim, yet would not live to enjoy her success.<sup>10</sup> Through these art works, we can share in her personality, aspirations and her thoughts.<sup>11</sup> Her work is her testament and allows us to appreciate the richness of her talent and of her life.

## notes

1. T4: the code name for the euthanasia program was derived from the address of the chancellery headquarters at Tiergartenstrasse No. 4 in Berlin.
2. In Autumn of 1940, 145 children from Katharinenhof, an institution in Saxony run by The National Society of the Home Mission for Children were taken to Sonnenstein and gassed. The remaining children were later transferred to the state institution Großschweidnitz (a psychiatric hospital) and starved or killed by medication. The story of the children of Katharinenhof Großhennersdorf is recounted in the commemorative book: *Erinnerung Wi(e)der Vergessen* (1997) by Dr. Boris Böhm.
3. 'Aktion 14f13': A program to reduce the numbers of those identified as 'undesirable' or 'asocial' from within the concentration camps. At Sonnenstein on July 28 1941 575 inmates from Auschwitz concentration camp were killed by lethal injection. 'Aktion 14f13' was known by camp inmates as Operation Invalid.
4. Chelmno (Kulmhof): A 'test experiment' using gas took place on Dec 8th 1941. Previous 'test experiments' were performed on mental patients and then on Russian prisoners of war. Chelmno has its own euthanasia legacy in being the first extermination site to make use of the gas vans.

5. Two publications: *History Of The SS* by G.S Graber (1979) and *SS Intelligence: The Nazi Secret Service*, Edmund L Blandford (2000) go into detail to explain the intricacies of the SS and its own association within the Einsatzgruppen and SD. Regarding the complexities of genocide with specific reference to the activities of the supporting Police battalions and the Einsatzgruppen: *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans And The Holocaust* by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen (1996). This extensive historical account also comments on the politics of the euthanasia project.
6. The first psychiatric patients to be murdered were probably Polish, as a result of Nazi occupation. By November 1939 over 4,000 asylum inmates were dead (Alan Farmer: *Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust* - p 68, 87). Throughout occupied Europe and Germany, mental hospitals / institutions and sanatoriums were cleared and their inhabitants murdered. Albeit not always officially within the T4 programme, these 'aktionen' were part of the overall and deliberate extermination of the mentally and physically ill.
7. Auschwitz-Birkenau: The first camp (Auschwitz I) was originally built in April 1940 as a labour / concentration camp. An extermination camp (Auschwitz II) at Birkenau was later added with gas chambers and crematorium and became operational in March 1942.

8. Literary sources are cautious to suggest that Elfriede was schizophrenic. At Hamburg (1929) a diagnosis for this illness proved unfounded.
9. With limited resources, she would re-use paper, frugally drawing around a previous image; such was her passion for sketching.
10. In recent years the works of Elfreide Lohse-Wächtler have gained increasing popularity. The majority of her pieces (preserved by her younger brother Hubert, 1911 -1988) have been exhibited throughout Germany and in the USA. These works are held by an association (Förderkreis), an artists' collective who further Elfriede's achievements. Single works are retained in private collections.
11. Elfriede's work can be viewed in three key publications: *Im Malstrom des Lebens Versunken* by Georg Reinhardt. *Elfreide Lohse-Wächtler Leben und Werk*, (an extensive monograph) edited by Georg Reinhardt, depicting 156 monochrome illustrations and colour plates. Also: *das oft aufsteigende Gefühl das Verlassenseins* by Hildegard Reinhart, depicting sketches of psychiatric patients and other works. There is a biography; *In Jammer und Schmerz ist sie verloschen - die Malerin Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler (1889 - 1940)* with photographs of Elfriede, written by Dr. Boris Böhm in the publication *Euthanasie—Verbrechen in Sachsen*. (All of these texts are in German, yet the images are in their own right rewarding).