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All Our Children

By

STEPHEN UNWIN

Dramatic Publishing Company
Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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(ALL OUR CHILDREN)

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49a Goldhawk Road
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ISBN: 978-1-61959-235-3

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To Joey

All Our Children was premiered by Tara Finney Productions at the Jermyn Street Theatre in London on April 26, 2017, and was directed by Stephen Unwin.

CAST:
ERIC ..... Edward Franklin
MARTHA ..... Rebecca Johnson
ELIZABETTA ..... Lucy Speed
VICTOR ..... Colin Tierney
BISHOP VON GALEN ..... David Yelland

The play was subsequently produced in New York City at The Sheen Center for Thought & Culture on April 6, 2019, and was directed by Ethan McSweeny.

CAST:
ERIC ..... Sam Lilja
MARTHA ..... Jennifer Dundas
ELIZABETTA ..... Tasha Lawrence
VICTOR ..... Karl Kenzler
BISHOP VON GALEN ..... John Glover

All Our Children

CHARACTERS

VICTOR FRANZ: A doctor, director of the clinic.
MARTHA: A maid.
ERIC: Deputy director, administrator.
ELIZABETTA: A mother.
BISHOP VON GALEN

SETTING: Winkelheim, Austria.
TIME: January 6, 1941.

"The unexamined life is not worth living."
—Socrates

INTRODUCTION

"Lives Unworthy of Life"

The persecution, sterilization and murder of hundreds of thousands of disabled people is one of the most overlooked chapters in the whole ghastly history of Nazi Germany.

Between 1939 and 1941 as many as 100,000 people with a wide range of disabilities were dismissed as *lebensunwertes Leben* (lives unworthy of life) and systematically killed in six converted psychiatric hospitals across Austria and Germany. Initially, lethal injections were used, but soon, at Hitler's personal recommendation, carbon monoxide was employed.

Aktion T4, as the program was called, was a logical extension of the eugenics movement, which had attracted support from a wide range of people, many with impeccable liberal credentials, across Europe and the United States. Few had suggested murder (although Virginia Woolf, confronted by a group of "imbeciles," wrote in 1915 that "they should certainly be killed"), but the Nazi program of compulsory sterilization of people with "congenital conditions" was widely accepted.

With the outbreak of war, the persecution escalated dramatically, and on Sept. 1, 1939 (the day of the invasion of Poland), Hitler signed his notorious Euthanasia Decree, which stated that, "after a discerning diagnosis," "incurable patients" should be "granted mercy death." Intellectually justified by Social Darwinism, this policy received popular support on the grounds of cost, with a poster claiming that a man "suffering from a hereditary defect cost 'the People's Community' 60,000 Reichmarks during his lifetime." As a leading Nazi doctor said, "the idea is unbearable to me that the best, the flower of our youth, must lose its life at the front in order that feebleminded and irresponsible asocial elements can have a secure existence in the asylum."

By early 1941, 5,000 children, many only a few months old, with a wide range of conditions—Down syndrome, "idiocy," cerebral palsy, and so on—had been assessed, registered and murdered. Initially, their parents were asked for their consent, and a panel of three "medical experts" was convened to agree on the course of action. In due course, however, deception and social pressure were deployed, and children were sent to so-called "special sections," apparently to receive medical treatment, but instead bussed off to their deaths.

Public opposition to the program was limited. Probably the most striking intervention came from the churches, especially the Catholic Bishop of Münster. Clemens August Graf von Galen (1878-1946) belonged to one of the oldest aristocratic families in Germany. He spent 23 years (1906-29) working as a parish priest in a poor district in Berlin but, as a staunch conservative, had opposed what he perceived to be the immorality of the Weimar Republic. Indeed, the Nazis, who saw him as an ally, welcomed his installation as Bishop of Münster in 1933. From the outset, however, he objected to many aspects of the regime and took editorial responsibility for a volume of essays criticizing the paganism of the philosopher and ideologue Alfred Rosenberg. He voiced his disapproval of Nazi racial theories and helped draft Pope Pius XI's anti-Nazi encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* (1937).

He is best known, however, for his criticism of the murder of the disabled and, in July and August 1941, delivered three sermons that didn't just criticize the program, they challenged the entire Nazi value system. In one of them, he asked why these "unproductive citizens" were killed:

> The opinion is that since they can no longer make money, they are obsolete machines, comparable with some old cow that can no longer give milk or some horse that has gone lame. What is the lot

> of unproductive machines and cattle? They are destroyed. I have no intention of stretching this comparison further. The case here is not one of machines or cattle that exist to serve men and furnish them with plenty. They may be legitimately done away with when they can no longer fulfill their function. Here we are dealing with human beings, with our neighbors, brothers and sisters, the poor and invalids … unproductive—perhaps! But have they, therefore, lost the right to live? Have you or I the right to exist only because we are "productive"? If the principle is established that unproductive human beings may be killed, then God help all those invalids who, in order to produce wealth, have given their all and sacrificed their strength of body. If all unproductive people may thus be violently eliminated, then woe betide our brave soldiers who return home, wounded, maimed or sick.

Thousands of copies of the sermons were illegally circulated, and local protest groups broke the silence that surrounded the program. Copies were also dropped by the RAF and inspired various resistance groups.

The Nazis were in two minds about how to respond to the "Lion of Münster." Some advised Hitler to execute von Galen or, at least, send him to a concentration camp; but others, especially Goebbels and Bormann, recognized the danger of alienating German Catholics, and von Galen—a close friend of the new Pope, Pius XII—was subjected to house arrest from late 1941 onwards. Hitler declared ominously in a private conversation that "the fact that I remain silent in public over church affairs is not in the least misunderstood by the sly foxes of the Catholic Church, and I am quite sure that a man like Bishop von Galen knows full well that after the war I shall extract retribution to the last farthing." Von Galen survived Hitler, dying of natural causes in 1946, and was beatified by his fellow German, Pope Benedict XVI, in 2005.

Astonishingly, partly as a result of von Galen's intervention, the program was formally discontinued in August 1941. It would be overstating the case to say that he stopped the murder (a further 100,000 disabled people were killed before the end of the war in less formal settings), and many of the techniques and personnel were employed in the far greater Jewish Holocaust that escalated so dramatically after 1941. Nevertheless, his denunciation was one of the most courageous and outspoken acts of resistance in the Third Reich.

All Our Children is very much a work of fiction. There is no evidence that von Galen had a meeting of the kind that I have dramatized (though he did talk with senior figures in the SS), nor do we know of a doctor involved in the program having qualms about what he was doing. What's clear, however, is that his intervention raised the most profound questions about the innate value of the human being, regardless of cost or productivity, and his voice, for all its stubborn absolutism, deserves to be heard.

It would be absurd to claim that disabled children face anything like this level of discrimination today. Nevertheless, there is a huge amount to be done to ensure that they're given the same opportunities as their able-bodied siblings. It's often said that you can judge a society by the way that it treats its most vulnerable. If Nazi Germany failed that test in the most abject way imaginable, we should never forget its terrible lessons.

—Stephen Unwin, London, 2017

All Our Children

ACT I

(VICTOR's office. Dawn.

On one side, there is a large desk with a window behind it. Heavy curtains. On the other side, there are two comfortable chairs and a small round table beside a stove. One double door into the room. There is a wall with a large number of box files. Medical certificates. A painting. Comfortable fittings. Radio and phone on his desk.

VICTOR is asleep by the stove. The curtains are shut. The stove has burnt out. The room is dark.

MARTHA comes in. She doesn't see VICTOR at first. She goes over to put some letters on VICTOR's desk and opens the curtains. Brilliant winter sunlight floods in. She turns and is very surprised to see him.)

MARTHA. Oh, Doctor, you gave me such a shock.

VICTOR. I'm sorry, I must have—

MARTHA. Haven't you been back to your room?

VICTOR. Herr Schmidt and I had a chat last night, and I—

MARTHA. Goodness, let me clear that up.

(She clears up the remnants of sandwiches and beer from the table.)

VICTOR. Good beer, Martha.

MARTHA. Not much of that cognac left, I see.

VICTOR. It was mostly me, I'm afraid. Herr Schmidt didn't stay long. I sat here reading and—

MARTHA. Fell asleep?

VICTOR. Yes.

MARTHA. You should sleep in your own bed, Doctor, or you'll get ill. Then where would we be?

VICTOR. Indeed. *(He coughs.)*

MARTHA. It's terribly cold this morning. I slipped on the ice.

VICTOR. You be careful, Martha.

MARTHA. I'll get you your breakfast.

VICTOR. And some water, I think.

MARTHA *(smiles)*. Rightio.

(She leaves. There is a pause. VICTOR picks up a box file at his feet and glances at a page.)

VICTOR. Oh Christ.

(He closes the file and takes it over to the bookcase. MARTHA returns with a jug of water and a towel.)

MARTHA. I'll get you a fresh shirt.

(She goes. He takes off his shirt and washes himself. She returns.)

VICTOR. That's better. Healthy mind healthy body. *(He dries himself.)* Thank you. *(He starts to cough.)*

MARTHA. That cough of yours. It's not getting better is it? *(She leaves.)*

(VICTOR does a few stretching exercises and puts the new shirt on. Turns the radio on. German news. VICTOR impatiently

retunes it. Mozart's "Music for 13 Wind Instruments." He stares out the window for a moment. MARTHA returns with breakfast: coffee, bread, ham and cheese.)

MARTHA *(cont'd)*. Here we are.

(He turns the radio off and sits at the table as MARTHA lays out his breakfast.)

VICTOR *(regarding the coffee)*. Is it real?

MARTHA *(laughs)*. Herr Schmidt got hold of some beans. God knows where from.

VICTOR. He's clever, our Eric. With a drop of that cognac, I think, don't you?

MARTHA *(smiling)*. You're the doctor … *(She takes the coffee to the drinks table and drains the bottle.)* That's the end of it, I'm afraid.

(She hands it back to him. He sips it.)

VICTOR *(regarding the cheese)*. Lovely. Dutch?

(MARTHA smiles.)

VICTOR *(cont'd)*. So, Martha, how's everything? Family all right?

MARTHA. Not bad. Hans had a week away, camping. Training, really. Long hikes and too much beer as far as I can tell. And Grete's been on a course with the BDM. Cooking, cleaning, that sort of thing.

VICTOR. How old is she now?

MARTHA. Seventeen last October.

VICTOR. I remember her coming here—

MARTHA. Feels like last week.

VICTOR. Has she got a boyfriend yet?

MARTHA. Oh, don't be silly. She's much too young.

VICTOR. And how's Freddy's chest? You were worried.

MARTHA. Nothing serious, thank God. He just can't shake it off.

VICTOR. Well, this weather. Forecast says it's going to snow. You should take him to a doctor.

(They look at each other.)

VICTOR *(cont'd)*. Not me, obviously.

(They both laugh.)

MARTHA. No.

VICTOR. I wouldn't mind seeing some normal children again. I used to, remember?

MARTHA. Before.

VICTOR. The old days, eh? *(Pause.)* Not like this lot now. More's the pity.

MARTHA. Freddy's very normal, thank heavens, just perfect.

VICTOR. I'm sure.

MARTHA. A right little chatterbox.

VICTOR. Do they miss their father?

MARTHA. Yes, but Christof writes now and then. Not often, but when he can.

VICTOR. Where's he stationed?

MARTHA. Out east, I think.

VICTOR. Poland?

MARTHA. Must be. Infantry, you know. Nothing fancy.

VICTOR. I see.

MARTHA. This was their first Christmas without him.

VICTOR. What a shame. *(Stands up.)* Well, I must get on. When Herr Schmidt gets in, ask him to come and see me, would you?

MARTHA *(clearing up the breakfast)*. Of course. Oh, and Doctor, there's a Frau Pabst wants to see you. She's one of the mothers. I said she could come at eight, when she gets off her night shift. I hope you don't mind.

VICTOR. That's rather—

MARTHA. She just wants to thank you. I'm sure she won't take long.

VICTOR. I see. *(Pause.)* That's a bit—

MARTHA. I couldn't say no—

VICTOR. Well, if I have to.

MARTHA. I feel for the mothers. Imagine having one of them—

VICTOR. Very well. Thank you, Martha.

(MARTHA leaves. VICTOR goes to the desk, lights a cigarette and stares out of the window. There's a pause.)

VICTOR *(cont'd)*. How does it go again? *(Reciting.)*

Über allen Gipfeln
Ist Ruh,
In allen Wipfeln
Spürest du
Kaum einen Hauch—

(ERIC comes in suddenly.)

ERIC. Heil Hitler.

VICTOR. Ah, Schmidt.

ERIC. What was that just now?

VICTOR. Goethe.

ERIC. Really?

VICTOR. Our national poet. The land of writers and thinkers.

(Pause.)

ERIC. No, I don't know what you're talking about, I'm sorry.

VICTOR. Oh, it doesn't matter. *(Pause.)* But look at the trees. So still.

ERIC. That's because there's no wind.

VICTOR. Peaceful. Don't you think?

ERIC. If you say so. It's damn cold out there, that I do know.

(VICTOR coughs and wheezes.)

ERIC *(cont'd)*. And that's not got any better, has it?

VICTOR. No.

ERIC. It's those cigarettes. Bad for your health, Doctor.

VICTOR. I know, I know.

ERIC. They're going to ban them soon, I hear.

VICTOR. Over my dead body.

ERIC *(laughing at the incongruity of what VICTOR's saying)*. Exactly. To save the nation's health, says Dr. Goebbels.

VICTOR. Well, they won't stop me. My one bit of freedom in this— *(Still looking out of the window.)* I mean look at that crow. Hopping from twig to twig looking for a berry "in all that ice and snow." What a thankless task. But it's free. So free.

ERIC. Like you smoking?

VICTOR. Exactly.

(Pause.)

ERIC. I've never seen the point.

VICTOR. You don't get the point of poetry either, do you?

ERIC. Not really.

VICTOR. But you have vices of your own, Herr Schmidt, don't you?

ERIC. Certainly not.

VICTOR. No?

(Pause. Again, looking at each other, silently.)

ERIC *(smiles, finally)*. I like motorbikes. *(Pause.)* I bought myself a new one last week, you know?

VICTOR. Oh yes?

ERIC. Zündapp K800. A 1937. What a beaut. *(He mimes its speed.)* Secondhand, of course. I couldn't afford—

VICTOR. I'm sure you'll get a raise soon.

ERIC. I'd better.

VICTOR. Any other vices?

ERIC. Certainly not. What are you suggesting?

VICTOR. Oh nothing.

ERIC. Good. *(Pause.)* So, the maid told me—

VICTOR. Martha, you mean?

ERIC. Yes, Frau Trondheim said you stayed up all night, staring into the fire.

VICTOR. I did.

(Pause.)

ERIC. Did you sleep?

VICTOR. A bit.

ERIC. And didn't go over to your quarters?

VICTOR. What's it to do with you?

ERIC. Well, why—?

(Pause.)

VICTOR. I couldn't— *(Pause.)* Nothing really. *(Pause.)* Bad dreams, that's all.

ERIC. About here?

VICTOR. Other things too.

ERIC. How odd.

VICTOR. Quite normal. Under the circumstances—

ERIC. But Doctor—

VICTOR. Yes?

ERIC. This is important work. You do know that, don't you?

VICTOR. Of course.

ERIC. Which requires dedication.

VICTOR. Herr Schmidt, please. It's just—

ERIC. What? *(Pause.)* You should be sleeping like a baby.

VICTOR . Do you?

ERIC. Of course. Life is to be lived.

VICTOR. And death is the end?

ERIC. This is my youth. And I don't intend to waste it.

VICTOR. So who's the lucky lady?

ERIC. I beg your pardon?

VICTOR. Try to be a gentleman, Herr Schmidt. Kindness is—

ERIC. What an odd thing to say.

VICTOR. Perhaps. *(Pause.)* Who knows? *(Starts coughing again.)* So, what's the schedule today, then?

ERIC. Well, the morning's clear. Ward round at midday as usual. Then early lunch over in the canteen. A couple of suppliers I'd like you to meet. *(Pause.)* But first, Doctor, we'd better—

VICTOR. This month's transport?

ERIC. Yes. It's a larger group than usual.

VICTOR. I see.

ERIC. Thirty-two in total. Two buses.

VICTOR. What was last month?

ERIC. Twenty-four. It's these quotas. Berlin expects us to—

VICTOR. All ages?

ERIC. Mostly late teens. A few early twenties. Two younger ones, I think. We're bending the clinical guidelines as it is—

VICTOR. I see.

(Pause.)

ERIC. And tonight you've got a visitor. Bishop von Galen, remember?

VICTOR. Christ, what does he want, do you think?

ERIC. Well, you saw his letter in the paper.

VICTOR. I did.

ERIC. Program Director Brack wants you to deal with him.

VICTOR. Right.

ERIC. I'm a bit disappointed, to be frank. I thought we'd done with that lot. I thought that was the whole point.

VICTOR. You'd think so, wouldn't you? *(Pause.)* So what am I going to say to him?

ERIC. I'm sure Berlin will tell you.

VICTOR. They never tell me anything.

ERIC. The usual stuff: taxpayers money, improving sanitation, lightening the load on the medical profession, that sort of thing.

VICTOR. Why can't the office do its own dirty work?

ERIC. I suspect they think you'd do it better.

VICTOR. What, and take the blame?

ERIC. Not at all, they want it from the horse's mouth, as it were. Senior pediatrician. Medical experience, and so on. The bishop will trust you.

VICTOR. So I'm being wheeled out as some kind of goddamned expert, am I?

ERIC. Of course. Years of service.

VICTOR. I'm dreading it. I'm a doctor, not a—

ERIC. It's just PR, you know. Listening politely to the sentimental squeals of the ignorant.

(VICTOR coughs into his handkerchief and looks for blood.)

ERIC *(cont'd)*. Blood?

VICTOR. Occasionally.

ERIC. You should see a doctor.

VICTOR. Perhaps.

(Pause.)

ERIC. So, shall we go through this little list of mine, then?

VICTOR. Of course.

(ERIC takes a box file out of his case, and lifts out a pile of papers, each with its own photo etc. These are real people. He gives VICTOR a typed list.)

VICTOR *(cont'd)*. Thank you.

ERIC. Two ticks, please: diagnosis and cure.

(ERIC hands VICTOR a red pencil. Pause.)

VICTOR *(regarding the red pencil)*. This reminds me of my first year at medical school.

(ERIC smiles. VICTOR glances down the list. He checks each case study and says "yes" as he marks them individually with two red ticks. This mustn't be hurried: there should be thirty-two sheets and each is a real person. After each one, ERIC adds it to his pile. At one point VICTOR stops.)

VICTOR *(cont'd)*. Not yet for young Karsten I think, don't you?

ERIC. If you say so.

VICTOR *(starts again. And then stops again)*. No, no, not Edith Manstein. Really no.

ERIC. No?

VICTOR. I heard her singing the other day.

ERIC *(scornfully)*. Hardly.

VICTOR. Moaning.

ERIC. Well, there you are then.

VICTOR. How old is she anyway?

ERIC. Here, fourteen.

VICTOR. Why her now, I mean.

ERIC. Well, it's obvious.

VICTOR. Is it?

ERIC. Yes, straightforward idiocy. She can't do the simplest—*(Pause.)* She won't notice, anyway.

VICTOR. Very well. Actually, no. Not Edith Manstein. *(Marks a few more and stops again.)* And not him either. Absolutely not.