



## Hadamar memorial: History teaches us to be vigilant

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### **Dr. Jan Erik Schulte, historian and Director of the Hadamar Museum reflects on the Memorial on the anniversary of the "Night of the broken glass."**

On 9 November, the world commemorates the anniversary of the “Night of broken glass”, or “Kristallnacht” when German Nazis, in 1938, attacked Jewish persons and property in a coordinated wave of antisemitic violence.

The Museum is one of the main memorials that commemorate the victims of National Socialism in Hesse. In its present form, it serves as a reminder of the Nazi “euthanasia” crimes.

Vatican News’ spoke to historian and director of the Hadamar Memorial Museum, Dr. Jan Erik Schulte, who shared his reflections on the importance of remembering the past.

### **The Hadamar Memorial Museum is an International place of remembrance. It commemorates all those persecuted in the course of the Nazi “euthanasia” crimes, between 1941 and 1945. Please tell us a little more about what happened in Hadamar in these years...**

**Dr. Schulte:** Hadamar was one of the killing centers of Nazi euthanasia, that is, the killing of people with disabilities and those with mental illness. And during the time of the Nazi dictatorship, there were various programs for the killing of people with mental illnesses and other diseases. In Hadamar itself, the place we are right now, there was one of these killing centers where between 1941 and 1945, almost 15,000 people were murdered. In 1941, they were gassed in a gas chamber. And between 1942 and 1945, they were killed because they didn't get their medication or they got poisonous medication or they simply did not get any food. So this actually was one of the major, major killing centers of euthanasia in Germany at the time.

### **Hadamar today is an international place of remembrance. Do you have many foreign visitors? Where are they from and why are they coming?**

**Dr. Schulte:** Basically, Hadamar is an international place of remembrance because of two reasons. First of all, because people from various countries were killed in Hadamar actually. The major part of those killed here were people from the German Reich, so they were German, but there were also people from Poland, from the former Soviet Union, and also people from Italy were killed here in this place. Usually, they were forced laborers which were sent to Hadamar. That is one basic information which is, I think, important, but usually people do not know - that this is a place where people from various countries were killed. Also from France, for example.

Today, Hadamar is an international place of remembrance. And, usually during the summer time, I have to admit, we have people from various countries who visit us, and sometimes it's relatives who come from the United States, from all over Europe, from Southern America, who visit the place where their forefathers died, where they were killed. But we have also people who are in the broader sense, tourists. Before the pandemic, we had quite a few people from Spain who were traveling through Germany and also visiting our place here. We have also had groups, for example, from Israel visiting usually as part of a commemoration tour or an educational tour. And we had quite a few people from Japan coming here because there was a time when there was a

discussion about how Japan dealt with people with disabilities. And so, yes, we have various groups of people who come here. Apart from this, most visitors do not come in groups, but for a single reason. They come to Hadamar because they are interested in the topic or also they are simply in the region and decide that is something important they want to visit.

**Even in our present times, there is a war in Europe, how important is it to have a place like the Hadamar Memorial Museum, a place that reminds us of the crimes of the former times and during former wars?**

**Dr. Schulte:** I think it's very, very important that we, first of all, do not forget those people who were murdered during the Nazi dictatorship, that also today we remember what happened to them. I think that is the basis for our understanding of how dictatorships work and what is the ultimate goal of dictatorships: that is killing, mass killing and these are crimes. I also think that when we study the mechanisms of how people were set outside society, how people were seen as not being humans. When we see these mechanisms in the past, we see - that is my strong belief - also what happens today, we see that there are mechanisms today, that there is a rhetoric today, which goes in this same direction: that we say that some people are not worthy to live in our midst, that some people are different. I think there it all starts. And when we decide, when we have a discussion, when we have a rhetoric, who says some people are different from other people and therefore they do not have the same rights. I think that is very basic. But I think when we learn about the past, we see how it happens today. It's not the same, we are not in the same situation. But I think that is very important for our societies where we live in, where we all see that this situation happens. I think it's also very important for the wider society. If we think about the war, which is happening right now in Europe and not far away from us, it is very important to understand how this war happened and what the rhetoric is. And we see right now that there is a nation, state, which is being degraded by another state that says that they do not have a right simply to exist. If we look at the past, we have the same situation. So awareness perhaps is the basic line. This place hopes to establish awareness of what happened in the past and what can happen in the present and in the future.

**You were talking about euthanasia, and disabled people - topics that are still important today. Pope Francis and the church speak about this as well...**

**Dr. Schulte:** I think from the basic beliefs of the church, there is, for sure, a moral authority to talk especially about the things which happened here in Hadamar - the killing of mentally ill people, of people with disabilities. And I think it is very important that the churches talk about what happened today, with regard to these groups, but also with regard to the broader society. I think this is very, very important to speak about. More and more, I almost have the feeling, that the discussion is about us and others. And I think that is the basic problem of community, of society. When we are disintegrated. And I think the churches have moral authority, they have still moral authority to talk about this and to point the finger right at the problem we have there. And I think it's very important for all institutions to talk about this. And I think it's very important that we all understand that all humankind is the same. And I think that is a basic belief of the churches. With regard to the time period of the Nazi dictatorship the churches - both churches, the Protestant and the Catholic Church, were definitely against euthanasia. And quite early on, beginning in 1940, when euthanasia started in the so-called 3rd Reich they sent letters to authorities to discuss this - what happened, the killing of people, and that this should stop.

Unfortunately, at least in the beginning, this was only on the level of correspondence. So there was no public discussion, and there was no public statement by the churches to condemn these crimes. However, in August 1941, the Bishop of Münster, Graf von Galen, during a sermon in his church, condemned euthanasia and made it public. He publicly condemned this and said that all people should resist being part of this. And it's also important because this helped that at least the

euthanasia action T4 stopped by the end of August 1941. And we also know from the bishop here in this region , the Bishop of Limburg at the time, that he also wrote a letter by the end of August 1941 to the Reichsminister of Justice talking about what especially happened in Hadamar. This is from the letter from Bishop Helfrich to the Reichs Minister of Justice from August 13, 1941.

Now, I'm quoting:“ About eight kilometres from Limburg in the small town of Hadamar, on a hill directly above the town, an asylum which had formerly served for various purposes, most recently as a sanatorium and nursing home, has been built or set up as a place where it is generally believed that euthanasia has been carried out according to plan for months since about February 1941. Buses with a large number of such victims arrive in Hadamar more often during the week. Schoolchildren in the surrounding area know this car and talk: , Here comes the murder box again. After the arrival of such cars, the citizens of Hadamar watch the smoke rising from the chimney and are shaken by the constant thought of the poor victims.”

So I think this is a very important document to show what happened. It also shows that there was some resistance - but as I said before, usually it was not a public resistance, but it was tried as a part of an administrative procedure. And that's not something the Nazis reacted to.

Source: [Vatican News](#), November 10, 2022.