



Lina

or
The Short Life of an
Exceptional Girl



Ruth Alice Dunkelman

with advice and support from Brigitte Wege

For our mother Elsa Dunkelmann,
née Bernhardt.



In loving memory of Jürgen Wege.

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Foreword

Aunt Gertrud's 85th birthday is being celebrated in Schwäbisch Hall in October 2010. Numerous well-wishers arrive and the stream of visitors seems to have no end.

After lunch, everyone waits for coffee. The excitement has died down a little and Aunt Gertrud leans back and relaxes. "Yes, yes, we used to be ten siblings, now there are only the three of us," she says to her two sisters Hanna and Elsa. Everyone present nods thoughtfully, then all the names and dates of birth are listed. This is not at all easy, especially since the siblings did not grow up together – some of them only met when they were adults.

Once again I take this opportunity to ask about Lina. But today, too, I only get a short, vague reply: "The Nazis killed all the disabled people back then." And it's not the first time I have heard this. I try to ask more questions, but quickly give up, as I realize that none of the sisters knows anything more about Lina's fate.

"You would have had to ask Liesl," my mother says. Aunt Liesl was the oldest of the siblings, and died years ago.

I am very much annoyed that I didn't ask earlier. "It's really sad that no one remembers Lina anymore," I say to my mother. "After all, she was your sister and my aunt."

The thought of Lina haunts me persistently from then on. Finally, I set off in earnest in search of her.

On the internet I come across the Deaconry in Stetten, where Lina is mentioned at a memorial service. Her medical records do indeed still exist there. There are also a few lines about Lina and her siblings in Lichtenstern. Finally, old lists

stored in the state archives in Ludwigsburg also prove helpful.

At this point, I would like to take the opportunity to thank Mr. Reiff of the archives office in Stetten, Mrs. Richter from the Lichtenstern Protestant Foundation and the friendly staff at the Ludwigsburg State Archives. They helped me a lot, in the end almost all my questions were answered. Unfortunately, in all this research I did not find even a single photo that could be unmistakably identified as a picture of Lina. But at least now, more than 70 years after her death, she has finally acquired a face and a voice.

Ruth Alice Dunkelmann, February 2019

History

Based on belief in the doctrine of racial hygiene, people with disabilities and mental illnesses were exposed to discrimination and persecution at an early stage under National Socialism. From January 1934, they were subjected to forced sterilization on the basis of the Law for the Prevention of Hereditary Diseases. Approximately 400,000 people suffered this fate by the end of the war, and about 5,000 died as a result of the operations.

By the summer of 1939 at the latest, the decision had been taken in Hitler's entourage to destroy mentally handicapped and mentally ill people as "lives unworthy of life".

The murders, which the perpetrators called "euthanasia", were systematically planned. Within the framework of various murder campaigns (e.g. "Action T4", "Reich Committee Children", "Action 14f13" or "Second Murder Phase"), approximately 300,000 people lost their lives under the National Socialist tyranny between autumn 1939 and the end of the war in 1945.

In "Action T4", approximately 70,000 people were murdered in the gas chambers of six killing centers between January 1940 and August 1941. The last of these to be built was the Hadamar killing center. Approximately 10,000 patients were killed in its gas chamber between January and August 1941. After a break of one year, the former Hadamar state sanatorium resumed its function as a killing center. As such, it was integrated into the "Second Murder Phase", in which murders were carried out primarily with overdosed

medication and targeted malnutrition. From August 1942 until the end of the war, another 4,500 people died in Hadamar.

(<http://www.gedenkstaette-hadamar.de>, accessed 28.07.2012)

In the parental home

It is summer of the year 1926. Two-year-old Lina lies on her bed and moans quietly. Everything hurts her, especially the right side of her body hurts unbearably. Hunger and thirst also torment her, but that is nothing new for Lina.

"Mommy," she cries feebly and babbles unintelligibly to herself. She hasn't learned to speak yet, she only knows a few simple words that she can hardly remember now. She stares intently at the door.

Liesl, who is seven years old, finally comes in. Lina beams at her sister and calls out, "Yoo-hoo."

"Yes, I know you're hungry," Liesl says. "Here, drink your tea, mother made it specially for you."

Lina reaches for the cup and for Liesl's hand. "Stay wi - ," she stammers and tries to hold the girl with her gaze.

"I can't stay, I have to go out again," Liesl explains. "The lady next door will give me a some bread and jam if I hang out her washing, I'll bring some for you." And already she is out the door.

For long days, Lina lies on the bed in the kitchen. Most of the time she is asleep or dozing. When she is awake, she stares at the door and waits for Liesl or her brother Fritz. Only in the evening does her mother come home with her little sister.

At night Liesl snuggles into bed with her. This makes Lina happy because she doesn't like to be alone. Liesl tells her what she has done and seen all day. One day she whispers a secret in her ear: "Soon we'll have another little brother,

because the other one has gone back to the dear Savior.” Lina nods, silently moved; she finds this incredibly exciting.

Sometimes her mother pushes the basket with little Gertrud in it next to the girls’ bed. Lina can’t get enough of the tiny hands and the sweet little face. She tries again and again to stroke the baby, but her hand hurts too much and won’t move properly.

Lina has a fever, a high temperature. Her mother takes her to the Deaconry Hospital in Schwäbisch Hall.

Anxiously, Lina opens her eyes. It is very bright all around her. A large room with white walls, and the people are also dressed in white.

A man leans over her and stares into her face. Lina cries out in fright. Fortunately, her mother is there to hold her in her arm.

“It’s all right, Lina,” she says softly, “don’t get upset, the doctor will make you feel better soon.”

The doctor looks rather stern. “Polio, probably. That’s not good, it’s bound to leave its mark; I suppose she’s already had measles,” he murmurs. The mother nods.

Lina is very hot and can’t keep her eyes open any longer. In her fever she fantasizes, dreams of little children and of her little brother in heaven playing with the angels.

At home she is startled out of sleep by loud shouts. It is her father shouting: “What a pigsty, this is no way to live! And there’s nothing decent to eat either! No wonder the children are sick!”

“What am I supposed to cook with if you don’t bring any money home? You have to take it all to the pub and pour it down your throat!” her mother yells back just as loudly.

Lina stretches out her arms to her father, but he doesn’t see her. Today he probably won’t sit at the table with her and feed her. Otherwise he does that often and Lina loves it, even if her mother thinks she should feed herself – but it’s just too hard for her with her bad hand.

Fritz sits at the kitchen table and cries quietly. He is six years old and has just started school; he doesn't like it much. Today the teacher gave him a beating because he still didn't have a notebook. His mother didn't want to buy him one – he shouldn't need one in the first grade, she said.

“But I *do* need a notebook now,” Fritz whines as the door loudly slams shut. His father bangs his way down the stairs and slams the door at the bottom as well.

“Yes, run away – you just do that, and leave me with all the misery!” the mother shouts after him through the window. “And you,” she turns to Fritz, “you tell your teacher that we don't have any money for this nonsense. What do you have a slate for! And now I don't want to hear another word about it, do you understand?”

Fritz says nothing in reply. But he will get a notebook. The neighbors give him things now and then if he asks them very nicely. Or he will ask Liesl, maybe she will give him a few pages from her notebook. He knows that he has to help himself, because there is no talking to his mother today. He can see that from her red face and the strange gleam in her eyes.

Mother and father

Marie Luise and Friedrich Bernhardt were married on 17 August 1918. It was a wartime wedding, Friedrich was briefly home on leave. A few months later the war ended and their life together could begin.

Marie Luise was born as the daughter of a maid in Enslingen near Schwäbisch Hall. Her mother was unmarried, which was quite a disgrace at the time. Luise was certainly made to feel it throughout her childhood. Friedrich came from a large family in Flossholz, a tiny village in the forest not far from Schwäbisch Hall.

Perhaps they met at a village festival or worked for the same farmer? In the family register there are no more than a few dates and names that we can only barely bring to life with the help of the imagination.

After the wedding they moved to Steinbach (now a district of Schwäbisch Hall). Neither of them received anything from home other than a few good words of advice. What they need to live, they had to earn for themselves.

Friedrich works in factories, and sometimes in the quarry. The work is very hard and the pay is always insufficient. They only buy the most necessary household goods for a small modest apartment.

After work, Friedrich often goes to the inn. A beer doesn't cost the earth and there are pubs on every corner. The other boys and girls from the village also meet there. They all know each other and can spend a few convivial hours together.