

Letter to the Dead

Sophie Trist

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Sonnenstein State Welfare Hospital, Pirna, Germany

17 July 1941

Dear Mutti and Vater,

I'm not as stupid as the doctors and nurses here think I am. Because I can't walk, they look right through me and think I don't know what's going on. No one even cares that I'm writing. I'm condemned to gnatentod, mercy death, so my words will never leave the hospital. This letter will be burned along with my body.

If I didn't have these few sheets of paper and this pencil stub, I think I would go mad. Frau Geller pressed them into my hands as we boarded the bus for Sonnenstein, knowing how much I love to write. Eva told me that I would get to write my own book one day. She said it in the wild, desperate way girls talk when we dream of the impossible. But Eva is dead now. They took her—took all the others from St. Anna's Home for Handicapped Girls—on the first day. The only reason I'm still alive is because of Dr. Langer's special interest in patients with cerebral palsy. I overheard him tell one of the nurses that he's going to dissect my body after they "euthanize" me. If I think about that, I will go mad, pencil and paper or no.

There were fifty kids in the ward when we got here, with every type of disability you can imagine: epileptics, cripples like me, the blind, the deaf, a hunchbacked boy, the mentally ill. After two days, there are only about ten of us, most of whom are sleeping now, turning fitfully beneath the cheap, thin blankets that don't keep out the drafts. The few who came to Sonnenstein believing that we would be cured or cared for have been disillusioned by the disappearances of friends and the callousness of the so-called medical personnel. On our first night, the nurses didn't even bother to take me out of my wheelchair. My friends had to help me into the narrow bed and put my nightclothes on me. That was a unique kind of shame. For the first time in years, I hated my body for not being like everyone else's. But my dignity is far from the worst thing this place has taken from me.

I miss my friends so much that it would break your hearts just to feel it. Adeline. Helga. Eva. Otta. Inge. It feels good to write their names, like part of them is still here. I think of how I would sometimes help Eva write letters to her brother, off on the eastern front. She'd dictate her message, I would write it down, and then, at the end, she would add a few sentences in braille, which she taught her brother when they were younger. Their closeness always made me wish I had a sibling, and I wonder how he will react to news of her death. Will he believe the Nazis' lie that she died of some bogus medical complication, or will he suspect the truth? If so, will he do anything about it? Eva was the only one of us who still had any family left who cared whether she lived or died; at least she will be remembered and missed.

I remember Adeline and Helga sneaking into the pantry to kiss when the caretakers weren't looking. They never knew I knew their secret, and though my Catholic upbringing told me I should disapprove, I was glad they had found love. I imagined them making a happy little life together in some remote seaside cottage, away from society's prejudice. I remember how Inge would play long, elaborate games in which she was a princess going on imaginary adventures with fairies, princes, and a whole cast of characters she would make up out of whole cloth. But now, thanks to the Nazis, Eva won't write any more letters, Adeline and Helga won't exchange any more elicited kisses, and Inge won't play any more imaginary games.

I took my friends' presence for granted at St. Anna's. I took St. Anna's for granted. As far as institutions for the disabled go, it was one of the better ones, with caretakers who actually took care of us. But the Nazis are systematically closing down places like St. Anna's and moving disabled people into institutions like Sonnenstein. The two nurses who accompanied us said that St. Anna's was being cleared to make space for wounded soldiers, but I knew by the stunned and grief-stricken looks on our caretakers' faces, and because of propaganda posters and newsreels I've seen, that this wasn't an ordinary hospital. By giving us "merciful deaths" they will relieve us of our suffering and the Third Reich of the burden of our care. It's ironic, really, because my name, Emilie, means industrious and hardworking, and I'm condemned to death because the government doesn't believe I can contribute to society.

I put this letter aside for a few moments and pulled out the rosary you gave me before you dropped me off at St. Anna's. I had some vague idea of praying, of trying to spiritually prepare

myself for the end. But I'd only managed to say one Hail Mary before a nurse came in. Please, don't call my name, I prayed. Don't say Emilie Rahn. I'm just fourteen years old. I'm not done writing yet. I'm not done living yet.

"Nina Mandel," the nurse called. A rail-thin girl with mousy brown hair looked up. I couldn't tell by looking at her why the Nazi doctors had selected her for euthanasia.

"Come on, dear, time for a shower," the nurse chirped.

"But I don't want to!" Nina protested.

"But you must. You can eat and see your parents again after you take a shower," the nurse said.

I wanted to cry out, "No! Don't go with her! Fight!" But fear froze me in place as Nina followed the nurse out of the ward. She's probably dead by now.

Rumors swirl around the ward. Apparently, there are two ways for a "useless eater" to be killed in Sonnenstein. Either they give you a lethal injection, or they do it with poison gas. They only shoot you if you try to escape, because why waste bullets on us when they're needed for the war effort? If I have to die in this hellhole, I hope I get the needle. I've heard poison gas hurts. Oh, dear God. Oh God oh God oh God! I'm crying even as I write this. I have to put the paper aside so my tears won't smudge it.

How can they do it? How can the doctors and nurses and SS men at Sonnenstein (yes, we do have a few guards here, although not many, because it's not difficult to keep a bunch of cripples in line), look at me and not see a human being? I know my legs don't work, but beyond that, don't I look like their daughters? Their little sisters? Who are they to say that there is only one way to be in the world, one kind of body that is acceptable? What makes them think they are God, to judge me worthy or unworthy of life? I know I asked you this once, when the Nuremberg Laws passed and Jews were stripped of their citizenship and civil rights. Vater, I remember you said, "I don't know, Emmy. But when the government is being inhuman, that is all the more reason for men of courage and moral fiber to stand up and be human." I suppose that's what you were: a man of courage and moral fiber. I suppose that's why they killed you.

You know, I can't help but be a little angry at you two. Part of me wishes that you hadn't had all that courage and moral fiber. The hardest day of my life was when you left me at St. Anna's,

even though you told me it was for my own safety, that you didn't want me to get caught in the crossfire of the Gestapo's investigation. Vater, if you had just gotten out of politics when you had the chance, if you hadn't tried to stand up to Hitler, maybe you and Mutti would still be here, with me, where you belong, instead of... wherever people go when they die. I guess I'll be finding out soon. Will I see Saint Peter at the pearly gates and go to Heaven? Or will there just be nothingness? I hope there's something where I'm going, because I do want to see you again. I take back what I said a moment ago about being angry. You couldn't just stand by and let the Nazis run all over everybody. You had to speak for those who couldn't speak for themselves. I want someone to speak up for me. I want someone to remember me.

I'm trying to distract myself with good memories. Writing them down helps make them more real. I remember our big house in Dresden, how it would always smell of fresh bread on Mondays and clean laundry on Wednesdays. I remember curling up by the fire with our cat, feeling perfectly normal and wanted and loved despite my handicap. I remember you making hot cocoa and ginger cookies, Mutti. And Papa, remember those picnics we used to have under the old apple tree? The flowers were so white in the spring, it was almost like snow. And you would tickle me and call me Princess Emmy, and we would all three laugh until our sides hurt.

It's no use. I still can't stop thinking about the needle and the gas. The rooms where people die are clean and white, they say. White like the apple blossoms in springtime. White like the snow, white to leave no trace of their crimes.

There's a bird outside the small, barred window above my bed. Eva loved birds. Even though she was blind, she could identify every bird by the sound it made. I wish I could ask her what kind of bird this is. The bird swoops and dives outside the window, and I hate it and love it for its freedom at the same time. For a second, I imagine I am that bird, that I have the ability and the right to move when and how I want. I imagine I could fly back in time as well as space, back to when we were a family.

More footsteps are coming down the corridor. It's one of the nurses, I think. I hate them more than the doctors or SS, because they feign kindness. They look ordinary, like anyone's aunty or mother. They call us "dear" and "pet" if that's what it takes to get us to go quietly to our deaths. She's coming for me this time. I can feel it.

I know it's selfish to pray for my life. I don't deserve to live any more or less than any of the other kids in this ward, or any of the other people in this hospital, or in however many hospitals like Sonnenstein exist across the Reich. I'm just one girl. My life, my words, will be obliterated. But that doesn't mean they don't matter. That doesn't mean I won't cling to life with every scrap of strength I have. I swear, I will hurt one of them before they inject or gas me. I will punch or scratch or bite. If I leave a mark on one of them, maybe they will acknowledge that I am human.

My heart constricts as the door opens. It's the same nurse who was in here earlier, the woman who took Nina. There's no malice in her gaze as she looks around the mostly deserted ward. There's just a bland, professional disinterest, and that's somehow worse. Our lives are so worthless that our killers can't even be bothered to hate us. The violence is purely clinical.

"Emilie Rahn," the nurse calls.

I don't look up when she calls me. I write even as she approaches my cot and gets my chair into position. If I'm writing, I'm alive. Maybe if I keep writing, keep hoping