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# THE POWER OF THE POWERLESS

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Lessons from Serving as a Conscientious Objector



*The Early Years of Joe Landis' Voluntary Service and  
the Beginning of His 44 Year Journey*

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## THE POWER OF THE POWERLESS:

### *Dieter Schmidt Survives T-4 with Humor and Grace*

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I was first introduced to the Nazi's T-4 pogrom in August 1967. While I did not know what T-4 was, according to Steve Silverman in his book: *Neurotribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity*, 200,000 individuals with disabilities were euthanized or taken into the ovens along with the Jews as a part of this program.

Dieter Schmidt was in his 30's when I first met him as his caregiver, in what was then West Berlin, Germany, as part

of my alternative service as a conscience objector. His muscular dystrophy by that time had put him in a wheelchair and given him a very "serious" face because he lost his ability to smile, but not laugh. As I slowly got to know him he told me that some of his friends were "transferred" from the institution where he was living, meaning they were euthanized. Yet for some reason he survived.

When he was a young teenager he was forced into the Hitler Youth. His battle with muscular dystrophy weakened his biceps preventing him from raising his right arm to do the required, "Heil Hitler". Not being able to do that, he collaborated with his friends adapted to this by rocking his right arm back-and-forth until it had enough momentum to reach the shoulder of his friend in front of him and he was able to camouflage disability, for the meantime. He told me he wanted to stuff his hand in his pocket. However, when his family could no longer take care of him he was put in Bethel. If he knew he never told me where his roommates were "transferred" to.



*Dieter Schmidt, (R) with friend Karl-Heinz Ruber (L) in 1968. Photo by Joe Landis.*



I found out later one place where individuals were "transferred" to, was just a few kilometers north of Berlin. It was Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp where the experimentation started on these "weaker" individuals and then euthanized. I visited Sachsenhausen with my family in 1995. The room where they experimented on people with disabilities was left intact in a ghastly white tiled room with a white tiled table. It was in the ground floor of a building so bodies could easily be rolled in and out. When we were looking around at the artifacts and the instruments they used, after a few minutes, my 15-year-old daughter said, "Daddy, I feel sick" so we left.

I can only imagine the way Dieter Schmidt felt as a youth when, as Steven Silverman describes it... *"what began in secrecy inevitably became the subject of widespread rumors and gossip. Children became terrified of going to the doctor for any reason. When the bus pulled up to a clinic they would say "here comes the murder-box again"...* (Silverman p. 135). Unfortunately, Dieter Schmidt could not leave the situation when he saw the murder-box arrive.

For those who were not so fortunate... they would die from injections of carbolic acid, excess of barbiturates, or simply left outside in the harsh winter until they

contacted pneumonia... *"Parents would typically receive a note in the mail informing them that their son or daughter had died of natural causes... Often these notes included a bill for cremation or burial expenses."* (Silverman p.132).

The name "T-4" is short for the secret order called **Aktion-T4**, signed by Hitler on September 1, 1939<sup>1</sup>. The offices were located at Tiergartenstrasse 4, the address of the Charitable Foundation for the Curative and Institutional Care in Berlin<sup>2</sup>. In spite of the trauma that Dieter Schmidt suffered in his life, he never lost his will to live, wild sense of humor, and love of classical music.

While he pulled thru the Hitler era with his life, he almost lost it in the bath tub one day. He loved to soak because it relaxed his body. However, because he was a very neat and clean person to a fault, he always insisted that I clean out this large free standing shared bathtub while he watched, before I started filling it with water. He was also an extremely private person, he only let certain caretakers attend to him and everyone knew that. But because his body was so cramped due to his muscular dystrophy, the curvature of the spine made him very short and he had prescribed way to be put into the tub. He told me one day he was put into the tub in the usual manner, told his caretaker to leave, close the door and he would ring for him when he was ready to be taken out of the tub. But somehow he lost his support and slipped completely under the water unable to reach the bell. Finally, he felt his feet touch the front of the tub and he had enough strength to push himself backwards so his face would resurface, then gasp for air and yell "Help" and then slip down under the water. He did this a number of times with his head resurfacing and shouting "Help" and then re-submerging. Finally, someone who was walking past the bathroom heard his cries for help and saved his life.

In the spring of '68 he took me along as his caretaker on a vacation to the then Czechoslovakia right during Prague Spring. In one unforgettable evening we were sitting together in a pub and he spotted two soldiers at a table, drinking their beer

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<sup>1</sup> The start date was actually October 1, but Hitler back dated it to have it coincide with the official start of WWI and provide cover for what was already happening (Silverman, p. 132)

<sup>2</sup> Tiergarden is the German name for zoo (animal garden). The irony is was not lost on me that while I was caring for Dieter Schmidt in Berlin in 1968, Bill Baldini here in Philadelphia at WCAU did a series on Pennhurst State School and Hospital on the evening news entitled *Suffer The Little Children*. At the conclusion, as a result of his investigation, he discovered at that in time Pennsylvania, the Zoo was spending more on its animal per diem than the State of PA per diem for the individuals living at Pennhurst.

and laughing. He told the waitress to automatically refill the soldier's beers and when they got empty, he would pay for it, but keep it anonymous. Each time the waitress would refill their glasses they would look around the room to see who might be picking up the tab. Little did they know that the laughing, deadpan Dieter Schmidt, who was looking right at them, was the culprit. As they stumbled out that evening they had no idea who paid for their inebriation.

Near the end of my two year term, he took me to hear Dvorak's New World Symphony (Symphony No. 9). It was a cathartic event for me. As the symphony was coming to the grand finale, I found myself suddenly bursting into tears. I understand it now as my sense of the coming loss of all my experiences and friendships, but little did I know that my two years of service would open up a new world of a vocation for me after I got settled in my career.

Finally, the gentle killer pneumonia did take Dieter Schmidt. While I was there he, was extremely careful not to catch a cold because of the risk of pneumonia. When he was younger he could battle them, however as he grew older and weaker pneumonia finally won out.

To this day every time I fill a bath I can't help but think of Dieter Schmidt. Needless to say the New World Symphony has a special meaning for me today and become my favorite. I Have not been able to pull off the trick he did in the pub (not sure if I want to), but I have done anonymous random acts of kindness.

Because of the life of Dieter Schmidt and his life experience and influence on me, we named one of our community homes the Schmidt Home.



*Dieter Schmidt, (R) with care taker Ken Yoder (center front) and unidentified friend in 1975. Photo by Joe Landis*

# THE SCHMIDT HOME:

## *The Story*

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Peaceful Living opened the Schmidt Home in 2013 for 3 men with intellectual disabilities, Matt, Jon and Paul. Matt and Jon were part of our services for a number of years but Paul was new. His mother Rosemary was not happy with his then time living arrangement and ran into Peaceful Living staff at a bowling outing. She saw how our staff interacted with our individuals and introduced herself and asked who we were. After she toured our other homes and programs she immediately ask that Paul be moved to Peaceful Living.



*Jon, Matt and Paul*

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## THE SCHMIDT HOME: *Testimonials*

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"Jonathan moved in to Schmidt four years ago. At first, he did not know what to make of his relocation, but in short order, he developed an easy comfort level in his new residence. His new house quickly became his new home and he loves it there. The staff is truly caring and his roommates are the best. They are comfortable with each other and, while they don't interact with each other in "typical" ways, it is clear that they get along. Not only is Jonathan settled and included at his home, but we ALL have gained a much larger family of parents, siblings and staff. And lastly, nothing brings us more joy than to walk into Schmidt any given day and we hear his laughter and see his joy. We are all truly is blessed." ***Kate and Kevin, Jon's parents***



*Jon with care companion, Shrona*



*Matt with Mom and Dad: L-R; Julia, Matt, Tim and Nephew*

"It was a true blessing when Matthew was accepted into the Schmidt House. A tremendous weight was lifted from our shoulders regarding where Matt would live after we are gone. All the staff is so caring and loving. And Matt has found two friends for life in Paul and Jon. Matt cannot tell us how he feels, but he runs from the car to the Schmidt home laughing and smiling whenever we take him back after a visit. Matt has truly found a home at Schmidt." ***Tim and Tricia, Tim's parents***

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"Mr. Schmidt's story and your life journey (Joe) inspire me more than I can begin to express. I can find no words adequate to thank you for all that you have done to help Paul. I cannot begin to share the peace I feel in my heart for the beautiful life he has found through Peaceful Living. He is loved, excepted as he is and encouraged through his extended family at Schmidt house.

*Paul with Mom, Rosemary*



Jon, Matt and Paul have become like brothers. In their limited verbal world—they get each other. The staff at Schmidt who provide their care are some of the most loving people I have ever had God's good grace to meet. Along with you—they have the gratitude of my heart.

For many years, anxiety ruled my thoughts and I wondered how I would continue to care for Paul. He was larger than me by the age of 12. He had many seizures daily, often they were accompanied with falls and injuries. I struggled physically with his care.

In my most anxious moments—usually 2:00 AM—I would turn to the Bible. I held onto this quote which sustained me in my darkest moments. For this reason, this is my quote for the Schmidt home: **"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your heart be troubled and do not be afraid."** John 14:27

Thank you for being God's living word through your beautiful vision and dedication. Thank you for helping us find the loving help we needed so desperately. You will always have the gratitude of my heart."

*Paul's mom, Rosemary*



*Matt, Paul and Jon at home, surrounded by care companions, family and Peaceful Living leadership staff.*