

Commemoration of people who died of HIV/AIDS - Cologne Pride 2022 Event "Names and Stones" at Aidshilfe Cologne, 23.06.2022

Speech by Michel Jähme

Ladies and gentlemen!
Dear friends!

Sometimes it happens that a well-reflected and thoroughly processed part of one's life story, which one considers to be completed, is touched by a current event and one is surprised by intense emotions.

This is how I felt when I heard the news on 17 October 2020 that the then German Chancellery Minister Helge Braun intended to honour the victims, that means: the dead of the Corona pandemic, with a special national act. In a newspaper interview, he explained: "We should send a signal that the deceased are not forgotten."

My reaction was prompt: a nerve in me was hit. I felt great indignation. I wrote spontaneously to friends: "Rage and anger is arising in me: What about the AIDS victims, forgotten and despised before?? Why was there never a proposal for an national act of commemoration for them?"

I do not want to enter into a debate today about which pandemic was more terrible and what justification or not for an national act of state for the Corona dead.

Instead, I want to focus on, and invite you to join me in tracing what it was that triggered my spontaneous outrage, what nerve it is that is hit in me.

As far as I know, there has never been a national act of remembrance for people who have died of AIDS. Unlike Corona, AIDS has not affected the entire population. The drama of dying of AIDS has taken place outside the public eye. In families, AIDS has been shamelessly concealed as the cause of death, and the true lives of those who have died have seldom been spoken freely and directly. HIV-Infection and AIDS were seen by bourgeois society as proof of a "life mis-lived". People with HIV and AIDS were treated like lepers, denied human dignity. In the first years of the AIDS crisis often enough and especially with regard to medical care.

It is this wounded dignity, especially in the early years of the HIV pandemic, that is still present in me as a lived experience of the social climate. And when I heard the announcement of a national official state act for the Corona dead, it came back as a strong pain. Even though I have been living with HIV since 1990, even though I survive HIV. Even though we have achieved a great deal in reducing stigma and discrimination together in our work in Aidshilfe, there still seems to be something latent as a restlessness in me. A real healing of these early violations of my dignity has obviously not yet taken place. It's a demand for compensation.

I was surprised that in the current coronavirus pandemic so little attention was paid to the experience of dealing with the previous pandemic, with HIV. Neither politics nor the media paid attention to the old experience. In the 1980s, Rolf Rosenbrock wrote the remarkable book: "AIDS can be defeated faster". Since then, there has been a catalogue of measures to combat AIDS more effectively. Those who experienced the AIDS crisis already knew all the medical and scientific terms used at Corona, and they knew the dynamics of life with constantly changing levels of knowledge.

But society as a whole had forgotten about AIDS, and so society was obviously unable to benefit from the proven. Instead, I watched as society struggled to learn what we already had to learn with HIV and know already for a long time: there is no 100% protection. There exist effective measures and behaviours that effectively reduce the risk of infection. We need to know about the transmission pathways. People need to be empowered to make their own realistic risk assessments and learn their own risk management, based on current knowledge.

Just as society has forgotten – and does not want to remember – the HIV pandemic and the painful and lonely dying on AIDS in the early years of the AIDS crisis, so I too feel forgotten with my own experiences.

An official national state act like has taken place in Germany addressing the Corona-pandemic in April 2021, draws the attention of the entire society to the victims and their survivors and expresses collective compassion. This joint compassion has never existed in the case of AIDS. Society didn't want to see us. We were alone in our communities - when we had them at all. The collective participation and compassion has been and is withheld from us.

We are growing old and we have survived HIV, both as HIV-positive and HIV-negative. It's obvious: We are here! You can't see just by looking at us, what we've been through. We still have to explain our pain in order to be understood when external events hit a nerve and we react emotionally.

I guess I'm not the only one having this experience.

The commemoration of Aidshilfe Cologne today here at the "Kalten Eck" („Cold Corner“) is giving me and giving us the experience of not being alone with this live history. It's so good to be here.

Thank you very much.

Michael Jähme

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