

# The Golden Crutch: Satire and Debates on Disability Rights in West Germany

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## I. Introduction

“Heil HUK!”<sup>1</sup> It was Ernst Klee’s final provocation. Klee, who later became known for his pathbreaking documentation of the Nazi T4 mass murder campaign, was working as a social worker in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, he wrote books on social issues and regularly contributed to high-profile media outlets like *Die Zeit*. As the climax to a 1978 event in Frankfurt, he accused an umbrella organization of German car insurers—known as the HUK Association—of reiterating Nazi propaganda about the so-called *lebensunwertes Leben*, the life unworthy of living. In order to promote the use of seatbelts, the car insurers had used the slogan “being crippled for life is worse than death” in a 1978 ad campaign.

Klee’s contempt did not confront HUK directly. Rather, he mockingly praised the campaign. He and a group of disabled and non-disabled activists bestowed on HUK an anti-award, the so-called Golden Crutch:

We are pleased to announce: The HUK Association has succeeded in becoming the first winner of the “Golden Crutch.” . . .

<sup>1</sup> Ernst Klee, “Verleihung der Goldenen Krücke: Behinderte – mit Spott gegen Diskriminierung,” *Luftpumpe* 2/10 (1979): 3–4, here 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Klee, *“Euthanasie” im NS-Staat: Die “Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens”* (Frankfurt, 1983).

3 Ernst Klee, *Behindert: Über die Enteignung von Körper und Bewusstsein. Ein kritisches Handbuch* (Frankfurt, 1980), 264.

4 Carol Poore, *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2007), 275.

5 Jan Stoll, *Behinderte Anerkennung? Interessenorganisationen von Menschen mit Behinderungen in Westdeutschland seit 1945* (Frankfurt am Main, 2017), 298–299.

The HUK Association deserves the “Golden Crutch.” Thirty-three years after the end of the Third Reich, it continues to propagate the life of the disabled as a life unworthy of life. The HUK Association deserves the “Golden Crutch” because it has used all its intellectual gifts—combined with high financial expenditure—to produce an ableist [*behindertenfeindlicher*] text that hinders the integration of seven million disabled people ...<sup>3</sup>

During the last third of the twentieth century, satirical, ironic, and mocking awards became a staple of West German culture. They were often part of activist attempts to highlight persistent everyday forms of discrimination. Alongside similar awards like the feminist magazine *Emma*’s “Pascha [i.e., “macho”] des Monats,” which had been awarded since 1977, the Golden Crutch was among the earliest activist mock awards gesturing at everyday discrimination.

In histories of West German disability rights, the Golden Crutch has been described as one of the earliest initiatives of German disability activism as it developed from local group efforts into a national movement.<sup>4</sup> What has not been studied, however, is exactly how the Golden Crutch informed public debates about disability rights. In this essay, I expand upon the existing argument that the Golden Crutch and similar satirical initiatives represented a subversive new strategy for challenging ableist thought patterns and denouncing discriminatory realities in everyday life.<sup>5</sup> With this mock award, activists with disabilities claimed a subject position that destabilized pervasive assumptions about the docility of disabled people. By awarding the Golden Crutch, disabled advocates claimed a new public voice not as objects of pity or charity but as scathing satirists. Alongside established, more confrontational forms of activism, such as demonstrations or street blockades, satirical awards could call out ableism by way of irony.

Furthermore, I will argue that the Golden Crutch allowed for critical exchanges between members of the general public and

the activist sphere. Some members of the public, including some who professed awareness of the social challenges for people with disabilities, disagreed with the Golden Crutch organizers about the selection of targets and the style of the award ceremonies. Finally, the Golden Crutch illustrates central internal fault lines within the broad spectrum of West German disability rights advocacy during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Over these years, questions of identity gained traction within disability rights groups. Compared with other social movements of this period, people without disabilities had a greater presence in disability rights advocacy than, for instance, straight persons had in queer movements, or men within feminist circles. This period increasingly saw more radical activists challenging the prominence of non-disabled people in the disability rights movement which included directly criticizing the Golden Crutch and its initiator, the non-disabled journalist Ernst Klee.

While creatively exposing paternalism and confronting members of the majority society with the discrimination that people with disabilities faced in their everyday lives, the Golden Crutch had run its course after just three annual presentations. In the early 1980s, award ceremonies descended into insider debates only members of the activist sphere could follow. At the same time, new instances of blatant ableism demanded less tongue-in-cheek commentary but rather more direct confrontation.

In this article, I will place the three awards of the Golden Crutch within West Germany disability history. I will draw on the vibrant historiography of the social history of people with disabilities and disability rights activism and refer to various types of published and unpublished source material, including correspondence taken from the estate of Ernst Klee archived at the Hadamar Memorial Museum. First, I will briefly introduce the evolution of disability rights advocacy in West Germany. In a second step, I will offer an analysis of each presentation of the Golden Crutch and the public debates each ceremony triggered.

6 For an in-depth account of disability advocacy in West Germany see Stoll, *Behinderte Anerkennung?*

7 Sebastian Schlund, "An Elite Among the Disabled: The Welfare State and Identity Formation of Disabled Veterans in Post-War West Germany," *History* 107/377 (2022): 747–764.

8 On the *Lebenshilfe* see Jan Stoll, "'Behinderung' als Kategorie sozialer Ungleichheit: Entstehung und Entwicklung der 'Lebenshilfe für das geistig behinderte Kind' in der Bundesrepublik in den 1950er und 1960er Jahren," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 54 (2014): 169–191.

9 Stoll, *Behinderte Anerkennung?*, 208–353.

## II. From Veterans' Associations to "Cripple Activism"<sup>6</sup>

For a long time, advocacy for improvements in social care for disabled people in West Germany was generated either by a specific group of disabled people or by associations predominantly made up of non-disabled people. In the early FRG, so-called *Kriegsopferverbände* [war victims' associations] that, among other groups, represented wounded war veterans, argued that ex-servicemen were due a "thanks of the Fatherland." These influential, male-dominated organizations such as the *Verband der Kriegsbeschädigten, Kriegshinterbliebenen und Sozialrentner Deutschlands* (*VdK*) counted roughly two million members in the 1950s. These groups drew a clear-cut distinction between people whose impairments stemmed from combat and people with so-called civilian disabilities. For war veterans, they demanded privileges and preferential treatment.<sup>7</sup>

Disabled women and people with other disabilities, particularly cognitive impairments, could not rely on similar pressure groups. From the late 1950s onwards, parental associations began to challenge the stigma attached to having a child with cognitive disabilities. The most prominent of these associations was and is the *Lebenshilfe für das geistig behinderte Kind* (founded 1958).<sup>8</sup> While these organizations gained immense political influence, they were headed by (non-disabled) parents and experts.

In his dissertation, *Behinderte Anerkennung?*, Jan Stoll traces the shift to organizations based on ideals of self-organization and self-advocacy in the late 1960s and over the course of the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> Emerging from local initiatives, the first notable groups were the so-called *Clubs Behinderter und ihrer Freunde* (*CeBeeF*). These clubs focused less on programmatic political activism but rather on connecting people with disabilities across the country and on the removal of everyday barriers. A more political branch of disability rights activism gained traction a couple of years later.



**Figure 1.** Ernst Klee (standing) at a 1976 event aimed to raise awareness about the inaccessibility of Frankfurt's streets. © Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München/stern-Fotoarchiv/Klaus Drinkwitz

In 1973/1974, the non-disabled journalist Ernst Klee and the social worker August 'Gusti' Steiner, himself a wheelchair user, started a so-called *Volkshochschulkurs* or *VHS-Kurs* that aimed to empower people living with a disability.<sup>10</sup> *Volkshochschulen* (Adult Education Centers) are a distinctive feature of the Central European academic landscape. Not offering degrees but rather goal-oriented training in a broad range of topics, *Volkshochschulen* are open to the public and often charge comparatively low tuition for their classes.

Steiner and Klee's class was entitled *Bewältigung der Umwelt*, i.e. "overcoming" or "coping" with the surrounding world. Klee and Steiner addressed their program to both disabled and non-disabled people. The class was intended to address the sense of isolation many people with disabilities felt and to raise public awareness for persistent forms of exclusion. While Klee and Steiner initially laid out a detailed class

<sup>10</sup> On the course, see Jonas Fischer, "Ums-trittene Interessenvertretung von Menschen mit Behinderungen: Zur Geschichte von Kriegspferverbänden, Elterninitiativen, Clubs, VHS-Kursen und Krüppelgruppen," in *Aufbrüche und Barrieren: Behindertenpolitik und Behindertenrecht in Deutschland und Europa seit den 1970er-Jahren*, ed. Theresia Degener and Marc von Miquel (Bielefeld, 2019), 213–242, esp. 222–234.

11 Gabriele Lingelbach, "Konstruktionen von 'Behinderung' in der Öffentlichkeit-sarbeit und Spendenwerbung der Aktion Sorgenkind seit 1964," in *Disability History: Konstruktionen von Behinderung in der Geschichte. Eine Einführung*, ed. Elsbeth Bösl, Anne Klein, and Anne Waldschmidt (Bielefeld, 2010): 127–150.

12 Lingelbach, "Konstruktionen von 'Behinderung,'" 138–141.

13 Ernst Klee, "Rent-a-Spasti?," *Die Zeit*, December 19, 1975. The original ad is reprinted in Klee, *Behindert*, 260–261.

syllabus, in succeeding installments of this class the participants themselves decided on the curriculum. The first year's course attracted roughly 70 people. Klee and Steiner's course became known for its spectacular activist maneuvers. For instance, its members, frustrated with the inaccessibility of public transport, blocked the Frankfurt Metro for twenty minutes in 1974.

There were changes in leadership, as Steiner soon stepped down from his supervisor position to focus on his studies. Yet satire always played an enormous role within the *VHS-Kurs*. During Christmas season, course students mocked charitable institutions' practice of raising money by showcasing people with disabilities as objects of pity. The use of pity was particularly tangible in a series of charity TV shows titled *Aktion Sorgenkind*.<sup>11</sup> Literally translated as "program for children to be worried about," this social organization was created in 1964 as a reaction to the thalidomide scandal and organized lotteries to finance special educational facilities and other rehabilitative initiatives. From the late 1970s onwards, activists would harshly criticize the paternalism of *Aktion Sorgenkind*.<sup>12</sup> The *VHS-Kurs* mocked the focus on pity by drafting a fake flyer advertising an agency to banks, shopping centers and political parties which offered to "rent out" disabled people. In an article for *Die Zeit*, Ernst Klee reported on this initiative:

... participants of a VHS course in Frankfurt founded a "Christmas sales organization for the disabled" ["*Vertrieb Behinderte zum Fest*"]—Rent-a-Spasti. Disabled people were offered for sale (by disabled people) ... "Disabled people with one crutch 4.98 marks; disabled people with two crutches 6.98 marks; spastic people without speech impediment 7.88 marks; with speech impediment 11.88 marks." Children residing in institutions were of course offered at a bulk discount.<sup>13</sup>

In Klee's words, the class used *Spott als Waffe*, mockery as weaponry, to lay bare everyday forms of ableism.



**Figure 2.** *VHS-Kurs* publications featured the drawing “Das Musterkrüppelchen” [“The Model Cripple”] which satirized public expectations of people with disabilities. Nachlass Ernst Klee collection, courtesy of Gedenkstätte Hadamar.

In 1977/1978, the first so-called “Cripple Groups” [*Krüppelgruppen*] formed in Bremen and elsewhere. These had a different approach. Unlike the *CeBeeF Clubs* or the *VHS-Kurs*, the “Cripple Groups” excluded non-disabled people, whom some of their members termed “oppressors.” As I will show over the course of this article, some of these activists went on to take a critical stance towards the Golden Crutch and its initiator Ernst Klee.

<sup>14</sup> See for instance *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, January 25, 1978, 5.

### III. The 1978 Award: A New Strategy for Challenging Ableism

HUK’s seatbelt-promotion ad began appearing in various German newspapers in January 1978.<sup>14</sup> The *VHS-Kurs* members were shocked by the ad, which they read as an implicit call for suicide. Advocate groups such as the *CeBeeF Clubs* quickly challenged the insurers and, in a letter to the organization, pointed out the ad’s reiteration of Nazi pro-euthanasia propaganda. The insurers flatly rejected these accusations and the ad continued to appear in major newspapers and magazines.

Members of the *VHS-Kurs* were unsure how to proceed. First, they wanted to see how the majority society felt about the HUK ad. On May 9, various class members took to the streets of Frankfurt to interview non-disabled people on their opinions about the ad campaign. The answers horrified them. While some interviewees grasped the bigoted premise of the

**15** All quotes in “9. VHS-Kurs Bewältigung der Umwelt (28.2. bis 13.6.78),” file 256, Nachlass Ernst Klee collection (hereafter N Klee), Gedenkstätte Hadamar, Hadamar, Germany.

**16** See for instance: Helmut von Bracken, *Vorurteile gegen behinderte Kinder, ihre Familien und Schulen* (Berlin, 1976). On the *longue durée* of eugenic thought in Germany: Dagmar Herzog, *Eugenische Phantasmen: Eine deutsche Geschichte* (Frankfurt, 2024).

**17** Report [*Baden-Baden*], June 13, 1978, provided by Archiv des Südwestrundfunks, Baden-Baden.

**18** Ernst Klee, *Behindert*, 261–262.

ad, most at least partly agreed with the claim that disability was equal to or even worse than death. According to class minutes, one passerby declared: “I would prefer death [to disability]. Because it is awful that all the people say: ‘you are a cripple.’ If I were you, I would be miserable and not take to the streets.”<sup>15</sup> Another interviewee concurred: “It depends on how crippled one is—if you are only a heap of meat ...” These statements hint at the persistence of eugenic beliefs within the West German public even three decades after the end of National Socialism. Similar eugenic and ableist beliefs were also documented by social scientific research at the time.<sup>16</sup>

These remarks do not mean there were no challenges to the HUK ad’s eugenic undertone. One outlet where critical takes on the HUK ad appeared were the so-called *Politimagazine*, current-affairs television shows which took up controversial issues and addressed social injustices. On June 13, 1978, the show *Report Baden-Baden* aired a piece on the ad campaign that included interviews with members of the Frankfurt *VHS-Kurs*. The report pointed to the lack of awareness on the part of the insurers about how the ad would read to people with disabilities. However, while the report criticized HUK and featured interviews with disabled people it remained a self-reflection of the non-disabled majority society. The program’s host introduced the segment by explaining the reason he and his colleagues took up the topic was because they wanted to show the (implicitly) non-disabled audience “how little aware we sometimes are of the hardship of our fellow citizens with disability.”<sup>17</sup> Finding it difficult to receive solidarity, the *VHS-Kurs* sought their own tone of critique instead. Looking back, Ernst Klee later noted: “We thought long and hard about how we could counter the text, because it contained ideas from the ‘Third Reich,’ according to which disabled life is an unworthy life. We decided to create an anti-prize in an attempt to ridicule a decidedly unlaughable fact.”<sup>18</sup>

The group chose satire and created the Golden Crutch trophy to be awarded annually on the *Buß- und Betttag* (Day of



Repentance and Prayer), a religious observance which at the time was also a federal holiday. This date was chosen with the idea that a large public event was sure to draw a sizeable crowd. Religious symbolism surely also played a role in choosing the date, at least for Ernst Klee who had studied Christian theology, worked within denominational contexts, and was married to a pastor.<sup>19</sup>

On November 22, 1978, the first Golden Crutch award ceremony took place at the municipal theatre of Frankfurt. The ceremony was introduced by a play that satirized daily forms of exclusion. Among other skits, the performance depicted the inaccessibility of government buildings and included an absurdist collage of ableist laws and regulations. At the event's conclusion, Ernst Klee read aloud the mock *laudatio* bestowed on HUK. The ceremony received coverage both within the national press and in the newly founded activists' newspaper *Die Luftpumpe*. Members of the *VHS-Kurs* saw the award ceremony as a complete success. After the award ceremony, one father of a disabled child wrote to Klee about his solidarity with the initiative and asked how he could become engaged in activism himself.<sup>20</sup>

Satire became a staple of the emerging activist press. Yet, while the satirical approach of anti-awards became fashionable in the disability movement it was also challenged. One example is an incident at the so-called *Berliner Behindertentage* [Berlin Days of People with Disabilities] held in the spring of 1979.<sup>21</sup> At this event, the Berlin commissioner of disabled people was awarded the quickly-invented "Golden Wheelchair" because he was seen as not having done enough to set up the event. Prominent activist Lothar Sandfort welcomed the idea but warned against too many "anti" awards.<sup>22</sup> In the case of this state-appointed official, the award was directed at somebody who thought of himself as supportive of people with disabilities and, as he revealed after receiving the award, lived with a progressive condition himself that would soon force him to use a wheelchair. This revelation softened the

**19** Ernst Klee, "Ich bin eine männliche Pfarrfrau," *Die Zeit*, September 6, 1975.

**20** [Anonymized] to Ernst Klee, January 20, 1979, file 244, N Klee. The names of individual correspondents in the Klee collection have been anonymized in this article.

**21** Stoll, *Behinderte Anerkennung?*, 393.

**22** LS, "Neue Ideen: Bericht über die Aktionstage der Berliner Behinderten," *Luftpumpe* 2/15 (1979): 16–18.

23 [Anonymized], "Wir normalisieren den Alltag: Gedanken über den 'Berliner Behindertentag' vom 28.4.1979," file 244, N Klee.

24 Udo Sierck and Nati Radtke, *Die Wohltäter-Mafia: Vom Erbgesundheitsgericht zur Humangenetischen Beratung* (Hamburg, 1984).

25 Klee, *Behindert*, 264.

26 See the articles in *Ende der Anstalten? Großeinrichtungen, Debatten und Deinstitutionalisierung seit den 1970er Jahren*, ed. Wilfried Rudloff, Franz-Werner Kersting, Marc von Miquel, and Malte Thießen (Paderborn, 2022).

activists criticism of him and furthered doubts among some observers whether he was the right target for this anti-award and its attendant public humiliation.<sup>23</sup> Such worries were indicative of an emerging debate between disability advocates and members of the general public that revolved around whether to condemn the paternalism of (residential) institutions for disabled people and (charity) organizations and public officials that acted on behalf of people with disabilities. In the following years, activists criticizing the state of care for people with disabilities would coin terms like *Wohltäter* or *WohlTäter*, a play on words translating to "philanthropists" but also containing the word *Täter*, which can be translated as "perpetrators" or "criminals."<sup>24</sup> When the Golden Crutch was awarded for the second time in the fall of 1979, debates about the right targets of activist satire took center stage.

#### IV. The 1979 Award: Debates on Targets and Style

In 1979, the award ceremony turned out to be more divisive. Retrospectively, Ernst Klee noted "The second award ceremony on the Day of Prayer and Repentance in 1979 sparked fierce protests from the 'prizewinners' and the audience."<sup>25</sup> The 1979 award was handed to the leadership of two facilities, the *Alsterdorfer Anstalten* in Hamburg and the *Spastikerzentrum* in Munich both of which had come under public scrutiny in the preceding years.

Criticizing residential facilities was nothing new at the time. In the late 1960s, significantly later than in other Western countries, experts in the field of psychiatry started to voice criticism of residential facilities in West Germany. Over the course of the 1970s, such institutions were more and more seen as outdated and isolating.<sup>26</sup> In 1975, an expert commission called the *Psychiatrie-Enquête* highlighted the need for reform, informing the German parliament of the dire state of the crowded and understaffed mental institutions in the country. Dissatisfaction only grew as more and more instances of over-

medication and violence against residents were uncovered. A new critical stance towards psychiatrists and institutions for people with disabilities began to dominate major media outlets. On the local level, the protest against institutionalization was also instigated by people with disabilities themselves. By the early 1970s, local activist groups, for instance in Bremen, were challenging the state of institutions.<sup>27</sup> In the 1980s, many groups of disabled activists would argue for the dissolution of residential facilities.<sup>28</sup>

In the 1970s, challenges to the status quo also came from within the institutions themselves. A new generation of more critical professionals took a more resident-focused approach at Alsterdorf.<sup>29</sup> This large Lutheran institution had a history dating back to 1850 when it was founded by the Protestant pastor Heinrich Matthias Sengelmann. During the Nazi era, its medical personnel—like that of many other institutions—was complicit in the Nazi crimes against people with disabilities. A group of younger personnel associated with the educator Horst Wallrath founded the so-called *Kollegienkreis*. This group demanded, among other things, new leisure activities for the residents. Due to their unvarnished criticism of the existing state of residential life, this group was at odds with the director, Pastor Hans-Georg Schmidt. In the fall of 1978, members of the Alsterdorf staff had privately published a so-called *schwarze Broschüre* [black book] that documented daily indignities. The book's publication, however, went almost unnoticed by local media outlets.

In April 1979, *Die Zeit* journalists working undercover exposed the scandalous living conditions of the residents of the *Alsterdorfer Anstalten* in Hamburg.<sup>30</sup> Ernst Klee visited the institution the following month. After the *VHS-Kurs* decided to award the Golden Crutch to the Alsterdorf leadership, Klee received severe criticism from the institution. The director and personnel from the care unit addressed irate letters to Klee. They suggested that Klee himself should take in people with so-called severe and/or multiple disabilities. Sarcastically,

**27** Gabriele Lingelbach and Jan Stoll, "Die 1970er Jahre als Umbruchsphase der bundesdeutschen Disability History? Eine Mikrostudie zu Selbstadvokation und Anstaltskritik Jugendlicher mit Behinderung," *Moving the Social* 50 (2013): 25–51, 28.

**28** See Jonas Fischer, "Raus aus der Anstalt' als Ziel der westdeutschen Behindertenbewegung. Praktische Heimkritik in den 1980er Jahren am Beispiel Dortmund," in *Ende der Anstalten?*, ed. Rudloff et al., 104–124.

**29** On the postwar history of Alsterdorf, see Gerda Engelbracht and Andrea Hauser, *Mitten in Hamburg: Die Alsterdorfer Anstalten 1945–1979* (Stuttgart, 2013).

**30** Christof Beyer, "Radikale Psychiatriekritik und die Transformation des Anstaltswesens in der Bundesrepublik," in *Ende der Anstalten?*, ed. Rudloff et al., 155–173, esp. 165–166.

**31** Quotes: Head of Care Unit to Klee, November 16, 1979, file 247, N Klee.

**32** Klee to Schmidt, October 31, 1979, and Schmidt to Klee, November 14, 1979, both in file 247, N Klee.

**33** "Interview mit Ernst Klee," *Wir in den Alsterdorfer Anstalten helfen . . . nach*, November 27, 1979, file 247, N Klee.

**34** "Alsterdorfer Anstalten bekamen 'Goldene Krücke' / Eigentlich ist alles erlogen! Interview mit dem Direktor der Alsterdorfer Anstalten," *Bild*, November 22, 1979, copy in file 247, N Klee collection.

**35** See the report on the TV show *Nordschau*, November 23, 1979.

they asked him why he had not taken "two or three" Alsterdorf residents home with him after his visit: "Your income, your enthusiasm, your sympathy, your beautiful home and your kind way would have been great qualifications. ... Wouldn't that be better than throwing around catchphrases?" According to them, Klee had only spent one hour at the facility and his reporting did not do justice to the tedious nature of care work nor to the tense financial situation of the institution. Therefore, they symbolically issued a counter award: "the sleazy pen."<sup>31</sup> Klee invited the clinic director to the award ceremony. While the director, Pastor Schmidt, absented himself, the award ceremony was attended by members of the critical *Kollegienkreis* who thought it was refreshing and thought-provoking.<sup>32</sup> This time, the satirical play in Frankfurt put the audience in the position of clinic residents. For instance, mirroring everyday realities at institutions, the audience was segregated according to gender and during the show the actors threatened to limit the audience's access to the toilets.

The members of the *Kollegienkreis* documented their experiences in Frankfurt for the Alsterdorf residents in a leaflet. The leaflet also included an interview that the *Kollegienkreis* conducted with Ernst Klee. Asked about the motives for awarding the Golden Crutch to Alsterdorf, Klee answered: "If you only moan about grievances in the disability sector, you only reinforce the charity image. And satire is a way for disabled people to go on the offensive. And the hysterical reaction of the award winners shows that it is effective."<sup>33</sup> Director Schmidt responded to the award ceremony in an interview with the tabloid *Bild* by claiming that the accusations launched by Klee and other were outright lies.<sup>34</sup> Wide-reaching local media like the *Norddeutsche Rundfunk*, however, took up the Golden Crutch ceremony and aired critical news reports on Alsterdorf.<sup>35</sup>

As in the previous year, the Golden Crutch helped to amplify existing criticism of the discrimination of people with disabilities. Unlike the case of HUK, however, there were opponents

to awarding the prize to Alsterdorf. This was not only true of the care personnel who condemned Klee. Much like the Berlin Disability Days, there was also criticism from members of the general public. A woman from Hamburg who lived near the institutions condemned the selection of Alsterdorf: "I am opposed to such an institution being denigrated in this way and would like to recommend that you and your so-called 'support group' spend at least a full year working among such people, some of whom are really severely disabled. You will certainly discover how difficult and grueling such care work is."<sup>36</sup>

The other award recipient in 1979 was by no means less controversial. Alsterdorf shared the "honor" with the *Spastikerzentrum* [Spastics Center] in Munich and its director, Albert Göb. Göb, who had headed the institution since 1956, had already been criticized for his leadership style. In 1977, the Bavarian parliament had received more than one hundred complaints from patients, their parents, and former staff members. The same 1978 episode of the *Report Baden-Baden* which aired the interviews with the *VHS-Kurs* members on the HUK incident included another report documenting the many complaints against the Munich institution and its director. Accusations included prescribed toilet times and video surveillance of the patients. According to the report, such regulations had allegedly led to suicidal tendencies among children and teenagers with disabilities educated at this institution. The persistent criticism led to an investigation by state agencies and to a court case between the state of Bavaria and the *Spastikerzentrum*. In April 1979, Ernst Klee himself compiled these allegations in a *Die Zeit* article.<sup>37</sup> Göb's attorney quickly intervened with the newspaper to demand an opportunity to reply.<sup>38</sup>

Again, awarding the Golden Crutch helped to amplify existing grievances. As the recipients of the award were decided in the spring while the event occurred in the fall, the announcement that the award would be bestowed upon Göb itself influenced local debates. In the months before the 1979 award ceremony,

<sup>36</sup> [Anonymized] to Klee, November 24, 1979, file 247, N Klee.

<sup>37</sup> Ernst Klee, "Die fetten faulen Weiber: Aus den Protokollen des Verwaltungsgerichts," *Die Zeit*, April 27, 1979.

<sup>38</sup> [Anonymized] to *Die Zeit*, May 3, 1979, file 249, N Klee.

**Figure 3.** Preparatory meeting for the 1979 “Golden Crutch” ceremony, November 13, 1979. © Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München/stern-Fotoarchiv/Klaus Drinkwitz.



**39** [Anonymized], “Mißhandlungen in Heimen!,” undated, file 249, N Klee.

**40** Klee, *Behindert*, 265.

parents collected signatures to apply pressure on the clinic’s leadership to resign.

Their petition listed the accusations against the *Spastikerzentrum*’s director and concluded:

Despite numerous public protests, Prof. Dr. Göb is not prepared to hand over the reins in the interests of the disabled. In order to persuade him to resign and to draw attention to the appalling conditions in care homes in Germany, he is to be awarded the “Golden Crutch” this year. ... Support the protests against maltreatment of children and young people in homes in the Federal Republic of Germany and the awarding of the “Golden Crutch” to Prof. Dr. Göb with your signature!<sup>39</sup>

According to Klee, the group collected thousands of signatures on the streets of Munich over the course of two weeks.<sup>40</sup> Again, already existing local debates were handed a major platform with the Golden Crutch. But there was also push-back, as articulated by the institution’s attorney. In the end, the initiative to unseat Göb did not succeed, and he remained director until 1990.

Not only the choice of recipients, but also the format of the award ceremony itself were debated in 1979. Upon entering the Frankfurt theatre, guests were expected to provide reasons for attending the event on a piece of paper. The answers that revealed the most ignorance of disabled people were to be awarded with another impromptu anti-prize. A non-disabled woman was declared the “winner” and, in a short interlude, was invited on stage and symbolically pitied for a minute by

the members of the *VHS-Kurs*. With this performance, course participants sought to demonstrate the paternalism of pity that was always directed at disabled people. The organizers were aware that this skit might be hurtful to the woman, but they thought it was reasonable. In his account of the ceremony, Ernst Klee sarcastically wrote on this episode: “Then the award for two spectators who had to give a reason for their visit on their ticket. That gives you a consolation prize. One minute of pity. The disabled people all look down. The spectators turn away. It is an embarrassing and shameful silence that triggers outrage everywhere. How can you humiliate a person like that? The unfortunate woman walks out, tears in her eyes. The audience is shocked.”<sup>41</sup>

Both some in attendance at the event and parts of the press criticized the interlude. The conservative-leaning *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (*FAZ*) saw the skit as a sign that disability advocates were not actually demanding better living conditions but rather seeking revenge on non-disabled people. “For then [when the audience members were pitied on stage] it became clear for a brief moment that the gulf between those in wheelchairs and the healthy is much deeper ... It was not the desire for compensatory aids that became briefly visible, but the desire for revenge. Those in wheelchairs cannot be comforted with surrogates. ... Health cannot be replaced or sued for. Just as little as tact, by the way.”<sup>42</sup>

Frankfurt resident Albrecht Verron, himself living with a disability, criticized this *FAZ* report in a letter to the editor entitled “incredibly wrong.” He argued that it was necessary to confront non-disabled people with the everyday realities of people with disabilities. In order to raise awareness, Verron argued that it would be necessary to offer a glimpse of everyday ableism to those who had never experienced it.

The same spectators were not at all horrified by the atrocities and cruelties that had been portrayed on stage during the evening. Are they just voyeurs? If it is true that the “pitied” woman

**41** Ernst Klee, “Eine Minute Mitleid: Der satirische Preis ‘Goldene Krücke’ ging an die Alsterdorfer Anstalten,” *Die Zeit*, November 30, 1979.

**42** Hans-Heinrich Pardey, “Der Rollstuhl hilft nicht über den sozialen Graben: Im Kammerspiel wurde die ‘Goldene Krücke’ für Behindertenfeindlichkeit verliehen,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 23, 1979, 49.

**43** Albrecht Verron, "Unglaublich falsch," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, January 8, 1980, 22. A longer version of the letter is archived in file 247, N Klee.

**44** Poore, *Disability in Twentieth-Century Germany*, 275.

**45** Swiss disability activists who visited the Frankfurt ceremony thought about importing the concept; see Ursula Eggli, "Eine ungewöhnliche Preisverleihung," *Puls: Monatsheft der Gruppen IMPULS + CeBeeF* 22/1 (1980): 25–26.

**46** Quoted after Ernst Klee, *Behinderte im Urlaub: Das Frankfurter Urteil – eine Dokumentation*, (Frankfurt, 1980), 33.

wanted to get to know the lives of disabled people better on this particular evening at the theater, then this short scene gave her the very best start; in just one minute she had an experience that some "healthy" people would like to avoid for the rest of their lives.<sup>43</sup>

As Carol Poore has pointed out, the Golden Crutch had an emancipatory thrust.<sup>44</sup> Further distancing themselves from traditional rehabilitation approaches, the *VHS-Kurs* challenged public perceptions about ever-grateful people with disabilities. Even more than in 1978, in 1979 the Golden Crutch sparked and furthered debates on the directions of disability rights advocacy. Within activist circles, the event was seen as a success.<sup>45</sup> Yet, selecting recipients from the field of disability institutions for the anti-prize and using a direct-confrontation skit during the award ceremony divided the non-disabled majority society. Families of the residents and reform-oriented clinic staff welcomed the award, as it amplified their own criticism of these institutions. However, there were also critical voices. What was new, however, was that it was a group of mostly disabled activists that set the tone for debates to which the majority society now had to react.

## V. 1980/1981: The Limits of Satire

1980 began with another scandal. On February 25, 1980, a Frankfurt District Court presided over by judge Otto Tempel awarded damages to a tourist on a package vacation because a group of people with disabilities was among the other hotel guests. In its ruling, the court issued the statement: "It cannot be denied that a group of severely disabled people can impair the enjoyment of a vacation for sensitive people."<sup>46</sup> This instance of overt discrimination instantly created public outrage which mobilized more people with disabilities, families and other non-disabled allies than ever before in postwar Europe. The outcry culminated on May 8 when various groups





**Figure 4.** Demonstration in Frankfurt against the so-called “Tempel Verdict” [*Tempel-Urteil*] on May 8, 1980. Credit: Heinz Wieseler/ picture alliance via Getty Images.

—including the Frankfurt VHS—organized a large demonstration of about five thousand people. In his documentation of the case, Klee reflected on the march to the court building.

The demonstration marched through the city center, along the main streets of the [Frankfurt] City Ring. Never in their lives have the citizens seen so many disabled people, hundreds of wheelchair users, mentally disabled people, learning disabled people, parents with their disabled child, thalidomide victims, people with short stature, married couples with disabled partners. Never before has there been such a large demonstration in the Federal Republic of Germany or in Europe, uniting all disabled people, whether physically or mentally disabled.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Klee, *Behinderte im Urlaub*, 82–83.

<sup>48</sup> Klee, *Behinderte im Urlaub*, 98.

Tempel was quickly deemed a worthy recipient of the 1980 Golden Crutch. In one journal, the father of a child living with cognitive disabilities even explicitly nominated the Frankfurt court for the award.<sup>48</sup>

Yet the 1980 event itself was perceived as something of a failure. While the Golden Crutch was indeed awarded to Otto Tempel in the fall, the theatrical part of the program turned into an insider debate that outsiders could hardly understand. The ceremony itself stuck to the established formula and featured satirical skits relating to the ableist rhetoric of the Frankfurt court ruling. But, crucially, the audience was not agitated as it had been in the years before. This was largely because it was not the intended audience anymore. In the fall of 1980, the Golden Crutch was, as prominent activist Lothar Sandfort acknowledged, in crisis:

49 L. S., "Goldene Krücke in der Krise," *Luftpumpe* 3/11 (1980): 3–5, here 4–5.

50 Fischer, "Umstrittene Interessenvertretung," here 232–234.

51 See the manuscript of the review, Beate Etzler and Jürgen Hobrecht, "Die Montags-Rezension," aired January 5, 1981 at *Radio Bremen*, archived in file 221, N Klee.

The crisis is also due to the fact that the award ceremony is becoming an insider affair. Just a few days after tickets went on sale, insiders—those who deal with disability issues on a daily basis—had almost filled the available seats, so that they occupied about 4/5 of the sold-out hall. However, the concept of the award ceremony is geared towards a more naïve public. What makes this public's ears prick up are often old stories, too dull for insiders. ... Either you concentrate on getting a more naïve public—this includes more advertising, which was prevented this year after the house was sold out so quickly, this includes more space in the hall, and this includes more tickets at the box office—or you accept that the award ceremony becomes an insiders' party.<sup>49</sup>

While Sandfort hoped to revive the Golden Crutch, the award was paused in 1981 and not awarded again. In a way, it was not needed anymore to generate attention. The scandal surrounding the Frankfurt judgment had already garnered significant national coverage.

There were other reasons for the award's demise. There was emerging criticism of Klee's status as a figurehead within disability rights activism when he himself did not have any disabilities. As Jonas Fischer has shown, referencing minutes of early *VHS-Kurs* meetings, some members felt insecure around Klee or claimed that he was too authoritarian.<sup>50</sup> But these challenges had been voiced behind closed doors. Publicly, Klee was increasingly called out by the more radical activists. In a 1981 radio review of his recent books, he was harshly criticized for dominating the disability rights movement and his alleged lack of reflection about his status as a non-disabled man.

Emancipatory work with the disabled—Klee apparently only understands this to mean his own work at the Frankfurt VHS and the awarding of the 'Golden Crutch' initiated by him—both of which have already been exploited to the hilt in the media. ... Disturbingly, at no point does Klee define his position as an educator for people with disabilities [*Behindertenpädagoge*] and a non-disabled person. He merely talks about being personally affected.<sup>51</sup>

Already in early 1980, activists of the “Cripple Groups” had criticized Klee for not amplifying their often spectacular initiatives. The best known “Cripple activist,” Franz Christoph, had applied for political asylum in the Netherlands, citing oppression of disabled people in the Federal Republic.<sup>52</sup> According to members of the “Cripple Groups,” Klee refused to write about this maneuver in *Die Zeit*, the widely-read newspaper to which he was a contributor. In an article in the activist *Krüppelzeitung*, they quoted a letter which according to them was written by a *Die Zeit* journalist to the *Krüppelzeitung* editorial staff indicating that Klee and others had talked about taking up Christoph’s asylum application in the paper but decided against it as they concluded that the situation of disabled people was improving overall. In the article, the activists directly asked Klee how such a positive evaluation could be reconciled with awarding the Golden Crutch.<sup>53</sup>

Christoph also accused Klee, whom he referred to as disabled people’s “strange friend” [*seltamen Freund*], of maintaining traditional hierarchies by talking in the name of disabled people.<sup>54</sup> Various “Cripple activists” claimed Klee was financially profiting from writing about disability and served as a false icon for many young people with disabilities. Christoph went even further by saying that Klee’s publishing of a disability rights calendar would be like a man publishing feminist material, which would have been unthinkable at the time.<sup>55</sup>

When asked directly about his motivation for engaging in the disability movement, Klee seemed incensed.<sup>56</sup> In March 1981, the central journal of Swiss disability activism, *Puls*, issued a special edition on the personal motivation of non-disabled people for engaging in disability rights activism. In his contribution, Klee dismissed the issue:

I do not want to engage in a discussion about my “motivation.” ... I am annoyed, I don’t know why non-disabled people always have to explain their support and engagement. A postman does not have to explain why he took the job, somebody who likes to play chess or soccer, or enjoys listening to music or going to the

**52** On Christoph, see also Dagmar Herzog, “Moral Reasoning in the Wake of Mass Murder: Disability and Reproductive Rights in 1980s–1990s Germany,” *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 66 (2020): 9–29, here 20–21.

**53** “Neueste Auswirkung des Asylantrages von Franz,” *Krüppelzeitung: Zeitung von Krüppel für Krüppel* 1 (1980): 19–20.

**54** Franz, “Was es alles so gibt,” *Krüppelzeitung: Zeitung von Krüppel für Krüppel* 2 (1980): 8.

**55** Franz, “Was es alles so gibt”; Jan Stoll, “The German Disability Movement as a Transnational, Entangled New Social Movement,” *Moving the Social* 53 (2015): 63–86, 71. Klee did indeed address this issue. In 1982, he shared the editorial direction of the *Behindertenkalender* with Gusti Steiner and handed it over to Steiner completely the following year.

**56** L.S., “Interview mit Ernst Klee,” *Luftpumpe* 3/3 (1980): 4–8, 6–7.

57 Ernst Klee, "Ein Briefträger muss sich auch nicht befragen lassen ...," *Puls: Monatsheft der Gruppen IMPULS + CeBeeF* 23/3 (1981): 5.

58 Lorenzo Piaggio, "Behindertenprophet im Abseits," *Puls: Monatsheft der Gruppen IMPULS + CeBeeF* 23/5 (1981): 5–7, here 6.

59 Compare, for instance, "Die goldene Krücke ist der Anti-Oscar der Krüppelszene," *tageszeitung (taz)*, November 29, 1979.

museum is allowed to do so; yet non-disabled people within the disability rights movement are always pressured to explain their reasons for being engaged.<sup>57</sup>

In the May issue of the same journal, one Swiss activist reacted to Klee's statement in an article labeled "disabled prophet on the sidelines." While reporting that he himself was intrigued by Klee's early publications on disability rights issues, he was shocked by Klee's evasive answer about his motivation. Implying that Klee was reluctant to talk about his motivation because he was making good money with his books on disability, he claimed Klee was only interested in helping disabled people as long as they were dependent on him. He saw Klee's paternalism play out most prominently at the Golden Crutch.

At the award ceremony for the Golden Crutch (television broadcast), the stage was densely "garnished" with disabled people, especially wheelchair users. However, it was not a disabled person who appeared at the podium, but Ernst Klee. In my opinion, this scene clearly showed a lack of sensitivity on Klee's part (and, of course, incorrect behavior on the part of the disabled people present).<sup>58</sup>

Looking at media coverage about the Golden Crutch, Klee is indeed in most cases the only organizer mentioned by name; often the disabled members of the *VHS-Kurs* are only referred to as "die Behinderten."<sup>59</sup> While the palpable tensions between Klee and the more radical disability activist branches deserve more attention in future research, this critique of Klee can be seen as an indicator for identity debates that dominated 1981.

The year 1981 itself was another reason why the Golden Crutch was suspended. In 1976, the United Nations had chosen 1981 as the *International Year of Disabled Persons* (IYDP), as it had already designated an international women's year (1975) and a children's year (1979). In many countries, state actors, charities, and experts created event schedules, mostly to talk about the successes of and advances within the reha-

bilitative sectors. In West Germany and elsewhere, activists with disabilities rejected these official schedules as self-congratulatory paternalism.<sup>60</sup> The protest against the IYDP overshadowed other activist activities. “The ‘Golden Crutch’ will not be awarded this year. The reason for this is the ‘International Year of Disabled People,’ which is currently taking place in front of everyone’s eyes and ears.”<sup>61</sup>

Prior to and during 1981, activists not only interfered with the official events; they also created their own counterprogram. Important with regard to the legacy of the Golden Crutch is that parallel to the public criticism of Klee, the question about the role of non-disabled people in disability activism became a major discussion point. The highlight of the counterprogram was to be the so-called Cripple Tribunal. Modelled after the Russell People’s Tribunal series, a 1960s initiative that had indicted Vietnam war atrocities, this court was to preside over the “human rights violations in the welfare state” which, among other things, included the living conditions in residential institutions.

During a preparatory meeting for this tribunal in late February, a controversial discussion took place over whether the tribunal should be organized by disabled and non-disabled people cooperating together or whether non-disabled individuals should be mostly excluded. A vote among the disabled members of the group decided that disabled members should work mostly on their own, with only occasional cooperation with non-disabled people.<sup>62</sup> This approach was favored by the so-called “Cripple Groups.” In the following months, the issue of cooperation remained divisive. Eventually members of the more radical “Cripple Groups” dropped out of the organizational committee, claiming that the Cripple Tribunal was cooperating with the “oppressor.”<sup>63</sup>

The tribunal was held on December 12–13, 1981, in Dortmund. It attracted roughly 400 participants across the spectrum of disability activism. The tribunal reiterated criticism

**60** Anna Dersken and Monika Baár, “Das Internationale Jahr der Behinderten 1981 in historischer Perspektive,” in *Aufbrüche und Barrieren*, ed. Degener and von Miquel, 161–184.

**61** “Information zur ‘Goldenen Krücke,’” *Luftpumpe* 11 (1981): 4.

**62** Compare with the report by Martin Theben: “Heute vor 40 Jahren begann das Krüppel-Tribunal in Dortmund,” *Kobinet Nachrichten*, December 12, 2021, <https://kobinet-nachrichten.org/2021/12/12/heute-vor-40-jahren-begann-das-krueppel-tribunal-in-dortmund/>.

**63** The exchange is reprinted in *Krüppel-Tribunal: Menschenrechtsverletzungen im Sozialstaat*, ed. Susanne von Daniels et al. (Cologne, 1983), 157–159.

<sup>64</sup> Stoll, *Behinderte Anerkennung?*, 314–316.

of everyday discrimination and, like the Golden Crutch, voiced criticism from the perspective of people with disabilities.<sup>64</sup> It remains one of the central points of reference for the collective memory of the German disability rights movement. The debates surrounding the identity of the tribunal organizers took up questions that were also discussed with regard to Ernst Klee's perceived dominance in the movement and the awarding of the Golden Crutch.

## VI. Conclusion

The Golden Crutch was an important stage in the articulation of the interests of people with disabilities in the Federal Republic of Germany. Satire and ridicule had already played a role in local clubs and would also play a significant role in activist magazines. The satirical approach allowed the members of the *VHS-Kurs* to take on a new active speaker position, which was very well received and was therefore also transferred to other contexts. Challenging internalized hostility towards disabled people, such as in the case of the HUK advertisement, was also well received by a broader audience.

However, as soon as the target of the mockery became the field of disability care, public approval was more divided. In the case of the award of the Golden Crutch to the *Alsterdorfer Anstalten* in 1979, it was not only the clinic director who rejected the award and its implicit condemnation. There were also voices who thought that the award was aimed at the wrong target, as the clinic was by some seen as working in the interests of disabled people. Nevertheless, it was empowering for disability advocates to set the tone in these debates. In 1980/1981, the era of irony seemed to be over, at least for the time being. While its satire had become worn out, the Golden Crutch's empowerment remained. In 2014, the Berlin disability pride parade revived the idea and to the present day awards a "Glitter Crutch" [*Glitzerkrücke*] annually.

More radical activists criticized the dominance of the non-disabled journalist Ernst Klee in organizing the Golden Crutch and in public reporting on the disability movement. Here, new research perspectives materialize particularly regarding the history of what is today often called allyship. Recent research has shown that parents of disabled people were often criticized in West German activist media, but parent groups were simultaneously often engaged in supporting disability rights issues.<sup>65</sup> Within and beyond disability history, the ambivalent and sometimes contentious relationships of self-activists and people engaging in activism for people whose identity they do not share require further research attention.

**65** Raphael Rössel, *Belastete Familien? Eine Alltagsgeschichte westdeutscher Haushalte mit behinderten Kindern (1945–1990)* (Frankfurt, 2022), 414–431. On the ambivalence of parental support in an American context see Allison C. Carey, Pamela Block, and Richard K. Scotch, *Allies and Obstacles: Disability Activism and Parents of Children with Disabilities* (Philadelphia, 2020).

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