

Midwives, nurses, gynaecologists – selected perpetrator biographies

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Ladies and gentlemen,

A while ago I was asked by two professional organisations whether I could meet a group of American nurses and physicians. One was the German Nurses Association DBfK and the other the Section Historical Nursing Research in the German Society of Nursing Science DGP.

The DBfK was founded in 1903 by Agnes Karll and became a founding member of the International Council of Nurses (ICN). During the Nazi era the organisation was forbidden and all secular nurses organised in an all-German "Reichsfachschaft". As I will point out later this doesn't mean that that we hadn't perpetrators in leading positions after WWII – quite the contrary. Our past president, who wrote our first chronicle and reported all this, was Margarete Lungershausen, assistant and crown-princess to the Reich's midwife leader, as I will point out later. Today DBfK is the largest free professional nurses' association in Germany.

The DGP – the German Society of Nursing Science – was founded in 1989 and is an independent – that means not connected with the several German nurses' associations and sisterhoods – an independent forum for the development and promotion of nursing science and nursing research. Its section for historical research is very small with about 17 members of whom 8 or 10 are actively working on nursing history. An even smaller group is working on midwifery history in the German Society of Midwifery Science.

As you have already guessed nurses and midwives in Germany are very strictly separated professions with different training, duties and grades of independence from physicians. Even nursing is divided into three main professions: adult nursing, paediatric nursing and nursing of old people, each with a non-academic training of 3 years. I myself am a paediatric nurse with an academic degree that followed in Nursing and Health. As there is no chair for nursing or midwifery history I am doing my doctoral thesis about the Reich's midwives' leader Nanna Conti at an institute for the history of medicine – which usually means physicians' history. So – I am a kind of interdisciplinary border crosser.

I will mainly talk about Nanna Conti and from her go on to discuss several acquaintances of hers who can also be ranked among the perpetrators of crimes in the German health system. I will also introduce two of the victims of its racial cleansing.

Around 1918, when Nanna Conti started her political career, midwives were usually free-lancers as most confinements took place in the families' homes. A lot of midwives lived on the border of poverty, were exhausted and suffered from their low social status. The years from 1918 until 1933 were dominated by struggles among midwives as the general political uproar in the country manifested itself among them. As a result the German midwives' association split and several separate midwife lobby groups began, each group having found the key to fortune for all German midwives. They all agreed, however, that a Reich's midwives' law would be necessary to change the profession's desolate situation. Nora Szász – a scholar of Prof. Baader – has done outstanding research on this period.

In 1933 their situation changed. One of the main foci of national socialist health policy was an increase in birth rates and the general improvement of the nation's health. Midwives became increasingly important. Firstly, all midwives organisations were forced to unite under the roof of the "Allgemeine Deutsche Hebammenverband", the *All-German Midwives' Association*. This organisation had a chairwoman – Nanna Conti – who was appointed by the Home Secretary. Discussion and voting was according to the "Führerprinzip" and strongly discouraged. Their chairwoman – or „Führerin“ as the midwives themselves called her – had an immense influence over them as she appointed federal and local chairwomen and acted as chief editor of the professional midwifery magazine which every midwife had to read. It was the system's voice in every midwife's practise. By this voice the Nazi population ideology was spread among midwives as well as being disseminated during their monthly meeting that every midwife had to attend. It seems that a lot of them didn't come regularly as there were frequent appeals in the magazine, but still there was a constant brainwashing.

Since most families were reliant on midwife services, midwives had to act as educators among the German population. Midwives had to teach mothers to be proud of fulfilling their duty towards the German nation, encourage them to give birth to as many children as possible and promote breastfeeding, which, from 1933 was actively promoted as part of a whole mother ideology.

Midwives were also charged with the task to report newborns with disabilities and ill babies as well as to announce miscarriages and abortions. They received a pay of 2,- Reichsmark for every baby they denounced. The actual work of midwives under the Nazi regime has been thoroughly researched by Wiebke Lisner at Hanover University.

Now let me say a few words to the physicians around Nanna Conti before going into detail about her biography:

Of course Jews were not allowed to participate in the midwives' organisation. The first change was to dismiss Prof. Sigfrid Hammerschlag, who had been editor of the professional magazine for years and published the Prussian midwifery text-book but was of Jewish origin. In a CV I just found some days ago he himself wrote that he was a Protestant. Probably he belonged to the so-called assimilated Jews. He was born in 1871 in Magdeburg and studied medicine at several German universities, for example 1890 in Würzburg, where he attended lectures amongst others by Prof. Röntgen, who discovered x-rays.

After WWI he founded the gynaecological hospital of Berlin-Neukölln which still exists. In May 1933 he was forced to retire. Hammerschlag was able to escape the imminent terror and emigrated to Persia, where he died in 1948. Last week I found lists which indicate how much Hammerschlag and his family had to leave behind when they left Germany. I haven't been able to analyse them yet but it is obvious that money and jewels as well as household items like a radio were confiscated. In a belated obituary in the re-established midwives' magazine in 1949 he was praised as an enthusiastic midwives' teacher. The era 1933-1945 wasn't mentioned at all. It was said that he had decided to emigrate. All that is remembered about Hammerschlag today is a short biography published by Manfred Stürzbecher on the internet. As Hammerschlag supported the more conservative midwives' group during the Weimar republic and obviously worked together with Nanna Conti and her son, who joined the Nazi party in the 1920s, I guess he probably couldn't understand why they did all this to him.

Dr. Marta Fraenkel was another Jewish physician who had to leave the editorial staff. She was a well-known physician who had worked for the Deutsche Hygiene Museum in

Dresden as well as for the League of Nations in Geneva. In 1935 she fled to Brussels where she worked for the Belgian anti-cancer league. In 1938 she emigrated to the United States where she worked for the Welfare Council of New York, the U.S. Government and the Public Health Office of New York. She died there in 1976. While Prof. Hammerschlag is quite forgotten in Germany a street in Dresden is named after her and also an assembly room at the Deutsche Hygiene Museum.

Prof. Benno Ottow succeeded Hammerschlag as medical director of the hospital of Berlin-Neukölln. He was of Baltic-German origin and born on the island of Hiiumaa in Estonia in 1884. He studied at Tartu university in Estonia, in Rostock and also in Berlin where he became a scholar of Prof. Walter Stöckel.

Stoeckel is a very interesting figure in the history of German gynaecology. He was a renowned physician who wrote – as far as I understand the matter – outstanding text books about obstetrics and female urology and is regarded as having invented this speciality. Stoeckel wrote his autobiography after WWII which was republished several times. There he showed a profound dislike of Conti – both mother and son - and held himself at a distance from national socialism.

On the other hand the Biographical Encyclopaedia of the Third Reich calls Stoeckel the outstanding gynaecologist of that era. Stoeckel himself wrote that he supported a mercy petition on behalf of his student Percival Treite, who was judged guilty of the murder of women in Ravensbruck. Another Stöckel student, Adolf Winkelmann, was also judged guilty because of the same crime. Of course Stöckel wasn't responsible for his former students and assistants – but these facts show how connected the physicians' community was. I think it must have been very difficult not to know what was going on as many afterwards claimed they had done. Prof. Ulf Schmidt at Kent University writes that Stöckel also was engaged in the mercy campaign on behalf of Hitler's personal physician Karl Brandt. Maybe Stöckel was an opponent of death penalty, but I do think that a critical biography of this past president of the German Society for gynaecology and obstetrics is a desideratum. Susanne Doetz has researched the history of Charité gynaecological hospital under his leadership in the context of forced sterilisations between 1942 and 1944. She is a co-worker at the Charité Institute for the history of medicine.

His scholar Benno Ottow, however, wrote one book about abortion because of urological indications in 1939 and published two festschriften on the occasion of his former teacher's 60th and 70th birthday. So – three of the six publications the German national library names under Ottow are related to Stöckel respectively, and one of his main research topics – female urology.

A paper probably presented by Ottow in 1937 shows that Ottow belonged to a sterilisation commission and that he himself performed 750 sterilisations because of eugenics between 1934 and 1937. It also shows that even convinced Nazi physicians like Ottow recognised that diagnostic mistakes were made and even women after her menopause were sent for a sterilisation.

In the revised midwifery text-book by Ottow and others from 1943 – which although it was based on Hammerschlag's book but didn't name him – he wrote the chapters about anatomy and pathology. But to conduct an overall assessment of his scientific work:

When he applied for a visa for Sweden in the late 1940s, the well-known Swedish physician and health functionary Axel Höjer judged his scientific work not remarkable.

When the house of the midwives' organisation was bombed in 1942 Ottow not only offered to Nanna Conti the opportunity to install the headquarters in his own apartment but

obviously also to live there when she stayed in Berlin.

Ottow fled to Sweden in 1945 where he worked as a zoologist. He died in Stockholm in 1975. Nils Hansson from Lund university in Sweden and I are currently doing research on his biography. We are interested in the question why he decided to leave Germany and never worked as a physician again. Most other leading gynaecologists and ordinaries stayed in their positions and lived happily and eminently respectable lives, while nobody questioned their doings during an era of eugenics and forced abortions and sterilisations.

To get back to Nanna Conti and the midwives:

To be a midwife was declared by many physicians and politicians to be the most noble and especially genuine female profession as mother and child were described as the nation's most valuable treasures. For the first time in centuries German midwives were wooed and cared for. Payment was still a topic of heavy discussion during the whole Nazi period - but still: Their training became regulated, they were invited to take part in health commissions, congresses and governmental debates, and they were honoured by being invited as the only non-academic medical profession to professional training courses at the Reich's physician leader school in Alt Rehse.

I was told that you would have liked to visit Alt Rehse and I would love to tell you a lot about it as I did my thesis about those midwives' courses there – but I am afraid that such an excursion would blow the schedule. Thomas Maibaum in Rostock has done his dissertation about Alt Rehse. You will find an English summary of his work in the conference book from Lund I have layed out.

So – who was the woman who represented German midwives during the Nazi era in front of politicians and physicians as well as in front of their international colleagues?

Nanna Conti was born on 24th April 1881 in Uelzen near Hanover. She had an elder brother who emigrated to the U.S. as an adult, and a younger one who died during childhood.

Carl Eugen Pauli, her father, was a renowned Etruscologist and worked as a headmaster in Uelzen. He was master of the local freemason lodge. It seems somehow strange that his daughter who assisted him in his research work in Italy and Switzerland and obviously shared his esoteric philosophy of life later adopted a world-view which brought discredit on everything Etruscan, and abandoned freemasonry. Her husband would come from a family with a freemasonry background, too, while her sons would have to swear as Nazi functionaries that they had never been members of a lodge. Some weeks ago I discovered a biography of her father which suggests that she had been influenced in her anti-Semitism by her father who is reported to have hated the German emperor William II and especially those few Jews who had gained influence at court.

In 1883 the family had to leave Uelzen in difficult financial circumstances and seek refuge with the mother's family in Sopot near Gdańsk. Her father had had a love affair with a young woman. In the late 19th century in rural protestant Northern Germany this relationship caused a scandal, led to a disciplinary investigation and Pauli's dismissal. He tried to get his habilitation thesis accepted in Leipsic – which failed because of his disciplinary sentence. In 1893 they moved to Lugano in Switzerland where Pauli accepted the post of teacher at a boys secondary school. He published several books about the Etruscans, and it is reported that he was assisted by his daughter in his archaeological research. In 1898 Nanna, not yet 17, married Silvio Conti, a post-office clerk from Monteggio near Lugano.

In 1899 their first son – Silvio – was born in Lugano. Nanna Conti's eldest son would

become a lawyer and appointed county president in Prenzlau between Berlin and the Baltic Sea in 1933. He killed himself in 1938.

In 1900 Leonardo was born, the favourite of his mother and later the Nazi physician's leader. In the Nazi era he would share his mother's love for Alt Rehse and even spend family vacations with his children there. It was Leonardo Conti who organised the family's flight from Berlin via Alt Rehse to Schleswig-Holstein. He was captured in Flensburg in 1945 and committed suicide in Nuremberg prison in October of the same year. His youngest daughter Irmgard married a soldier of the U.S. Army and moved to her husband's home country. Her autobiography was published in Wilmington, Ohio in 2008.

Nanna and Silvio Conti divorced while she was pregnant with her 3rd child. The decree stated clearly that it was Silvio Conti who was at fault for the failing marriage. He probably never met his sons again and never got to know his daughter Camilla, born 1902 in Oetsch near Leipsic. Camilla Conti never appeared in public and probably most midwives didn't even know about her while they knew Silvio junior and admired Leonardo. She married Dr. Robert Nissen who became director of a museum in Munster in Westphalia. She and her husband should be regarded as typical German opportunist [o'pportjunists] but they didn't play an active political role.

While the children stayed in Munich Nanna Conti was trained as a midwife at Magdeburg midwifery school. In 1905 she and her children together with their widowed maternal grandmother moved to Berlin where Conti started working as a freelance midwife.

Nanna Conti and her sons joined several extreme right-wing parties and organisations before they became members of the NSDAP, Nanna Conti in 1928 or 1930. Being a faithful and devoted advocate for the national socialist movement she became appointed chairwoman of the united midwives' organisation in 1933. First she shared duties and honour with her predecessor Emma Rauschenbach but this highly merited functionary was soon degraded and finally forced out in 1939. Fariba Sauer-Forooghi has done her dissertation in Leipzig about Rauschenbach.

During the following years Conti travelled all over Germany to unite the midwives and make sure that they internalised Nazi population policies including the so called necessity for the sterilisation of the so called "inferiors" and the abortion and selection of ill and so called "malformed" babies.

There are several decidedly anti-Semitic and racist articles by Conti herself in the midwifery magazine. Even in 1946 after the capitulation of the "Deutsche Reich" she felt the need to mention that the mayor of the village where she had sought refuge, who was obviously not too obliging towards her, was a Jew and former ragman and complain about "Jewish vindictiveness". By the way – she was referring to Jean Labowsky, a mobile trader and the only surviving Jew in Bad Segeberg, who had been appointed town director by the British army.

It seems that she also corresponded with Margarete Lungershausen, leading midwife in Benno Ottow's hospital. She was leader of the hospital midwives section in the "Reichsfachschaft". Lungershausen was a trained nurse and midwife and had also attended a course for leading nurses at the private university for women in Leipzig in 1920. In 1945 she fled to Denmark where she was imprisoned until 1948. She returned to Germany and became president of the German Nurses Association in 1953. As I told you in the beginning she wrote the first chronicle of our professional organisation. She deeply influenced the DBfK during its first years. Lungershausen died in 1973. A couple of weeks ago I received the copy of a letter by her which indicates that even in the 1960s she didn't

really distance herself from national socialism and also that she stayed in contact with Conti and Ottow. She evidently used her old connections when she published her chronicle in the same company which had published the midwives' magazine for decades. Her biography under consideration of her impact on German nursing history is still a desideratum.

Lungershausen, Conti and Ottow founded a school for leading midwives at the hospital Berlin-Neukölln. It was a national socialist elite school for midwives. One of the lecturers there was Luise von Oertzen, mother superior of all Red Cross nurses. von Oertzen became mother superior in 1935. From 1937 Red Cross nurses were directly involved in the Reich's preparations for war, as Horst Seithe pointed out in his dissertation in 1993. von Oertzen was a member of the Nazi party and honoured with the golden party badge of honour.

The picture shown here is quite significant. It was taken during the inauguration of Ernst Robert Grawitz as president of the German Red Cross. It visualises how close she was to the centre of the Red Cross. Judith Hahn – another scholar of Prof. Baader – has done an extraordinary work about Grawitz and two other high-ranking SS physicians.

von Oertzen was famous for visiting her nurses at the front, so she must have seen under which poor circumstances the regime let its soldiers literally rot. She must also have seen how prisoners of war were treated. So she knew but didn't report to the International Red Cross.

Ulf Schmidt reports that traumatised soldiers were killed by gas. I know that you visited Bernburg, where Dr. Hoffmann certainly also talked about nurses in the euthanasia program. It hasn't been researched yet how much nurses were involved in these killings of soldiers behind the front. My colleague Thomas Foth, who is currently at Ottawa University, does his dissertation about the responsibility of nurses for euthanasia killings by creating via their documentation a picture of patients as creatures not worth to live. We are members of the International Collaboration on the Role of Nurses and Midwives in the Third Reich, a group of scholars who are studying this neglected area. A website will be available soon.

In his 1993 book about the Red Cross Horst Seithe pointed out that a critical biography of Luise von Oertzen was still to be done. So I was quite astonished when I found out last autumn that the Mecklenburg Red Cross had named a nursing home quite close to my home town after Luise von Oertzen. When I pointed out that this patronage [peitronidsch] maybe wasn't luckily chosen I got no answer and a very angry one when a journalist became interested in the story. I think they will try to sit it out.

She was dismissed in 1945 but very soon became mother superior again. This next picture is quite interesting as it was published by the journal DER SPIEGEL in the 1950s in a critical report about her nursing policies. It is a bit mean in the late postwar period as it clearly shows her swastika brooch.

Back again to Nanna Conti:

Nanna Conti was president of the International Congress of Midwives in Berlin in 1936 which was attended by 700 midwives from all over Europe. The congress was widely reported in midwives' journals. This picture was published in the Swedish magazine.

These 700 midwives also visited Alt Rehse. Others even attended training courses. Midwives from Denmark, Italy, Switzerland, Algeria and Estonia visited Alt Rehse in 1937. Another participant was a yet unidentified Miss Rodenberg from the U.S. She was

described as a linguist with German roots who travelled all over Europe to report afterwards in the U.S. So far I haven't found anything else about her.

According to a resolution by the Berlin congress Conti became president of the International Midwives' Association, today's International Confederation of Midwives, until the following congress 1938 in Paris. In 1942 the founder of the ICM, Prof. Frans Daels, a gynaecologist from Ghent, appointed her to become his successor as secretary general of the ICM. This is remarkable not only because Belgium was under German occupation at that time, but also because Daels was a well-known Flemish nationalist. He was sentenced to death because of his collaboration with the Nazis, but was able to escape, returned to Belgium in the 1950s and continued working as a physician. Unfortunately those few ICM-files from that period, which are left, are kept at the Wellcome Library in London and are still closed. Most files burned when the midwives' headquarters were bombed. However - the ICM has to face the fact that the International Confederation of Midwives was led by a Nazi supporter and a Nazi midwife during its first decades. By the way – the International Midwives' Congress in Madrid in 1963 stood under the patronage of [Doña](#) Carmen Franco, the Spanish fascist dictator's wife.

Nanna Conti also travelled all over Europe to meet midwives, strengthen the international network and to talk about national socialist Germany. Between 1936 and 1938 she visited Italy, Belgium, France, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia and all Austrian Gaue after the Anschluss. She obviously regarded herself as a multiplier and an informal ambassador of the regime.

She reached the zenith of her career in 1938 when the German midwifery law passed which declared that midwives had to attend every regular confinement whether a physician was present or not. It also binded every pregnant woman to call a midwife for assistance. Of course that edict supported pregnant women, but it also meant that the system became aware of every newborn and stillborn baby. This law also excluded Jewish midwives from the profession.

There are several very interesting publications about Jewish nurses in Germany and the destruction of our Jewish nursing tradition. As far as I know the history of Jewish midwives hasn't been researched yet. I did my best to find their traces but so far I haven't found any.

Nanna Conti's deep racism and anti-Semitism is shown clearly in her many publications in the midwives' magazine. In 1942 for example, Conti wrote about 'racial development in the U.S.A', strongly disapproving of Mrs Roosevelt, who 'liked acting as patroness' of the 'black' population and spoke at *Negerversammlungen* (Negroes' meetings). Conti also didn't like that 'just' eight per cent of Afro-Americans were illiterate, that there were universities for them and efforts were made to fight tuberculosis and syphilis within the African-American population. From her point of view it was a waste of resources to engage so intensively on behalf of an 'inferior' race. Other articles by her show her fear that the *Neger* would outnumber the 'white race'. By the way, she accused the Jews of supporting Afro-Americans – stating that this support was not to be wondered at as Jews always would deceive their host country.

Interestingly enough she had no problems birthing Jewish women before 1933 and it seems that she was well-liked among Jewish families. There is also a testimony that she supported a physician who helped a Jewish colleague to emigrate, but I think that her support was more due to her connection with the so-called Aryan physician.

Nanna Conti was afraid of being sentenced to death by the Soviets and fled to Schleswig-Holstein in April 1945. A midwife accused her of having embezzled money from the

organisation but she wasn't arrested. Actually I don't think that she embezzled money for her personal benefit, but sources which I have found just recently suggest that she kept slush funds.

Also a denazification file couldn't be found.

We don't know how much influence she still held after the end of the Nazi regime. There is a letter from a midwife asking her to be quiet for the midwives' sake but also reports that she still attended meetings. She died on 30th December 1951 in Bielefeld.

Today she is quite forgotten among German and Austrian midwives as well as in the ICM - but the centre piece of "her" midwifery law – the midwives' monopoly on confinements – is legal in Germany and Austria until today. So – German and Austrian midwives have a very special position. Therefore it is no wonder that in the 1980s Nanna Conti was still announced in a midwifery text book as one of the icons of German midwifery.

Protagonist behind the desks like Nanna Conti, Margarethe Lungershausen or Luise v. Oertzen are difficult to judge, for researchers as well as for practitioners. Since the 1980s there is a debate going on whether women like them were perpetrators. They didn't kill or torture. All three were devoted nurses and midwives and did their utmost to strengthen their profession. Weren't they just acting in the context of the time and regime? They did implement racism and eugenics in nursing and midwifery, helped to exclude Jewish colleagues, agitated against Afro-Germans and -Americans and – in the case of Luise v. Oertzen- supported actively a war which violated international law. I do regard them as perpetrators.

There is still a lot of research to do but I am hopeful that the growing interest in perpetrator research will also bring nursing and midwifery historiography forward.

Thank you very much for your attention.