

NANNA CONTI – THE BIOGRAPHY OF NAZI GERMANY’S CHIEF MIDWIFE

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I am glad to be here and to present some results of my research. Nanna Conti was chairwoman of the German midwives' professional organisation during the Nazi era. Before going into details about her I will give you some information about German midwives during the Weimar Republic and the Nazi era in general. As we are here to remember the centenary of Florence Nightingales death I will also point out how their biographies and grade of commitment shared similarities, even if one chose the bright and the other the dark side.

The icon of German midwifery from the 1890s on has been Olga Gebauer who was chairwoman of the first Germany wide midwives organisation. Her main aim was to unite the German midwives in one strong organisation. The years following World War I were dominated by struggles among midwives as the general political uproar in Germany manifested itself among them. The social democratic wing tended towards a fusion with the unions while an extremely right wing fought against such an idea. So - when Gebauer died in 1922 the splitting of the organisation into several midwives's lobby groups had already started.

In 1923 a midwifery law passed the Prussian parliament, however there was still no old-age pension for midwives and too many midwives rivalled in the face of decreasing birth rates. Many midwives lived on the border of poverty, were exhausted and suffered from their low social status. From 1926 on health insurance companies had to pay when their insurants called a midwife but the reports in the midwifery magazine show the difficulties midwives had to overcome to get their fees. Often they were forced to pay for material and transportation costs themselves. According to many letters written by midwives their general situation was desperate.

In 1933 their situation changed. One of the main foci of national socialist health policy was an increasement of birth rates and an improvement of the nation's health in general. Midwives became increasingly important. First all midwives organisations were forced to unite under the roof of the “Allgemeine Deutsche Hebammenverband”. This all-German organisation was far from being a democracy. It had a chairwoman – Nanna Conti – who was appointed by the Home Secretary. Discussion and voting was according to the “Führerprinzip” decidedly not supported. Even as midwives were regarded essential for a successful population policy they were never allowed to manage their own affairs but were kept dependent on male politicians. Nevertheless 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 to which every midwife had to subscribe. Whether they all read it we don't know but it was the system's voice in every midwife's practise. With this voice the Nazi population ideology was spread among midwives as well as during their monthly meetings 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. Midwives should act as ideological multipliers among the German population as most families called them at one time or another. They should 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 but on the other hand spy on them. They were charged with the task to report on newborns with disabilities

and ill babies as well as to announce miscarriages and abortions.

Of course it was not wished in Nazi Germany that Jews participated in the midwives' organisation. The first change here was to dismiss Prof. Siegfried Hammerschlag, who had been editor of the professional magazine for years and published the Prussian midwifery text-book but was Jewish. In May 1933 he was replaced by Prof. Benno Ottow, a strict national socialist. Prof. Hammerschlag was able to escape the imminent terror and emigrated to Persia, where he died in 1948. In December 1938 the first midwifery law for the whole of Germany was released. From then on Jewish women were not allowed to be appointed as midwives and from 1940 on Jews were not allowed to attend midwifery schools either. Women who had one Jewish parent or Jewish grandparents – so called 1. grade and 2. grade “Mischlinge” – were excluded, too. These announcements were published in books as well as in the professional magazine whose editor for midwifery affairs was – Nanna Conti. In the revised midwifery text-book from 1943 – which although it was based on Hammerschlag's book but didn't name him – it says about so called “Mischlinge”: “ God created the white man, God created the black man, but the bastard was created by the devil.” So called “Volljuden” were described as parasites, unable to work in productive professions like crafts but able to mimicry and because of that being extremely dangerous for the nation's racial purity and health. This book was published and revised by renowned physicians and recommended to every midwife by Nanna Conti.

To be a midwife was declared to be the most noble and especially genuine female profession as mother and child were described as the nation's most valuable treasures. This by the way didn't hinder the government to not give full civil rights to women. For the first time in centuries German midwives were wooed and cared for. Payment was still a topic of discussion during the whole Nazi period but their training became regulated, they were at least 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, an exemplary Nazi leader school, village and estate in Mecklenburg.

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 April 24th 1881. In 1881 – far away from Contis birthplace Uelzen near Hanover – Florence Nightingale celebrated her 61st birthday and had started to make public appearances again the year before. Nightingale's plan to establish a midwifery school had failed in the 1860s.

Like her Conti was born into an educated but far less wealthy middle class family. Her father, Dr. Carl Eugen Pauli, came from a small town in West Pomerania, her mother Anna from Lębork in Pomerania. 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 described by his son as a conservative Prussian and was master of the local freemasonry 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 with national socialism a world-view which brought discredit on everything Etruscan and abandoned freemasonry. Her husband would come from a family with freemasonry background, too, while her sons would have to swear in the Nazi era that they had never been members of a lodge.

In 1883 the family had to leave Uelzen and seek refuge with the mother's family in Sopot near Gdańsk. Her father had had a love affair with a young woman who probably lived as a so called “house daughter” with the family. Those were young women who lived for a while in another household and assisted the mistress of the house - so training for their own role as future wives and mothers. This woman – Elisabeth Hein from a baker's family in Uelzen – had moved to Berlin and given birth to a daughter who died in infancy. As the child's name was Elisabeth Clara Pauline –

Clara being quite similar to Carl and Pauline the female version of Pauli – it is quite sure that Pauli not only was her father's child, but that they held each other in real affection. In the late 19th century in rural Northern Germany this relationship caused a scandal, led to a disciplinary investigation and Pauli's dismissal. For the next years he had to struggle for his scientific reputation and the financial support of his family. For some years they lived separated as he tried to get his habilitation thesis accepted in Leipsic – which failed because of his disciplinary sentence – while his wife stayed in Sopot. After a period during which the whole family was united again in Leipsic they moved to Lugano in Switzerland where Pauli accepted the post of teacher at a boys secondary school. Until 1893 he published several books about the Etruscans, and it is reported that he was assisted by his daughter in his archaeological research. Not much is known about Nanna Conti's upbringing and education but that she must have received a quite broad one as she is reported to have spoken five languages fluently. We do know that she was able to follow the international midwifery congress in Paris in 1935 without problems. Of course she spoke Italian fluently which explains her decided preference for her Italian colleagues throughout her political work – besides the fact that Italy was also ruled by fascists.

In 1898 Pauli had to retire because of illness. From a letter written by him I suppose that he suffered from cardiac insufficiency. On March 3rd of that year Nanna not yet 17 married Silvio Conti, a post-office clerk from Monteggio near Lugano. It is often reported – as written in the C. Vs of their sons – that he was a post director, but the Swiss post archives told me that he was leading one single post office but had to leave the staff because of being unfit for the job.

In May 1899 their first son – Silvio Carlo Paolo Clemente – was born in Lugano, carrying again the names of Carl Pauli. Most certainly Nanna Conti didn't know about her dead half-sister. From a later letter by her brother we can suppose that the children were never told the truth about their father's dismissal in Uelzen. Her eldest son would become a lawyer and in 1933 country president in Prenzlau between Berlin and the Baltic Sea. He killed himself in 1938. In 1900 Leonardo Ambrogio Giorgio was born, the favourite of his mother and later Nazi physician's leader. As one of the most important men in German health system he strongly supported his mother's fight for homebirths which made him quite unpopular amongst obstetricians. He committed suicide in Nuremberg prison in 1945.

Throughout her marriage Nanna Conti suffered from permanent pregnancies and several miscarriages while her – also very young – husband seems to have maltreated her and had love affairs. With one of his mistresses he eloped to London during the divorce process in 1903.

The marriage of Nanna and Silvio Conti was divorced in Zurich while she was pregnant with her 3rd child. Probably the process took place in protestant Zurich because it was easier there to get the divorce than in catholic Lugano. 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 Anna Flora Maria Camilla, born in 1902 in Oetsch near Leipsic. Camilla Conti never appeared in public and probably most midwives didn't even know about her while they did know Silvio junior and admired Leonardo. She married Dr. Robert Nissen who became director of a museum in Munster in Westphalia. Contrary to her family she seems to have been a faithful Christian and – even if clearly devoted to her mother – she and her husband should be regarded as typical German opportunists but 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 maternal grandmother – Carl Eugen Pauli died in 1901 – moved to Berlin where Conti started working as a freelance midwife which at that time was more common than working in a hospital.

Having a look at what happened at Nightingale's residence in London around 1900 we know that Florence Nightingale had nearly completely retired to her bedroom suffering from old age disability

and probably dementia. As we all know she died highly decorated on 13th August 1910.

Conti didn't refer to Florence Nightingale as one of her role models but there are some similarities in their biographies: Both were educated and influenced by their fathers with a focus on the classics, were polyglot and chose medical professions which were not seen suitable for women of their class. Of course there were broad differences, too – for example Florence Nightingale being a wealthy, childless bachelorette and Nanna Conti a mother of three with a low income. But both were driven by the desire to improve the health conditions of their fellow humans and the working conditions of nurses and midwives around them as well as worldwide with a decided love for statistics. But while Nightingale preferred a Republic and accepted other ethnic groups as equally human, Conti developed a world-view based on the belief in a “Führer” and the absolute superiority of the German so called “race”.

Nanna Conti and her sons joined several extremely right-wing parties and organisations before they became members of the NSDAP, Nanna Conti in 1928 or 1930. Conti's commitment to midwifery policies is documented from about 1918 onwards. She was one of the protagonists of the midwives' nationalist group fighting the unionists. Being a faithful and devoted fighter 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.

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 not so many decidedly anti-Semitic articles by Conti herself, but she was chief editor of the magazine which published them. She herself frequently referred to Jewish physicians as being responsible for abortions and spoke of “Jewish feminists” of the Weimar republic as anti role models for the modern German Nazi woman. 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”.

According to herself Conti was chairwoman of the International Confederation of Midwives from 1936-1938. However I couldn't prove this as the files at the Wellcome Library are still closed. It is a fact that she was president of the International Congress of Midwives in Berlin in 1936 which was attended by 700 midwives. She also travelled all over Europe to meet foreign colleagues and all across the Reich including the conquered areas .

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.

Having talked about similarities between Conti and Nightingale I want to mention that Nanna Conti and her son Leonardo were strictly against smoking and drinking and active in the abolition movement, and I was quite astonished when I found the following quote from Florence Nightingale in the Bostridge biography: that smoking and drinking “make our race degenerate”. Debates about race, nation's health, sterilisation and euthanasia were not a German phenomenon but discussed worldwide. Some states in the U.S. passed sterilisation laws which were highly recommended in Nazi Germany, e. g. by Nanna Conti. But no other country industrialized the torture and mass murder of humans as the “Deutsche Reich” did.

Nanna Conti was afraid of being sentenced to death by the Soviets and fled to Schleswig-Holstein

in April 1945. There she was accused of having embezzled money from her organisation but never arrested. 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 among her son's family. In the obituary by her successor Helene Kornfeld it says: "Beyond all course of world and time the life deeds of Nanna Conti will endure. We will keep her in our grateful hearts." Nevertheless she is quite forgotten among midwives but the centrepiece of her midwifery law – the midwives' monopol on confinements – has remained until today. In the end looking at the parallels in the upbringing and grade of commitment of Florence Nightingale and Nanna Conti the main question of perpetrator research arises: What causes the one to become a modern saint and the other to become a perpetrator?

Thank you very much.