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Oertzen, Conti, Oberheuser – traces around Ravensbrück of female protagonists of the Nazi health system

(...) A few annotations: The actual focus of my research is a biography of the Reich's midwives' 'Führerin' Nanna Conti. She is also the key aspect of my paper.

My research approach is the Grounded Theory by Strauss and Corbin. Hence I am especially interested not only in the consequences of the acting of Nazi perpetrators but also in contexts and interaction between protagonists. Therefore I started to collect information about acquaintances of Nanna Conti or – if information was not accessible – to reconstruct biographies within the framework of my dissertation.

For today's presentation I chose Oberheuser and von Oertzen because of their regional references as well as their ideological similarities with Nanna Conti. Research about Oberheuser has been done by several people in the context of Ravensbrück or the Nuremberg trials but a critical biography of her as well as of von Oertzen is still a desideratum. I will also introduce a few others around Nanna Conti.

To get down to my topic: Nanna Conti was born in 1881 in *Uelzen* near Hanover into an educated 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 one elder brother who emigrated to the U.S. as an adult, and a younger one who died during childhood.

Her father belonged as headmaster of the boy's secondary school and master of the local freemasons' lodge to Uelzen's upper crust. In 1883 the family had to leave Uelzen facing insolvency. Pauli had a lover who had clandestinely given birth to a daughter who died in infancy. In the late 19th century in rural Northern Germany this relationship caused a scandal and led to Pauli's dismissal. They moved to Leipzig where her mother ran a boarding house for foreign students and her father worked as a teacher. In 1893 they moved to Lugano in Switzerland where Pauli taught at a boys secondary school. He published several books about the Etruscans and was certainly one of the fathers of modern etruscology.

Also he was a member of the Pan-German league, an ultra-nationalist and anti-Semitic political organization. From this organisation one can draw a continuous development line

towards the German National People's Party and the German Nationalist Protection and Defiance Federation, the largest anti-Semitic group in the Weimar Republic, and from there to the Nazi Party. From hints on her early political career I am quite sure that Nanna Conti was already active in the Berlin women's group of the Pan-German league before World War I. However, she and her sons joined the mentioned parties and federation. So – from the continuities in their world view I am reasonably certain that Nanna Conti was deeply influenced by her father.

In 1898 Nanna not yet 17 married Silvio Conti, a post-office clerk from Monteggio near Lugano.

In 1899 their first son – Silvio junior – was born. He would become a lawyer and country president in *Prenzlau* – not far from here – in 1933 and kill himself in 1938. Perhaps his personal problems with the local SS and Nazi party became so difficult that even his influential younger brother could no longer protect him from dismissal.

This younger brother was Leonardo, born in 1900, his mother's favourite and later Nazi physician's Führer. Leonardo Conti was deeply involved in the extrusion of Jewish physicians, the planning of the euthanasia program and forced abortions on forced labourers. Also he strongly supported his mother as she lobbied for midwives. Leonardo Conti committed suicide in Nuremberg prison in 1945.

During her marriage Nanna Conti had multiple pregnancies all the while her husband maltreated her and had love affairs. The marriage was divorced while she was pregnant with her 3rd child Camilla, born in 1902 near Leipsic. Camilla Conti later never appeared in public.

Nanna Conti was trained as a midwife at Magdeburg midwifery school in 1903-1904. In 1905 she and her family moved to Berlin where Conti started working as a freelance midwife. Probably she chose to become a midwife partly because of the urgent necessity to earn a living and partly because this profession fitted into her conservative conception of women.

At this point I have to give you some information about midwives and nurses in Germany. Nurses and midwives in Germany have always been strictly separated professions. While midwives have a long professional tradition, nurses started to become a profession in the late 19th century. Around 1900 they started to emancipate from churchly paternalism. Red Cross nurses were organised similarly to the deaconesses in mother houses. Midwives, on

the other side, had as freelancers always been lone fighters but started to organise around 1900, too. Both professions are still semi-academic in Germany.

Around 1918, when Nanna Conti started her political career, a lot of midwives lived on the border of poverty. The years until 1933 were dominated by struggles among midwives as the general political uproar in the country manifested among them. Conti was one of the protagonists of the midwives' nationalist group.

In 1933 the midwives' often desperate 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. So - midwives who held the nation's future literally in their hands, became vastly important.

All midwives organisations were forced to unite under the roof of the All-German Midwives' Association. Being a devoted fighter for the national socialist movement Nanna Conti became appointed leader by the home secretary.

Among other duties midwives were charged with the task of reporting 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 documented. Responsible for the implementation of this task was Nanna Conti.

For the first time in their history midwives were regarded essential for an efficient health system and a successful population policy. Sufficient payment remained a topic and Nanna Conti never gained access to the select inner circle around Hitler himself, but still: Midwives had reached a higher social position as ever before and even after the Nazi period.

There were several decidedly anti-Semitic and racist articles by Conti herself in the midwifery magazine plus she was chief editor of the magazine which published them. In 1933 the first change in the paper's editorial staff had been to dismiss Prof. Siegfried Hammerschlag, a gynaecologist of Jewish origin. He was replaced by Prof. Benno Ottow, a national socialist. By the midwifery law from 1938 Jews and so called 1. grade and 2. grade "Mischlinge" were excluded from the midwifery profession. One of the brains behind the law was – Nanna Conti. In the midwifery text-book from 1943 so called "Volljuden" were described as parasites and 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.

Nanna Conti presided the International Congress of Midwives in Berlin in 1936 which was attended by 700 midwives from all over Europe. According to a congress resolution she became the first president of the International Midwives Association, today's International Confederation of Midwives, the ICM. In 1942 she became secretary general of the ICM. As the ICM had to be re-founded in the 1950s Nanna Conti theoretically remained the ICM's executive leader until her death. Unfortunately most ICM-files from that period burned in Berlin in 1943 and the remaining files at the Wellcome Library in London are still kept closed.

Back to the congress 1936: On the last day the midwives undertook a bus tour to Hohenlychen and Alt Rehse. In *Hohenlychen*, Dr. Karl Gebhardt was leading physician at the sanatorium, who also became a leading SS physician and committed criminal medical experiments here in Ravensbrück. One of his assistants was Dr. Herta Oberheuser. Oberheuser was the only woman to be judged guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity in the physicians' trials in Nuremberg. Like so many others Oberheuser claimed that she had just done as she had been ordered. She was released after a couple of years.

Susan Benedict has published about the treatment of pregnant women in Ravensbrück. She has found no suggestion that trained midwives were called to attend to birthing prisoners. Sabina Arend told us that some nurses were actually midwives but others trained on the job. So – the physicians in charge violated genuine national socialist law when they ordered nurses or helpers to attend to inmates as the midwifery law from 1938 binded them to call for a midwife for every parturient.

The second place of excursion was *Alt Rehse*. Because of the importance of midwives for the Nazis' population policies, and Nanna Conti's influential connections, German midwives were the only non-academic medical profession which got training courses there. Nanna Conti attended every midwives' course until they were stopped in 1941. The lectures covered a broad field of professional and Nazi topics.

(...)

I mentioned Luise von Oertzen: She became mother superior in 1935. From 1937 Red Cross nurses were directly involved in the Reich's preparations for war.

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. Contrary to the Geneva Convention Germany let especially the Russians starve. Until February 1942 2 Million of 3,3 Million Russian prisoners of war died, 60% or 10.000/day. von Oertzen was a member of the Nazi party and honoured with the golden party badge. The International Red Cross honoured von Oertzen with the Florence-Nightingale-badge for her war nursing in 1959.

Ulf Schmidt wrote that traumatised German soldiers were killed by gas. As far as I know it hasn't been researched yet whether Red Cross nurses were involved in these killings behind the front.

von Oertzen was dismissed in 1945 but like many others recovered soon and became mother superior again in 1952. In 1996 the local Red Cross named a nursing home in *Lübbersdorf near Friedland* after Luise von Oertzen. A board member stated that they had been happy to fulfil the wish of the von Oertzen family to name the home after their famous relative. He thanked Luise von Oertzen posthumously and said that the Red Cross identified itself with her deeds, that she was an example to them. When I pointed out in 2010 that a deeper and critical analysis of her biography would be up to date I got a very angry and defensive answer. Preparing for today's presentation I asked again whether the Red Cross had new information about the life and career of Luise von Oertzen. They haven't answered yet. Josephine Ulbricht is currently doing research about the Red Cross in WWII. S

Back again to Nanna Conti: Nanna Conti reached the zenith of her career in 1938 when the already mentioned 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 or physician to call a midwife for assistance. This unique monopole is still operative in Germany and Austria and therefore it is no wonder that even in the 1980s Nanna Conti was still praised to be one of the icons of German midwifery history. As I already told you this elementary paragraph of the law was frequently violated in Ravensbrück.

Nanna Conti *fled to Schleswig-Holstein via Hohenlychen and Alt Rehse* in 1945. She left for Hohenlychen on April 21st. Judith Hahn found out that Gebhardt left Hohenlychen for Schleswig-Holstein on the 27th. I am sure that Nanna Conti, Gebhardt and Oberheuser met in the same trek.

It is unknown whether a denazification of Nanna Conti took place and also how much influence she held after the breakdown of the Nazi system. However, she lived in poor

circumstances in *Stocksee* before she moved to her daughter-in-law in Bielefeld. The year after Conti had left Stocksee Herta Oberheuser moved to this village where she opened a practise. In 1958 she was recognised by former prisoners of Ravensbrück. After international protests and a long proceeding she lost her approbation in 1960 and left Stocksee in 1965. In preparation of this paper I have tried to get more information about her time in Stocksee and her standing in the village but all my enquiries remained unanswered.

Nanna Conti died in 1951, Luise von Oertzen in 1965 and Herta Oberheuser in 1978. Oberheuser was without a doubt a perpetrator. Conti has been regarded to be dubious for a couple of years. But the debate about the Nazi past of assumed idols in medicine, nursing and midwifery like Luise von Oertzen has just started.