

Harrowing Memoir

German Woman Writes Ground-Breaking Account of WWII Rape

By Susanne Beyer

Gabriele Köpp was repeatedly raped by Russian soldiers in 1945, when she was just 15. Now, at the age of 80, she has become the first German woman to write a book under her own name about the sexual violence she experienced during World War II.

By the time a person turns 80, her life has consisted of 29,200 days. In the case of Gabriele Köpp, that life has included a high-school education and a training program as a physical and technical assistant. It has also included an affinity for "pure mathematics," as Köpp calls it, and for physics.

She is fascinated with the power of the tiniest particles, or, quoting Goethe, with "what holds the world together in its innermost self." Because of her fascination for elementary particles, she went on to earn a doctorate in physics and eventually became a university professor.

Her life has also included many friendships, primarily with men, from doctoral students to colleagues to Nobel laureates. And there are also eight godchildren in her life.

Nevertheless, for Gabriele Köpp, what happened in the space of only 14 days was enough to cast a dark shadow over the rest of her life, the remainder of those 29,200 days.

No Home to Return To

Köpp is sitting in an armchair in her Berlin apartment, talking about those 14 days. She serves freshly brewed coffee with condensed milk out of a can. She smokes the long, thin Kim brand of cigarettes, which have become rare in Germany.

There are black-and-white photographs of her mother, her father and her sisters hanging on the walls. They are all dead. There are also photos of her parents' house, including exterior and interior views. The house was in Schneidemühl, a town in the former German region of Pomerania; today the town is called Pila and is located in northwestern Poland. Where the house stood is nothing but a meadow today.

Köpp describes the photos with German words from a distant era: the *Salon* with its chandelier, her father's *Herrenzimmer* ("study"). Her pronunciation also betrays her roots. She says "Tack" instead of "Tag" (the informal version of "Guten Tag," or "hello"), just like many others who originally come from regions that were once German and are now Polish.

Köpp's apartment is not one of those long-occupied flats that contain layer upon layer of the possessions its occupant has accumulated over the years. She only took the apartment about 10 years ago, when she retired from her position at the Technical University of Aachen in western Germany and moved to Berlin. When asked whether she thinks it's unusual for someone to move at that age, she waves her hand dismissively. It doesn't really matter, she says, because she never had a home to which she could return.

But Köpp isn't interested in issues like the loss of one's home and the controversy over Germans displaced from Eastern Europe after World War II. "People get together in clubs for that sort of thing," she says. "It's not for me." Nevertheless, the things she experienced during a 14-day period while she was fleeing from her homeland were so traumatic that she still has trouble sleeping today. There are times when she cannot eat, and she is much thinner than she wants to be. She wears slim-cut jeans with a shirt and vest. Her thighs look thin enough to encircle with two hands.

Köpp has lived a full life in which she had everything -- everything but romantic love. It was her bad luck, she says. Women outnumbered men after the war, and none of the few men that remained happened to be right for her. "Besides," she adds, "I wouldn't have been able to feel anything, anyway."

During those 14 days, Köpp was raped, again and again. She was 15 years old, and she knew nothing about sex.

'Door to Hell'

Köpp has now written a book about those 14 days and about the rapes, titled "[Warum war ich bloss ein Mädchen?](#)" ("Why Did I Have to Be a Girl?"). The book is an unprecedented document, because it is the first work of its kind written voluntarily by a woman who was raped in the final months of World War II, and who, years later, described the experiences and made them into the central theme of a book.

There is "A Woman in Berlin," the famous confessions of a woman who was raped in World War II, which was first published in the 1950s and republished in 2003. But the woman was unwilling to disclose her identity, and it wasn't until after her death that it was revealed that the anonymous author was a journalist. To this day, there are doubts as to whether she truly wrote the book alone or whether there was a co-author who helped her to distance herself from the horrific events and, with distance, to achieve a voice -- a surprisingly free, confident and even flippant voice.

Köpp lacks this voice. She describes the first few days of her escape with precision, sequence by sequence, almost cinematically, but it is clear that she is not a practiced author. Nevertheless, her account is so gripping precisely because it was not polished for the sake of putting beautiful language on paper. Her story exerts a pull on the reader that stems from the authenticity of her words and experiences. And when the author herself is unable to comprehend what she experienced, even her voice reaches its limits.

Köpp couldn't find the words to describe the rapes themselves. She writes of a "place of horror" and a "door to hell," and she describes the rapists as "brutes" and "scoundrels." When asked why she was unable to describe exactly what happened to her, in all its horror, she shrugs her shoulders and says: "I can't even say the word" -- rape.

Double Trauma

Köpp is familiar with "A Woman in Berlin," but she says that her book is different. That book's anonymous author, she says, was a woman in her early 30s "at the time when it happened," in other words, an experienced woman. Köpp, who was only half her age, says: "I was hardly more than a child." Writing her account under her own name hasn't made it easier, she adds, "but I had no choice; who else would do it?"

Indeed, women have rarely reported voluntarily on their encounters with violence during and after the war. Experts describe this experience as a double trauma: the act of violence itself, and having to keep it hidden. Philipp Kuwert, a trauma expert and head of the department of psychiatry and psychotherapy at the University Hospital of Greifswald in northeastern Germany, began a research project last year on the repercussions of sexual violence in World War II, interviewing 27 women affected by such violence. He already has the results of his study but hasn't published anything yet. "It is one of the first and probably the last study of this nature, because 95 percent of the women who were affected are no longer alive."

No one knows exactly how many women became victims of sexual violence during the war. A figure of 2 million has been mentioned in various studies, but is considered unreliable because of the lack of concrete evidence. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that it was a crime committed against large numbers of women.

The average age of the women in Kuwert's study at the time of their rapes was 16.7, and each of the women was raped an average of 12 times. About half of the women continue to suffer from post-

traumatic symptoms, including nightmares, suicidal thoughts and what is known as avoidance behavior, with 81 percent stating that the experiences had a massive impact on their sexuality. An "emotional anesthesia," or the avoidance of strong emotions, was typical for these traumatized women, says Kuwert.

Problems Forming Attachments

The horrific experiences also affected the subsequent generations. "A mother with post-traumatic stress symptoms can have trouble forming an attachment to her children in their early years," says Kuwert. Mothers who are burdened by their own, repressed feelings have problems reacting to and regulating the emotions of their children. According to the theory, these children grow up in an atmosphere of fragility and nameless threat. According to Kuwert, nothing is as stressful as the experience of rape and torture.

When soldiers commit rape during war, it is not just "to humiliate a particular individual," says historian Birgit Beck-Heppner, who specializes in the subject of sexual violence and war. It also represents a "signal to the enemy population that its political leadership and its own army can no longer guarantee its safety." This is why these rapes are often committed in public.

Beck-Heppner, who wrote the epilogue to Köpp's book, is 38 and part of the same generation as trauma expert Kuwert. People in their age group, in their late 30s and early 40s, are more or less the grandchildren of the Nazi generation.

"The motivation to study rape in World War II stems from my age group," says Kuwert. "We are running out of time," he adds, and points out that there are still many questions to be asked. There is documentation, of course, but many of the contemporary witnesses will soon be dead. For Kuwert, the only way to obtain a true picture of what happened is to examine the stories of individual victims. "There is no such thing as objective trauma."

Köpp is living proof of Kuwert's statement, that objective trauma doesn't exist. Given her experiences, one would expect that she would have had difficulties interacting with men. On the contrary, Köpp has a problem with women. In her book, she explains why.

'Headlong onto a Knife'

On the evening of Jan. 25, 1945, Köpp was packing her things, preparing to flee. Her mother told her to hurry, because the Russians were approaching the town, and she said that she would join her later. Köpp wanted to talk to her mother on that evening, but she was silent and barely spoke with her daughter, not even to warn her about the many things that could happen while she was fleeing. "In a sense, she allowed me to run headlong onto a knife," Köpp writes today, as an old woman.

On Jan. 26, 1945, Köpp and her older sister left the house. She would later learn that Soviet soldiers liberated the Auschwitz concentration camp the following day, Jan. 27. The ordeal that was about to begin for Gabriele Köpp had its roots in the crimes committed by her fellow Germans.

She hardly remembers saying goodbye to her mother. In fact, she writes, she has only recently allowed herself to think that there may have been no goodbyes at all.

She boarded a freight train with heavy sliding doors. The city had already come under artillery fire. At the time, she says, she never dreamed that it would be decades before she could return home. Peering through the small windows in the freight car, she realized that the train was traveling south, and not leaving the city in a northerly direction, as she had believed.

She knew that Russian tanks had encircled the south. After a short time, she heard the sound of artillery fire, and the train came to a stop. The locomotive had apparently been hit. The sliding doors were locked, and the only way to get out of the car was to crawl through one of the high windows. She was an athletic girl and managed to pull herself up to the window, and a soldier pushed her through the small opening. Her sister remained behind in the train. She would never see her again.

'I Despise These Women'

She fell into the snow, lying flat on the ground at first to protect herself from the gunfire. Other refugees had also managed to escape from the train, and they began running toward a farm and then a nearby village. Köpp followed them. A baker let her into his bakery.

In the village, Soviet soldiers carrying large flashlights searched for girls in the dim light. One of them grabbed Köpp. The next day, she was chased to another house, where she was raped by a soldier, and then by another soldier soon afterwards. The next morning, she was pushed into a barn and raped by two men.

That afternoon, she hid under a table in a room filled with refugees. When the soldiers came to the building, asking for girls, the older women called out: "Where's little Gabi?" and pulled her out from underneath the table. "I feel hatred rising up inside of me," she writes. She was dragged off to a ransacked house. "I have no tears," she writes. The next morning, it was the women, once again, who "pushed" her into the arms of a "greedy officer." "I despise these women," she writes.

It went on this way, "relentlessly," for two weeks. After that, she was taken in at a farm, where she managed to hide from the soldiers.

'I'm So Afraid'

She wrote a letter to her mother in her light-blue pocket calendar, even though she had no idea where her mother was: "There is no one here to come to my aid. If only you were here. I'm so afraid, because I no longer have my 'illness' (*ed's note: menstruation*) any more. It's been almost 10 weeks now. I'm sure you could help me. If only dear God wasn't doing this to me. Oh, dear mother, if only I hadn't left without you."

Her menstrual cycle was interrupted for seven years, a widespread phenomenon some gynecologists called the "Russians' disease."

When Köpp finally found her mother in Hamburg, after being a refugee for 15 months, she wanted to show her the letter. But the mother, who had not expected to see her daughter again, greeted her coldly, holding out her cheek to be kissed.

The mother also told her to keep quiet about everything she had experienced while fleeing, although she could write it down if she wished. Köpp followed her mother's advice. She was 16 when she wrote the notes that she quotes in her book today, notes that she has since donated to the House of History in Bonn.

The Turning Point

In conversation, Köpp repeatedly mentions the betrayal by the women and her disappointment in her mother for not wanting to listen to her, and perhaps not even wanting to have her as a daughter anymore. "I could have talked to my father, but he was dead," she says. She searches for reasons to explain her mother's behavior, speculating that perhaps the mother felt guilty for having sent her and her sister on their journey alone.

Trauma expert Philipp Kuwert says that research on abuse victims contains other accounts of betrayal by fellow women. In cases in which people the victims would normally have trusted covered for or even supported the offenders, some have found it more difficult to come to terms with the betrayal than the violent act itself.

Köpp went into psychoanalysis when she was 47. "The analysis was the turning point," she says. Of course, she adds, she was aware that it was not customary for members of her generation to go to an analyst, and she would never have considered doing it on her own. But, she says, she had a breakdown at 47, while she was writing her post-doctoral thesis, and she was admitted to a psychosomatic clinic.

She began analysis at the clinic. "I fell in love with my first analyst," she says, chuckling quietly. And? Well, of course nothing happened, she says, adding: "he is very respectable."

The Stations of Her Life

She remains in contact with her former analyst, who urged her to write the book. "The fact that it was even possible for me to feel anything for another person -- that was the turning point," she recalls. Since then, there have at least been moments, she says, in which she feels liberated.

Has she had any other experiences of love and sexuality? No, she says, nothing at all. "For me, it was just violence."

Gabriele Köpp jumps up from her armchair, as easily as a young girl. She is 1.55 meters (5 feet) tall. She walks into the hallway, where her own paintings are hung on the wall. She has been painting a lot lately.

One of the paintings depicts the stations of her life. There are crosses and skulls at the center of the image. A date is written across the top: Jan. 26, 1945. Other paintings show hearts and strong colors.

They are the kinds of pictures that girls paint -- 15-year-old girls.

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

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