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01/21/2010 04:53 PM

The 'Dishonorable' German Girls

The Forgotten Persecution of Women in World War II

By Jan Friedmann

Hitler's Gestapo arrested thousands of women for admitting they had affairs with foreign forced laborers in Germany, despite many confessions being false and made under duress. Men were often executed and women sent to concentration camps for the crime of "racial defilement." Some continued to suffer the consequences long after the end of the war.

On Sept. 19, 1941, Maria K. signed the record of her interrogation. In her written statement to the police detective, the 14-year-old girl confessed that she had "shared the bed of Polish national Florian Sp. and also had sexual relations with him."

The incident allegedly took place on a Saturday evening in July. She had tended the cows during the day, and that evening she and her 18-year-old friend Hedwig invited the two Polish men to join them.

According to her signed statement, they kissed, and then the four of them went to the bedroom, Hedwig with Josef G. and she with Florian. Once in the bedroom, the Polish man removed her panties. They had sex three times that evening and twice in the next few days, once after lunch, behind a bush in a nearby field. This is the account given in her signed confession.

Maria K., who is 82 today, covers her face with her hands when she talks about the "confession" that changed her life forever and led to the death of the two young men. She is ashamed, even though the Gestapo detective concocted the statement and beat her into signing it. This is her story today, and other documents support its veracity.

Gisela Schwarze, a historian from the western German city of Münster, has spent years investigating cases like hers, digging through the files of special courts in cities like Dortmund, Bielefeld and Kiel. She uncovered Maria K.'s story in a local archive. It unfolded in Asbeck, a village with a wartime population of 850 in the western Münsterland region.

'Racial Defilement'

As a result of her research, Schwarze discovered a group of victims of the Nazi regime that has been neglected to this day. It consists of the women and girls who government officials accused of having sexual relations with foreign forced laborers. Some of the romantic relationships did exist, while others were made up, but the punishment was almost always extreme. The women were sent to concentration camps by the thousands, while the men were usually executed.

"Fellow Germans who engage in sexual relations with male or female civil workers of the Polish nationality, commit other immoral acts or engage in love affairs shall be arrested immediately," Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS, ordered in 1940.

The crime the Nazi lawyers had constructed was called "racial defilement." At first, it only applied to relationships between Jews and non-Jews, but the racist construct was later expanded to include Slavs.

Prisoners of war and deported civilians were forced to work in factories and in fields, where they came into contact with local residents, many of them women. The men were fighting on the front. But informers prepared to denounce wrongdoers were everywhere -- neighbors, co-workers and teachers -- contributing to a hellish atmosphere of racial hatred and bigotry.

Maria K., the third youngest of 11 siblings, was orphaned as a child. An older brother took in the siblings, but he was eventually drafted into the German army, and his 27-year-old wife was left to care for the children on her own. To help her out, the landlord sent Florian Sp., a young Polish forced laborer, whom the children quickly came to trust.

'Necessary Welfare Measures'

The comfortable relationship between the Polish worker and the family was viewed with suspicion in the village. Maria was arrested, and during her interrogation the Gestapo officer hit her in the face and told her to admit that she had had sex with the Pole. The helpless and naïve girl signed the confession, which only marked the beginning of her worst ordeals. In October 1941, the Gestapo in Münster submitted a request to "initiate the necessary welfare measures" against Maria, who was now classified as a "dishonorable German girl."

She was placed in various reformatories and was eventually taken to a place that the SS had set up to house young female delinquents: the "Uckermark Youth Protection Camp," a subcamp of the Ravensbrück concentration camp.

She was given a prisoner number, 290, and from then on she no longer had a name. She suffered beatings, whippings, hunger and acts of humiliation. She was released in the fall of 1944 and taken to a preparatory school for children's nurses near Berlin. At the end of 1945, she managed to return to Asbeck by traveling through occupied Germany. The two Polish forced laborers had already been hung in Asbeck on August 28, 1942. The cause of death listed on their death certificates was "unknown."

The people who carried most of these executions remained unpunished after the war, and in 1963 the Münster public prosecutor's office closed its investigations into the cases. But the humiliations continued for Maria K. During church services, villagers berated her as a "Pole's whore" and "Pole lover." Many women who had survived the Nazi persecution were treated in much the same way.

A few weeks ago, Maria K. and historian Schwarze traveled to the Uckermark camp together, where a memorial, a stone wrapped in strips of iron, stands today. Maria K. scattered a handful of earth at the site, which she had collected in the forest where the two young Poles were killed.

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

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