

Knowledge and Complicity: High Society Women and the Third Reich

Lauren Ditty

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History Department
Georgetown University

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*To the women
of the resistance.*

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Hedwig Höss enjoyed luxury. Fortunately, her marriage to Auschwitz Kommandant Rudolph Höss provided her with the status and privilege to indulge her extravagant tastes. From late 1941 to the summer of 1944,¹ Frau Höss lived in a villa complete with an extensive flower garden just outside the gates of Auschwitz. During this time, an Auschwitz prisoner by the name of Stanislaw Dubiel tended to Frau Höss' flowers and periodically visited a depot located a walking distance from the villa to acquire everything from household items to jewelry for the woman of the house. Dubiel frequented this depot, affectionately referred to by Frau Höss as "Kanada," each time she decided her wardrobe or her reception rooms lacked sufficient opulence. Kanada was a convenient euphemism employed by Hedwig Höss; Kanada referred to a warehouse containing the belongings of Jewish prisoners sent to the gas chambers.²

According to Dubiel, Frau Höss rarely purchased goods from outside of Auschwitz, preferring to pilfer luxury items from repositories containing the items confiscated from Jewish prisoners and from those sent directly to the gas chambers. Many Jewish deportees had brought along basic household items including sugar, flour, and butter. As a result, Frau Höss did her grocery shopping on the grounds of Auschwitz as well.

After the war, Frau Höss took refuge in an abandoned sugar factory, hoping to escape justice from the Allied powers. When British soldiers discovered her, they found her amongst "astonishingly large amounts of the finest hand-tailored clothes and furs, all former possessions of Auschwitz's dead."³ Höss simply could not leave her stolen possessions behind.

¹ Though Rudolph Höss was transferred from Auschwitz to the Berlin Head Office in the fall of 1943, Frau Höss and the children remained at the villa until the summer of 1944. – Jadwiga Bezwinska, ed. *KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS: Höss, Broad, and Kremer* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1984) 287.

² The story of Hedwig Höss comes from the detailed biography presented in Gudrun Schwarz, *Eine Frau an seiner Seite: Ehefrauen in der SS-Sippengemeinschaft* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1997), passim.

³ Irene Guenther. *Nazi Chic?: Fashioning Women in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Berg Publishing, 2004) 5.

Frau Höss' story is anything but extraordinary. The wives of SS men often lived on or near the concentration camp grounds in communities known as *SS-Siedlungen*, and their privilege as well as proximity to the camps provided conditions for astonishing behavior. Few if any used their elevated status to temper the evil of Hitler's Reich through small acts of resistance; others often used their status to exacerbate existing evils, valuing privilege over human life.

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Since the time of Allied liberation, questions of guilt have plagued Germany and have cast a dark shadow that refuses to fade, even in the presence of indefatigable efforts to atone for their awful deed with enthusiastic oaths of future peace. In the endless game of finger pointing, the complicity of women in the Third Reich remains particularly ambiguous. Undoubtedly, some women believed wholeheartedly in the tenets of National Socialism and participated within the regime as much as the system allowed, and can, without hesitation, be labeled as perpetrators. It is also true that millions of women, particularly Jewish women and the 'hereditarily impure' can be classified categorically as victims. However, millions of women fell within these two extremes: they were neither zealous perpetrators of genocide nor clear victims. Amongst 'Aryan' women, the distinction looms hazy at best, due in part to the difficult definitions of the terms themselves.

Feminist historians have long struggled with the ambiguity of female complicity in the twelve-year reign of National Socialism. Unwilling to examine female complicity in Nazi atrocities, some feminist historians maintained a tense silence until the second wave of the feminist movement precipitated an examination of gender-specific history throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Early accounts ignored female complicity and essentially exonerated a generation of

women on grounds of an oppressive patriarchal system with little room for a female voice.

Therefore, the secondary works concerned with the role of Nazi women written throughout the 1970s and early 1980s presented a very limited examination of female involvement, representing German women as the patriarchal Reich's secondary victims. While this view has been contested by several historians since its appearance in the seventies, an examination of its tenets yields important information about the experience of women under National Socialism.

Accounts of female experience under the Third Reich which spoke to the victim thesis normally emphasized the substantial gains made by women leading up to 1933 and illustrated the corresponding regression which occurred after Hitler's rise to power. These accounts discussed those rights which were *gained* during the Weimar Period and correspondingly *revoked* or legally abrogated after 1933. Under the Nazis, men not only occupied the positions of power within government, but women experienced certain discriminatory measures even outside of politics, including a ban on double earners, removal of women from the job market so as to reduce the male unemployment rate, and a restriction of female students to ten percent in the universities.⁴

Even Nazi tenets spoke to the idea of an oppressive patriarchy leaving little room for individual female agency. In an interview in April of 1932, a delegation from the National Women's Organization asked Hitler if he intended to abrogate the legal equality of women and men under the Weimar Constitution of 1919 and he replied, "What has the Revolution of 1918 actually done for women? All it has done is to turn 50,000 of them into blue stockings and party officials. Under the Third Reich they might as well whistle for such things."⁵ Here, Hitler clearly

⁴ Vandana Joshi, *Gender and Power in the Third Reich* (London: Palgrave Macmillan: Technical University of Berlin, 2003) 2.

⁵ Norman H. Baynes, ed. *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler: April 1922-August 1939*, Volume 1 (London: Oxford University Press: 1942) 528.

articulated his disdain for the emancipatory gains made by women during the Weimar period. His use of the derogatory term “blue stockings” disparaged the intellectual and educated woman and mocked her involvement in public and political life. Clearly, in his eyes, the idea of gender equality was not just an unfortunate product of Weimar, but an illness to be remedied by National Socialism’s return to traditional values.

In order to justify his views and appeal to women who were very much enjoying their new political gains, Hitler ironically derided the entire political process. Through flattery, Hitler managed to frame political life as undesirable for all, especially the pure and honest woman. In an address to women at the Nürnberg Parteitag on September 8, 1934, he dismissed the value of women in politics:

We the National Socialists have for many years protested against bringing woman into political life; that life in our eyes was unworthy of her. A woman said to me once: You must see to it that women go into Parliament; that is the only way to raise the standard of Parliamentary life. I do not believe, I answered, that man should try to raise the level of that which is bad itself. And the woman who enters into this business of Parliament will not raise it, it will dishonor her. I would not leave to a woman what I intend to take away from men.⁶

As articulated by Hitler in this speech, National Socialism had no place for women in politics and intended to restrict women to the domestic realm. Because women had few political opportunities under National Socialism, historians in favor of the patriarchal-victim thesis claimed women also had no venue to protest the reactionary and aggressive policies of the regime. According to this view, articulated most famously by Gisela Bock in her book *Zwangssterilisation im Nationalsozialismus: Studien zur Rassenpolitik und Frauenpolitik*,⁷ history should consider these women as victims of an oppressive system that denied them significant agency. Gisela Bock and others argued that racism and sexism were inextricably

⁶ Baynes, 530.

⁷ (*Compulsory Sterilization in National Socialism: A Study of Race-Politics and Women's Politics*) (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1986)

linked under Hitler, and women, like the Reich's racial enemies, should be viewed as victims of an oppressive regime.

Furthermore, historian Margarete Mitscherlich created a psychological model that equated anti-Semitism to an unresolved Oedipus complex in her book *Die friedfertige Frau* in 1985.⁸ She argued that anti-Semitism unconsciously grew out of a projection of male hate onto fathers and a shift of incestuous desires onto a different group of people, the Jews. In this manner she gendered anti-Semitism and argued that “a weakly developed superego of women made them less vulnerable to this kind of narcissistic anti-Semitism. Their anti-Semitism rather stemmed from their identification with male prejudices.”⁹ Anti-Semitism was a latent male phenomenon and applied to females only insofar as they identified with prejudices otherwise foreign to them. Interaction with males and their existence within a male-dominated society forced them to adopt prejudices they did not naturally possess. Mitscherlich therefore attributed the existence of any female anti-Semitism to the patriarchal society.

Many historians took issue with this view and began to see the problem in exonerating an entire gender. Karin Windaus-Walser began to ask important questions in her criticism of Mitscherlich's position including: “How about the resolution of the Oedipus complex in women? How about female projection of incestuous desire and hatred of mothers on Jewesses?”¹⁰ That is, if anti-Semitism existed as a by-product of an unresolved Oedipal complex, what about the resolution of the so called Electra complex in women? By asserting the ability of women to harbor anti-Semitic sentiment, Windaus-Walser began to assign women agency and to pave the way to a full examination of female involvement. Anti-Semitism was not merely a phenomenon

⁸ Discussed in Vandana Joshi, *Gender and Power in the Third Reich* (Palgrave Macmillan: Technical University of Berlin, 2003) 3.

⁹ Joshi, 4

¹⁰ Ibid.

perpetuated by a male-dominated society, but a prejudice unfortunately harbored by male and female alike.

Copious evidence supports Windaus-Walser's initial assertion that anti-Semitism was as much a female problem as a male one. In April 1933, an article entitled "Nazi Women Urge 'Holy War' On Jews" appeared in *The New York Times* and clearly articulated a fanatical female prejudice. In the article, the National Socialist Women's Federation called on German women to join the boycott against Jewish stores noting, "The fight is inexorable. Personal feelings must be disregarded."¹¹ The anti-Semitic language of the article continued, encouraging women to fight until Jewish domination was destroyed, and stated "The German housewife in every situation of life alone can decide victory in this fight. There will not be a copper henceforth for a Jewish shop, for a Jewish physician or attorney from the German woman..."¹² This article illustrates a poignant example of a shared anti-Semitism containing quotes spoken by women and targeted at women, suggesting an emerging female specific anti-Semitism. After listing the dangers of the Jewish race to the purity of the German nation, the article concluded with the war cry utilized by the National Socialist Women's Federation: "German women, you are fighting a holy war."¹³

Given the evidence of anti-Semitism amongst the female population, the suggestion that anti-Semitism was not male-specific but existed across gender lines appears quite obvious. Windaus-Walser's initial inquiry, though timid, into the actual sentiments and behavior of women under Hitler opened the doors for further investigation which would provide a greater picture of female experience under the Third Reich. Several female historians began to chip away at the taboo of female involvement until Claudia Koonz forever shattered the wall of concealment female historians favoring the "victim thesis" had worked so hard to build.

¹¹ "Nazi Women Urge 'Holy War' On Jews," *The New York Times* 2 April 1933: 29.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Claudia Koonz's *Mothers in the Fatherland* (1987) was the first work to associate women with active participation in the orchestration of Nazi crimes. She indicted clerical workers alongside concentration camp guards, and even criticized the wives of the SS men who made comfortable, normal homes for murderers. She thereby placed indifferent bystanders, lower-level workers, and direct perpetrators under the same umbrella category of guilt.

Once Claudia Koonz investigated the taboo topic of female perpetration of Nazi crimes, various accounts of sadistic, female concentration camp guards and callous clerical workers in charge of sterilization records emerged. However, Claudia Koonz did not examine the complicity of upper-class women, referring to women predisposed to Nazi dogma as predominantly middle-class. Citing Theodore Abel's essay contest for the best essay on the theme "Why I Became a Nazi," Koonz insisted that "all but a handful of women [who submitted essays to the contest] had grown up in middle-class Protestant families... 'postal official,' 'railway man,' 'businessman,' 'government employee,' 'artisan,' or 'small factory owner' appeared frequently in the blanks after fathers' or husbands' occupation."¹⁴ Therefore, Koonz concentrated her research and corresponding indictment on the female middle class. I hope to take her study one step further and examine the complicity of high society women closest to the Nazi Party leadership and of the female elite living on the grounds of concentration camps, an area with an abundance of unexplored material.

Ultimately, this thesis seeks to examine the lives of upper-class women under Adolf Hitler, both wives of key Party officials isolated from the Holocaust in a bubble of luxury and wives of concentration camp commandants who lived in the direct vicinity of the camps and remained indifferent to the atrocities taking place all around them. With the rise of Hitler came a

¹⁴ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987) 184.

new class of women. Wives of key party leaders and SS commanders became, virtually overnight, members of a new elite on the arm of power. Interestingly this class of women, closest to the party's main leadership, differed at times dramatically from the propagated Nazi ideal. Their access to expensive clothing, cosmetics, cigarettes, and other items deemed "vices" by Nazi propaganda fashioned a new, female demographic at times ironically like the one shunned by Hitler's early followers. Wives of concentration camp commandants also lived rather comfortable lives and reaped the benefits of their elevated positions. However, in contrast to the other high society women, wives of concentration camp commandants lacked the physical distance from atrocities to claim innocence.

It is important to note that my focus shall be on private women who were close to power by virtue of their spouses and their spouses' elevated positions. Unlike women such as Leni Riefenstahl and Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, who were publicly involved in Hitler's regime, the women I analyze lived behind the scenes as wives of powerful Nazis. Therefore, the complicity of these private women is much subtler and more nuanced than for those who were zealous public supporters. Aside from their unmatched privilege, private women closest to Hitler's trusted minions had relatively extensive knowledge of Nazi atrocities and war-time aims. This thesis seeks to examine what knowledge their privileged position afforded them, what exactly they knew, when they knew it, and how their positions in high society shaped their culpability in the regime's crimes.

Most of the primary source material in this analysis comes from post-war interviews with high society women. Therefore, the women's answers to questions about their knowledge of Nazi atrocities are often of questionable reliability. In most of their responses, the women attempted to exonerate themselves and claim ignorance of Holocaust horrors. Where appropriate,

I have commented on embedded efforts of self-exculpation, and where these efforts are obvious, I have let the words of the women speak for themselves.

By first looking at National Socialism's notion of the ideal woman, I will show how high society women deviated from this ideal and how, to some extent, they were able to live outside of Nazi propagated norms. Then I will discuss how, as renegades to Nazi norms, high society women were able to enjoy luxurious lifestyles, lifestyles which depended upon the preservation of a regime which set out to systematically annihilate Europe's Jews. After an examination of the women in Hitler's inner circle, I will transition to the wives of SS men, focusing specifically on the wives of concentration camp commandants. By examining the racial dynamics of the SS, I will demonstrate how the term high society applies to this group of women insofar as they represented Germany's racial elite. Investigation into the living arrangements of SS families will illustrate the extent to which comfortable living took place amidst enormous atrocity, and will provide the necessary background for the individual case studies which follow. The case studies will focus on four wives of concentration camp commandants: Rosina Kramer, Hedwig Höss, Ilse Koch, and Theresa Stangl. Each story is different and represents a different type of complicity, but the stories are united by the fact that all four women did nothing to temper the brutality carried out under their husbands' commands.

Chapter One: The Emergence of Nazi Reactionary Attitudes and the Ideal

Woman

Germany's first experiment in democracy, the Weimar Republic (1918-1933) presented women with unprecedented opportunities. Women earned the right to vote under the Weimar Constitution of 1919, and between 1919 and 1932 one hundred and twelve German women were elected to the Reichstag.¹⁵ Despite unprecedented emancipation, the ability to participate in the political process and hold positions in the Reichstag, women were still expected to subjugate their civic duties to the preservation of private life. Though welcomed into political life, they contributed to only a few areas of public policy including education, health, culture, religion, and welfare. As Claudia Koonz asked "Were women equal citizens or a special-interest lobby?"¹⁶ Regardless, many women found these new opportunities exciting and liberating. As one female law student described, "The New Woman can be a genuine, one-hundred-percent woman now that women's rights have been won."¹⁷

However, with these opportunities came reactionary fears from both men and women who desired a return to traditional gender roles. The emancipated woman and her presence in the public realm provided tangible evidence of what reactionaries claimed to be a decaying German culture. Traditional gender roles appeared on the brink of extinction and German culture in the process of corruption. Additionally, the steady arrival of American culture and its influence upon fashion and time-honored values exacerbated the issue. It appeared to many that the modern world had abducted the traditional German *Hausfrau* and replaced her with a politically suave vamp.

¹⁵ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987) 30.

¹⁶ Koonz, 31.

¹⁷ Koonz, 35.

According to reactionaries, many of whom would come to support Hitler, the modern woman “armed with bobbed hair and made-up face, fashionable clothes and cigarette, working by day in a typing pool or behind the sales counter in some dreamland of consumerism, frittering away the night dancing the Charleston or watching UFA and Hollywood films,”¹⁸ threatened Germany’s moral fiber and needed to be suppressed.

Reactionary sentiments were not negligible and, Socialist and Communist organizations exempted, a definite trend toward conservatism characterized the female population during the 1920s. Bourgeois women’s politics in the 1920s emphasized emancipation, but also a dedication to the concept of “separate spheres.” A fear of “masculinization,” especially amongst Protestant women, mitigated the efforts of emancipation and “turned conventional [feminist] language upside down and spoke of ‘liberating’ women from occupation outside of the home and expanding their opportunities within domestic roles.”¹⁹ The most prominent display of this type of retrograde emancipation occurred within the German-Evangelical Woman’s League, the largest single woman’s organization in Weimar Germany. This organization dedicated itself to “saving women from modernity” through support of family programs meant to solidify the woman’s place in the domestic sphere.²⁰

Throughout their ascent to power in the late 1920’s, the Nazis capitalized on this fear of modernity and fed prevalent reactionary desires with propaganda promising the return to traditional roles. According to Nazi dogma, the woman’s place was in the home, and her most important role was that of mother. Her duty to the movement was to marry an ‘Aryan’ man and

¹⁸ Detlev J.K. Peukert. *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987) 98.

¹⁹ Koonz, 205

²⁰ Koonz, 206.

produce many valuable ‘Aryan’ children, thus ensuring the continued existence of the German race.

Long before Hitler officially took power in 1933, he intended to orchestrate the systematic removal of women from the public realm. Vehemently opposed to female suffrage, Hitler intended to depict public, political life as a danger to a woman’s constitution. Politics and other vices of the modern world presumably distracted a woman from her true calling as mother and detracted from her ability to cultivate a domestic space for husband and child. In an interview with a Weimar reporter in 1931, Hitler articulated his feelings on suffrage and the democratic process, noting “I am no friend of female suffrage. I am opposed to universal, equal and secret voting rights. What nonsense-equal voting rights for the professor and the dairy maid!”²¹ Hitler disdained basic democratic principles and reviled the idea of a woman in politics. A woman’s place was in the home, raising children, many if possible, and participation in public policy only distracted her from her natural role as mother.

The Nazis continued their critique of the modern women even after they officially came to power in 1933. For example, at a Nürnberg Party Rally in September 1936, Adolf Hitler summarized the Nazi stance toward women:

If today a woman lawyer achieves great things and nearby there lives a mother with five, six, or seven children, all of them healthy and well- brought up, then I would say: from the point of view of the eternal benefit of our people, the woman who has borne and brought up children and who has therefore given our nation life in the future, has achieved more and done more!²²

Here, Hitler presented National Socialism as a complete rejection of Weimar’s modern woman.

A woman’s participation in the public realm distracted her from her primary role as mother. The

²¹ Edouard Calic, ed. *Secret Conversations With Hitler: The Two Newly-Discovered 1931 Interviews* (New York: The John Day Company) 40.

²² Document 1a in Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2001) 141.

Nazi woman was to bear the Reich healthy, Aryan children, and maintain her domestic space for her Aryan family.

Besides birthing and raising children for the Reich, women were to dress in traditional German garb and avoid cosmetics so as to display a natural German beauty. A woman's appearance, like her role within society, was regulated. In order to perpetuate Nazi racial policy, women featured in propaganda possessed Nordic features, natural radiance, and wore dirndls or other modest, traditional examples of German fashion. As the print of a German woman on the cover of *Frauen-Warte*, a bi-weekly illustrated magazine for women during the Nazi years, illustrates, the plain and unadorned woman represented the ideal (**Figure 1**). Here, the featured woman's hair is done in Gretchen braids, her lips are naturally pink and her face is free from makeup. Like the ubiquitous images of the hereditarily pure German woman, "her beauty, unsullied by cosmetics, her physical strength, moral fortitude, simplistic [sic] manner, her willingness to bear hard work and to bear many children, and her handmade traditional folk costume [recall] a mythical, untarnished German past."²³

The urban alternative to the rather rural dirndl took the form of uniforms. Nazi officials understood that selling the folk costume to urban women would likely prove unsuccessful. However, a woman's dedication to the German Reich was equally emphasized through uniform. By wearing a uniform, the German woman subjugated her individual desires to the communal destiny of the German race. She physically delineated her individuality to the greater German Volk. No personal insignia besides cloth badges to distinguish rank were allowed while in uniform. The members of BdM, League of German Girls, appeared utterly indistinguishable. Each girl wore a white blouse, closed at the neck with a black kerchief and leather knot, a belted navy blue skirt, short white socks, brown leather shoes with flat heels, and an Alpine climbing

²³ Irene Guenther, *Nazi Chic?: Fashioning Women in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Berg, 2004) 115.

jacket.²⁴ Like the folk costume urged for rural women, the urban uniform “visibly expressed the Third Reich’s demand for unity, uniformity, commonality, and community.”²⁵ **(Figure 2)**

Modest fashion and natural beauty coupled with fertility completed the propagated female image under the Nazis. While the modern woman had fallen to foreign influences in fashion and female identity, National Socialist ideals would return the woman to her natural role and secure a Reich rooted in time-honored values and traditions. As the poster in Figure 3 illustrates, the dawn of National Socialism would bring about a return to a happier time in which women could devote their natural maternal urges to the rearing of a hereditarily pure family. The German woman would dress in traditional clothing and her natural complexion, untarnished by cosmetics, would glow in the Nazi sun. **(Figure 3)**

By praising modest German garb and equating high fashion with foreign influence, Nazi officials created the dichotomy between what was German and what was “other” and thereby threatening. Cosmetics and fashion which masked a German woman’s natural beauty reeked of foreign influence. With expert ease, German propaganda artists transformed what was foreign, threatening, and un-German into what was decidedly “Jewish.” Jewish shop owners allegedly sold items which threatened the natural beauty of the German race. Consumerism and materialism quickly became linked with anti-Semitism, and party rhetoric urged women to avoid the temptation to shop at Jewish shops, and to forego finery. The Jewish woman, not the German woman, “idly sits around, painted up and powdered and adorned in silk and baubles.”²⁶ By avoiding foreign luxury items, women avoided the material corruption so despised in the prejudicial depiction of the Jews.

²⁴ Irene Guenther, *Nazi Chic?* 120.

²⁵ Irene Guenther, *Nazi Chic?* 120.

²⁶ Irene Guenther, *Nazi Chic?* 92.

German propaganda emphasized utility and practicality in consumption, deriding superfluous expenditures and unpatriotic purchases. The virtuous woman shopped with an eye for utility and a patriotic heart. That is, she purchased only what was necessary and avoided dispensable foreign items. In February of 1934, Erna Günther published an article in *NS Frauen-Warte* urging women to support the German worker by purchasing from stores owned and operated by pure Germans, illustrating the extent to which protectionist propaganda had reached women in early 1934, even before the Nürnberg Laws of 1935.²⁷ In a passionate appeal to the female, patriotic soul, Günther opined: “Do not underestimate this task! I know that it is easier to make a quick trip to the department store. It requires thought to purchase domestic products, remembering with each purchase that German goods provide German people with wages and food.”²⁸ Günther’s appeal suggests the success of Nazi propaganda. While she never ostensibly references the Jews, her repetition of “German” insinuates that the department store owners whom German women should avoid are not German. Shopping at those stores threatened German workers and displayed a lack of prudence. A true German woman considered the consequences of her consumption when she shopped and did her part for the Reich by frequenting Aryan stores.

²⁷ By 1935, the Nazi Party was under pressure from both grass-roots activists and anti-Semites to regulate marital and sexual relations between Aryans and Jews. Additionally, the legal profession and registry officials demanded greater clarity on how to define a Jew. What resulted was the passage of The Nürnberg Laws of 1935 which included a multitude of anti-Semitic legislation. Included in the Nürnberg Laws was the Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor which regulated marriage and officially defined Jews as second-class citizens. Ultimately, the Nürnberg Laws brought a certain legal status to discrimination and segregation, effectively state-sanctioning anti-Semitism.-Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann. *The Racial State: Germany 1933-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 45.

²⁸ Erna Günther, "Wir Frauen im Kampf um Deutschlands Erneuerung," *NS Frauen Warte*, (2), #17 (25 February 1934) 507.

Therefore, National Socialist sentiment as it pertained to women and their predestined roles as wife and mother was ubiquitous, well-known, and successfully internalized. Additionally, the pure German mother was to remain unsullied by superfluous foreign and Jewish influences. The modern world had attempted to defile the virtuous German woman, and National Socialism had arrived to rescue her from further defilement. To defeat Germany's internal and external enemies, gender roles needed to be preserved, strengthened, and glorified in disparate ways.

Yet, while propaganda ministers and high ranking party officials worked arduously to perpetuate the image of the idyllic and austere German woman, their wives lived in antithetical luxury. Interestingly, the women married to prominent Nazis lived lives strikingly at odds with the propagated female image. They purchased clothes from France, had favorite Jewish fashion designers, wore cosmetics, often smoked, and enjoyed an exuberant lifestyle derided by the prudent and modest woman of Nazi posters and flyers. Even during wartime shortages, these women had access to the finest of items.

The Nazi Ideal v. The Elite Reality

The chasm between Nazi rhetoric and the reality amongst the female elite is perhaps best demonstrated through the protracted search by Nazi leaders for the First Lady of the Reich. Hitler, having promised himself forever to the nation, was determined to remain a bachelor. However, the National Socialist movement needed a female figurehead. The chosen woman would presumably come from the upper tier of the party. Yet, the wives of the Nazi elite deviated so grossly from the perpetuated female ideal that Nazi officials struggled to find a suitable woman for the job.

At first, Magda Goebbels appeared to be the ideal choice. A fervent Nazi supporter and publicly recognized as the wife of propaganda minister Josef Goebbels, many German women already looked to her as the embodiment of devotion to the Reich. She boasted blonde hair, blue eyes, and had already birthed numerous healthy, Aryan children for Germany. During Hitler's twelve-year reign, she was seemingly always pregnant and would eventually have seven children in total for the Führer. At first glance, Magda Goebbels appeared to fulfill the Nazi ideal and therefore seemed the natural choice for the position.

However, Magda also enjoyed high fashion from France and occasionally smoked, despite Hitler's personal antipathy for the practice and the ubiquitous Nazi propaganda posters urging women to avoid the habit. Her extensive beauty regimen further separated her from the Nazi female ideal, and in one particular interview, Magda stated "I hold it as my duty to appear as beautifully as I possibly can."²⁹ As late as January 1945, Magda Goebbels was still ordering handmade leather shoes and a trio of hats.³⁰ Marital problems with Goebbels, her Jewish stepfather, and her obsession with fashion and beauty negated Nazi ideals. Her vices precluded her from becoming the First Lady of the Reich.

Even Emmy Göring, wife of Hermann Göring, deviated from the Nazi ideal to a distracting degree. Though blonde and pure German, Emmy often appeared at the opera decked in furs and expensive tiaras.³¹ Traudl Junge, Hitler's secretary, remembered "The Queen Mother," as they called Frau Göring, arriving to Hitler's birthday celebration in a "huge cornflower-blue cape." The Görings' enormous estate in Obersalzberg was "more luxurious than the Berghof itself and [was] stuffed with plundered art."³² She too displayed little austerity.

²⁹ Irene Guenther, *Nazi Chic?* 172.

³⁰ Angela Lambert. *The Lost Life of Eva Braun*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006) 397.

³¹ Irene Guenther, *Nazi Chic?* 137.

³² Lambert, 227.

Hitler's mistress and later wife, Eva Braun, also deviated dramatically from the Nazi ideal. The first time Traudl Junge met Eva Braun, she noted her extravagant clothing and modern femininity:

She wasn't at all the kind of ideal German girl you saw on recruiting posters for the BdM or in the women's magazines. Her carefully done hair was bleached, and her pretty face was made up- quite heavily. When I first saw her she was wearing a Nile-green dress of heavy woolen fabric. Its top fitted closely, and it had a bell-shaped skirt with a broad leopard skin edging at the hem...The dress had close-fitting sleeves, with two gold-coloured clips at its sweet-heart neckline.³³

Additionally, Fräulein Braun indulged in cigarettes and had her hair done once a day by a personal stylist.³⁴ More importantly, Hitler desired that his relationship with Eva remain a secret. Therefore, her mandated clandestine existence precluded her from serving in a first lady capacity.

The sources which discuss this search rarely agree on its final outcome. Some sources insist Hitler approached Emmy Göring immediately after her wedding ceremony to Hermann Göring in September of 1935 and informed her that from then on she would be the Reich's First Lady and no official event would take place without her present.³⁵ According to this argument, despite Hitler's personal relationship with Magda Goebbels, Goebbels' rank as number three in command and Göring's rank as number two provided that Emmy's marriage to Göring granted her the position of first lady. Still others argue that Gertrud-Scholtz-Klink fulfilled this role because, as leader of the BdM (League of German Girls), she adhered to National Socialism's propagated female image. Regardless of the final outcome, the difficulty of the search depicts the dichotomy which existed between the women of Hitler's inner circle and the Nazi ideal.

³³ Traudl Junge and Melissa Müller, ed. *Until the Final Hour: Hitler's Last Secretary* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2002) 63.

³⁴ Irene Guenther, *Nazi Chic?* 137.

³⁵ Fabrice d'Almeida, *High Society in the Third Reich*, trans. Steven Rendall (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008) 48.

The extent to which the wives of key party leaders deviated from the propagated female ideal under the Nazis is astounding. Even those women closest to Hitler appeared at times more similar to the repudiated “modern woman” of the Weimar period than to the Aryan woman in braids and dirndl. The disparity between theory and practice existed throughout the upper tier of the Nazi Party. As members of the new elite, these women preferred to flaunt their status through fashion and luxury rather than adhere to the requirements of Nazi dogma.

Additionally, this conspicuous materialism continued amidst the worst genocide in history. The photos of the wives of the Nazi elite draped in furs, expensive jewelry, and elegant gowns appear grossly inappropriate given the historical context. At first glance it seems utterly impossible that these women lived in the same Reich which exterminated six million Jews. Yet they did. An examination of high society women and their complicity in the Holocaust demands an examination of their luxurious lifestyle, a lifestyle which depended upon maintenance of Nazi power. They owed their lifestyles to a regime which set out to systematically annihilate Europe’s Jews, and their willingness to live a lifestyle with such a high price deserves, at the very least, to be questioned.

Chapter 2: High Society and Hitler's Berghof

The Penetration of High Society and Magda Quandt:

Hitler was a sort of Louis XIV without a Versailles. He had the pomp, the courtiers, the quarrels between princes, and the bizarre aspects of a sovereign, even toward the end of his career. His passion for the colossal did not lead him to construct a gigantic court, but instead to transform his whole country into a series of groups of courtiers in which he could navigate at ease, finding everywhere the same obsessive zeal...³⁶

German high society experienced a great change in the aftermath of the First World War. In the immediate postwar years, German society across the board was characterized by a more casual behavior, especially after the Socialists took power.³⁷ For example, veterans of the war, who had belonged to high society and were lucky enough to return from the front alive, brought back a crude manner of speaking which they used to vent their frustrations in private and in public.³⁸ President Ebert (1919-1925) did his part to loosen the rather restrictive requirements of state-sponsored high society by restructuring state dinners to be less ostentatious and organizing small gatherings rather than large receptions.³⁹ Whereas before the war, the German elite would have written Hitler off as a populist ruffian, the changes in high society's expectations which occurred during Weimar enabled Hitler to penetrate high society in a way which would have been impossible a decade earlier.

Hitler had long understood the importance of reconciling high society with political power as a means of garnering support from this important constituency. In the months following his appointment as chancellor in January of 1933, Hitler attended various social gatherings, usually organized by either Goebbels or Countess Viktoria von Dirksen, who, as a member of the

³⁶ Fabrice d'Almeida. *High Society and the Third Reich*, trans. Steven Rendall (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008) 5.

³⁷ d'Almeida, 17.

³⁸ d'Almeida, 17.

³⁹ d'Almeida, 17.

established German elite, had begun to introduce Hitler and other NSDAP members into the Berlin salons as early as 1930. Convinced that Hitler's rise to power would facilitate the restoration of the empire, Viktoria von Dirksen frequently invited Hitler to her evening gatherings attended by high officials and members of the former imperial family.⁴⁰ Hitler used his access to the established elites at the salons and at parties organized by Goebbels and Countess Viktoria von Dirksen to convince the social elite that the Nazi Party represented a legitimate movement rather than a band of aggressive and angry young men.

On February 24, 1933, President Hindenburg invited Hitler to an extravagant formal dinner, marking his official entry into German high society.⁴¹ Having made a good impression on Hindenburg and his guests, Hitler overcame the doubts harbored by many within the established elite, and from then on, frequented high society with ease. Hitler had succeeded in winning elite approval and melding that approval with government power.

Even before Hitler's official entry into high society at Hindenburg's party, Hitler understood how to navigate the icy waters of elite life. His adept social skills quickly won the hearts of many German elites who had harbored doubts about his fledgling nationalist organization. To the established elite, Hitler was both *salonfähig*⁴² (given the change in social customs) and representative of a breath of fresh air. In some sense, he simultaneously adhered and deviated from high society protocol in an effort to gain acceptance while galvanizing support for something new. Instead of the usual formal wear, Hitler often donned lederhosen and brightly colored coats when he attended parties, which, according to many observers, created a vivid and exciting contrast to established fashion norms.⁴³ His dress in combination with the armed

⁴⁰ d' Almeida, 39.

⁴¹ d' Almeida, 39.

⁴² Worthy of being received in a fashionable salon.

⁴³ d' Almeida, 27.

bodyguards who stood outside of salons in which he was socializing added to an “aroma of adventure” which intoxicated Germany’s elite.⁴⁴

Even before 1933, as the National Socialist Party gained popularity and votes, Hitler and other Nazi leaders earned more respect and a greater degree of acceptance. Many socialites took notice of the party’s success and wished to become a part of a movement which appeared to be sweeping the nation. One such socialite attended a campaign meeting in Berlin in September of 1930 and became utterly enraptured by the movement, particularly by speaker Dr. Joseph Goebbels who quite literally performed that day. From that day on, this woman would dedicate the rest of her life to Hitler until, in a final testament to her fevered devotion, she poisoned her children and herself in Hitler’s underground bunker in the final weeks of the war. Her name was Magda Quandt.⁴⁵

Interestingly, Magda Quandt’s background did not position her to accept the tenets of National Socialism, especially its racist overtones. A child of divorce, Magda lived alone with her mother until she remarried and her stepfather, a Jewish business man by the name of Max Friedländer, adopted her. The new family moved to Brussels and Magda took her stepfather’s surname of Friedländer. Max Friedländer was a tolerant man, and allowed Magda to attend a Catholic school run by Ursuline nuns while he ran his house according to Orthodox Jewish rules.⁴⁶ In July of 1914, Magda and her mother returned to Berlin; it is unclear if Friedländer moved with them and little is known of his relationship with Magda after this date. Due to her later marriage to Goebbels, the lack of information on Max Friedländer is probably not a coincidence. A key Nazi figure such as Goebbels certainly could not afford for information about

⁴⁴ d’Almeida, 28.

⁴⁵ Born Maria-Magdalena Ritschel in 1901, Angela Lambert, *The Lost Life of Eva Braun* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006) 235.

⁴⁶ Angela Lambert, *The Lost Life of Eva Braun* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006) 235.

his wife's Jewish stepfather to reach the public. Moreover, this was not the only skeleton in Magda's closet.

In January of 1921, Magda married the wealthy German banker Günther Quandt. For the next few years, Magda moved in high society circles and attended extravagant parties, taking full advantage of her husband's fortune. While enjoying her considerable wealth, Magda carried on a sexual affair with a militant Zionist, an affair which ultimately ended her marriage,⁴⁷ marking her second unacceptable relationship with a Jew. Despite his wife's sexual indiscretions, Quandt remained devoted to Magda emotionally and financially for many years after they divorced in 1929. One year later she attended a Nazi party rally and watched, enraptured by Goebbels' oratorical genius. Moved to the core by Goebbels, Magda joined the Nazi party, applied for a job at headquarters, and was soon transferred to Goebbels' department after he allegedly saw her beautiful figure descending the office stairs.⁴⁸ The love affair between a notorious anti-Semite and the stepdaughter of a Jew began, and from the start, it was a public performance.

Goebbels and Magda were married with copious pomp and circumstance in December 1931. Hitler himself served as the couple's witness and Leni Riefenstahl accompanied the bride to the ceremony in a chauffeur-driven car.⁴⁹ The marriage of renowned socialite Magda Quandt and rising star Joseph Goebbels constituted a high society event depicted in the press and discussed on the streets. Though Hitler would not be named chancellor for another year, it was clear that the National Socialists had begun to infiltrate high society; one of Germany's main socialites had just married Hitler's right-hand man.

Why did a man who harangued against the Jews on a daily basis marry a woman with ties to the world he so despised? Was it Magda's seductive beauty which caused Goebbels, a

⁴⁷ d'Almeida, 29.

⁴⁸ Lambert, 236.

⁴⁹ d'Almeida, 30.

notorious anti-Semite, to overlook her blatant connections to the Jewish world? More important to this study, how could Magda bring herself to marry a man like Goebbels? After all, Goebbels' anti-Semitism was no secret and Magda's own background certainly did not predestine her to embrace the Nazi racial agenda. Because of Magda's background and her penchant to pick and choose which tenets of Nazi dogma to accept and which to discard, I believe the interpretations of Magda Goebbels which focus solely on her blind and fevered devotion to the Nazi movement miss an important motive - Magda understood the dynamics and potential perks of power.

Soon after her marriage to Goebbels, Magda's apartment (left to her in her divorce settlement) on *Reichskanzlerplatz*, a street in a chic and fashionable district of Berlin, served as a social base for Hitler and his inner circle, and Magda assumed the role of Hitler's official hostess.⁵⁰ By marrying Goebbels, Magda guaranteed herself a position on the arm of power and a continued presence in high society. As high society became increasingly dominated by Nazi supporters and Nazi leaders themselves, Magda enjoyed the luxury and pleasure the merging of these two spheres produced. In her analysis of high society in the Third Reich, Fabrice d'Almeida defines the relationship between high society and power in a way Magda Goebbels seemed to understand perfectly:

High society shows the ability of a government to live with the elites of its country to achieve a synthesis of the power principle with the pleasure principle...Being a member of high society means participating indirectly in power through coalescence, receiving part of its benefits, and taking advantage of its shadow to conceal one's privileges.⁵¹

Magda Goebbels took full advantage of the synthesis of power and pleasure. Her position as Goebbels' wife and as the nation's hostess provided her with the ability to live outside of certain expectations or requirements, namely, Nazi beliefs about the female image, and to serve her

⁵⁰ Lambert, 238.

⁵¹ d'Almeida, 6.

Führer in a way most pleasing to her - as a beautiful socialite. As a socialite, she had both access to tremendous luxury and the benefits of power.

National Socialism's penetration of high society and Magda's own story within this greater context provide a framework for the discussion of the Nazi inner circle and the women within it. Because German high society became increasingly dominated by Nazi leaders in the early thirties, and those leaders in fact began to represent high society itself, we can define high society at this time as "a certain coalition of elites, that taken together, constituted a political class."⁵² The women within this class warrant investigation because they lived within a social sphere which profited from the perpetuation of crime. In examining the crimes of Nazi high society, d' Almeida insists:

In short we are called upon to examine a banquet. This banquet lasted twelve years, almost a generation, but it was the counterpart of the murder that took place over a relatively short time and is known under the name of genocide. What is high-society life if not a gigantic feast of savage sacrifice that the Nazis made of so many people, and primarily the Jews?⁵³

As we shall see, the continued existence of Nazi high society relied on the persecution of the inferior. High society feasted upon the sufferings of those deemed undesirable and built a life of luxury out of others' despair.

The Banquet

The men and women of Hitler's inner circle quickly adapted to life at the top. They attended casinos, spas, and horse races, dropping large sums of money at each event. Because the members of Hitler's inner circle, including Heinrich Hoffmann, Eva Braun, and Magda Goebbels, did not hesitate to lose a little money at the gambling tables, spas, casinos, and other

⁵² d' Almeida, 11.

⁵³ d' Almeida, 11.

establishments traditionally frequented by high society, none of these establishments experienced a decline in profits during the mid-thirties.⁵⁴

Additionally, fashion, especially for the women, constituted an important facet of high society life. However, in the thirties, more than seventy percent of clothing sold in Berlin shops was produced by Jewish tailors.⁵⁵ Therefore, aryianization of the clothing industry became a goal of anti-Semitic policy.⁵⁶ The organized purge of the Jews from the German fashion industry throughout the thirties and the destruction of many Jewish clothing shops on *Kristallnacht* severely limited a good Nazi woman's access to high fashion. Even if a Nazi woman found a Jewish clothing store still in operation in the late thirties, she would have been scorned for entering. Yet, high society women, frustrated by the lack of chic fashion and equipped with the means to circumvent rules, often ignored the government's exaltation of the traditional dirndl and indulged their luxurious tastes by surreptitiously purchasing from Jewish tailors or procuring items from abroad.

Magda Goebbels and Emmy Göring, for example, desired the most fashionable styles and were willing to swallow whatever anti-Semitic or xenophobic feelings they had for the purpose of fashion. Frau Goebbels and Frau Göring remained patrons of Jewish tailor Fritz Grünfeld, who won a gold medal at the Paris World Fair in 1937, throughout the war.⁵⁷ While vacationing abroad or accompanying their husbands on professional trips, high society women took note of the latest trends. In some cases, war developments, primarily the German invasion of France, provided high society with new opportunities for fashion procurement. After the invasion, Eva

⁵⁴ d'Almeida, 127.

⁵⁵ d'Almeida, 118.

⁵⁶ Irene Guenther, *Nazi Chic?: Fashioning Women in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Berg Publishing, 2004) passim.

⁵⁷ d'Almeida, 118.

Braun frequently purchased French make-up and perfume along with furs.⁵⁸ The attack on the Jewish fashion industry proved to be a wonderful development for Frau Goebbels and Frau Göring; only those with the power to circumvent Nazi policy would have access to the best fashions.

While this particular study focuses on high society women, it is important to note that the men in Hitler's inner circle certainly reaped the benefits of their positions as well, and often did so in similar ways. Besides the purchase of expensive vehicles and ostentatious clothing, Nazi bigwigs including Göring, Goebbels, von Schirach, Bormann, Speer, Himmler, and Ribbentrop all amassed significant art collections.⁵⁹ Göring in particular had a seemingly insatiable appetite for art and constructed a gallery at his Karinhall residence for the purpose of housing his enormous collection. By the end of the war, Göring had accumulated 1,375 paintings, 250 sculptures, and 168 tapestries.⁶⁰ Once again this luxury came at the expense of National Socialism's victims. Göring and the other dedicated art collectors in Hitler's inner circle took advantage of public sales of Jewish property, goods confiscated from non-Aryans, and oftentimes simply looted.⁶¹

Given the significant suffering of so many under Hitler's Reich, the luxury enjoyed by high society seems utterly out of place. While traveling to Obersalzberg during the war on a train with Hitler's personal staff and entourage, Traudl Junge, Hitler's young secretary, remembered observing the great luxury around her. While she made no mention of the Jews in this statement, and was in fact ironically referring to ordinary Germans, she described the dichotomy which existed between the privileged and the unprivileged during the Nazi era. That is, she emphasized

⁵⁸ d'Almeida, 127..

⁵⁹ d'Almeida, 128.

⁶⁰ d'Almeida, 129.

⁶¹ d'Almeida, 130.

the disparity between the luxury she experienced as one close to Hitler and the experience of ordinary Germans:

So now we were rolling through the night all the way across Germany, with every comfort you can possibly hope for on a train journey. I couldn't help thinking what other trains now traveling through the German landscape at the same time might be like: cold and unlit, full of people who didn't have enough to eat or anywhere comfortable to sit...Personally I had never known or seen such luxury before, even in peacetime.⁶²

Here, Traudl Junge unwittingly illustrated the eerie dichotomy which existed between the lives of those in Hitler's inner circle and those relegated to the outside. While the footnote in her memoir insists that Traudl's comment here refers to ordinary Germans traveling throughout Germany at this time, and not to the Jews carted off against their wills, the modern reader, informed by the greater historical context, can observe the monstrous injustice of the scene itself. Here, the train's passengers basked in unmatched luxury while Jewish prisoners simultaneously, stripped of all comforts, rode to their deaths.

Because Traudl Junge was officially hired to take dictation from Hitler in early 1943 when the systematic annihilation of the Jews was already well underway, her comments become all the more revelatory. Surely Traudl recorded something referencing the "Jewish Problem" and its corresponding *Endlösung* during one of Hitler's many dictations. Perhaps the luxury around her served as a buffer between her and the fate of the "other." One wonders if the fate of Jewish prisoners so much as crossed her mind as she looked out the window of her opulent compartment and pondered the life of her fellow Germans.

Traudl Junge's inadvertent, poignant observation epitomizes the dichotomy between high society luxury and the privation experienced by others. High society women such as Magda Goebbels and Emmy Göring lived in materialistic bubbles while their husbands set out to deprive

⁶² Traudl Junge and Melissa Müller, *Until the Final Hour* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2002) 51.

an entire race. Did these women know of the horrors endured by the Jews, as they paraded about in their custom-made gowns? To what extent did they understand their husbands' jobs? If they knew, did they care, or did they cultivate a conscious indifference which allowed them to enjoy their luxury guilt-free?

Because the wives of the Nazi elite gathered once a year in the spring at Hitler's residence in Obersalzberg known as the Berghof, an examination of the women who visited the Berghof allows for a convenient method of investigation into high society women's knowledge of wartime aims and crimes. While at the Berghof, these women were surrounded by members of Hitler's inner circle and considered members themselves. They took part in late night chats, ate their meals with the Führer and his closest advisors, and strolled about the grounds with the architects of the Third Reich. Therefore, examination of life at the Berghof allows us to collectively observe how conscious the wives of Nazi leaders were of policy and crime.

Hitler's Berghof

*In the broad horizons of the land around Berchtesgaden and Salzburg, cut off from the everyday world, my creative genius produces ideas which shake the world. In those moments I feel no longer part of mortality, my ideas go beyond mortal frontiers and are transformed into deeds of great dimensions.*⁶³ - Adolf Hitler

The Berghof was Hitler's chalet located high in the Bavarian Alps at Berchtesgaden in Obersalzberg.⁶⁴ Only those belonging to high society and, more specifically, to Hitler's inner circle, could count on an invitation to visit the Berghof. Ultimately, the Berghof women fell into three distinct categories. The first group consisted of elite Nazi wives, many of whom can be

⁶³ Arthur H. Mitchell, *Hitler's Mountain: The Führer, Obersalzberg and the American Occupation of Berchtesgaden* (London: McFarland & Company, 2007) 22-23.

⁶⁴ Mitchell, 7.

characterized as nothing short of fecund, including Magda Goebbels (mother of seven), Gerda Bormann (mother of ten), and Margret Speer (mother of six). In addition to these women, Ilse Hess,⁶⁵ Erna Hoffmann, and Margaret Himmler rounded out the first group of female, elite guests. The second group consisted of Eva Braun's personal guests including her sister Gretl, her friend Marion Schönmann, and Fraulein Silberhorn, a blonde telephone operator at the *Gasthaus* who would later become Martin Bormann's mistress.⁶⁶ The elite Nazi wives and Eva's friends "coexisted in mutual rivalry and disapproval and very few women were welcome in both groups."⁶⁷ The third group, "occupying a neutral buffer state"⁶⁸ consisted of Hitler's private secretaries, including young Traudl Junge.

Together, the women who frequented the Berghof represented a formidable social network, both impressive and intimidating to an outsider. They lived luxurious and seemingly trivial lives, spending their time gossiping, parading around in high fashion, and enjoying expensive food and drink. After the war ended and the regime's crimes had been exposed, many Berghof guests represented life at the Berghof as boring and entirely tedious. However, Maria Below, wife of Colonel von Below and frequent Berghof guest, insisted that postwar renunciations of the Berghof were simply untrue: "We all lived through this together, and Hitler's knowledge of history and art was phenomenal. Of course, the repetitions became tedious, but those first years particularly-how can you forget how excited we all were...And how many moments there were when we were happy?"⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Frau Hess fell from favor and was promptly evicted from their home 'on the Berg' after her husband, Rudolph Hess took off on a secret peace mission to Scotland in 1941.

⁶⁶ Lambert, 229.

⁶⁷ Lambert, 229.

⁶⁸ Lambert, 229.

⁶⁹ Gitta Sereny, *Albert Speer: His Battle With Truth* (New York: Knopf, 1995) 113.

Traudl Junge provided a unique perspective on the extravagance of the Berghof. Hired as Hitler's secretary in early 1943, she observed the happenings at the Berghof as one unaccustomed to luxury and privilege. As she wrote in her memoir:

I'd had so little chance to enjoy parties and elegance before the war that all my wardrobe was casual. Now I felt right out of place. Eva almost never wore the same dress twice, even when we spent weeks at the Obersalzberg, and she certainly never wore the same outfit to dinner as at lunch or in the tea-house.⁷⁰

As Traudl Junge described, the Berghof was an embodiment of elegance and exclusivity of which she was slowly becoming a part. The Berghof appeared immune to wartime hardships and rations; its inhabitants and guests wanted for nothing. While the Nazi state restricted the rights of its Jewish citizens and eventually carted them off against their wills to ghettos and later to the death camps, the elite women of the Berghof lived in a material fantasyland. The women in Hitler's inner circle enjoyed tea for hours, swam in the Königsee, and wore fashion forbidden to the average German woman, while the architects of the Holocaust methodically put their plan to annihilate Europe's Jews into practice.

Eva Braun's unique relationship to Hitler enabled her in particular to live each day as a perpetual fashion show. Clothing and vanity dominated her world. Eva had her own personal dressmaker in Berlin by the name of Fräulein Heise, from whom she ordered hundreds of dresses on Hitler's bill. She studied fashion magazines religiously, intent upon keeping up with the latest chic trends, unhindered by the Nazi propaganda urging her to dress in traditional German dress (**Figure 4**). She quickly adopted the latest trends featured in chic magazines, sometimes purchasing the featured designs directly from the designers themselves. Most of the time, however, she would ask Fräulein Heise to modify the designs to fit her figure. Eva's drawers

⁷⁰ Junge, 72.

held dozens of handmade Italian shoes, hand-embroidered silk lingerie monogrammed with her initials, and she dressed each day in a film star bathroom with porcelain fittings.⁷¹

Eva was not the only woman who flaunted opulent fixings and fashion, though her access to the Führer's money did provide her with the more ostentatious examples of female fashion. The other Nazi wives and mistresses enjoyed all of the perks the Berghof had to offer, also dressed in the most expensive clothing of the time. As Traudl Junge remembered, "Apart from Martin Bormann's wife, all the women [at the Berghof] met their Führer with carefully painted lips."⁷² The key party leaders of the Third Reich conversed, dined, and socialized with a group of women who violated the propagated Nazi ideal.

The elegance and exclusivity present at the Berghof distinguished this group of women as insiders, separate and distinct from ordinary German women, the propagated female ideal, and the designated "outsider." Given the greater historical context, the many photographs of these women frolicking about the Berghof grounds appear utterly chilling (**Figures 5 and 6**). The wives of the Nazi elite picnicked, swam, sang, danced, purchased expensive clothing, and gossiped, completely disconnected from the horrors of the outside world. While the Nazi Party succeeded in dividing Germany into a country of insiders and outsiders, the Berghof served as a barefaced example of this division. As wives of the Nazi elite secluded from the greater circumstances affecting Germany, the Holocaust and the war itself became peripheral issues. With time, isolation bred indifference. Able to live in an isolated paradise, these women could associate the ugliness of the Holocaust with another world, separate from their own.

The theme of indifference, while a prominent theme in the historiography of the Holocaust, is especially important in the case of the wives of the Nazi elite. Indifference was

⁷¹ Lambert, 206-208.

⁷² Junge, 74.

easily employed by the women sheltered from the realities of the Holocaust, their bubble penetrated only infrequently in the form of jokes or asides. At the Berghof, indifference appears to have become a means by which these women erected a barrier between themselves and serious political and military matters. Author Victoria J. Barnett, insists that “indifference” above all is “the mark of the bystanders who remain passive, who avoid involvement and thereby step outside the wheel of history.” Though many emotions are involved, “indifference is essentially an expression of distance.”⁷³ With respect to the women sheltered at the Berghof, physical distance aided in cultivating emotional distance. The Jew felt like a distant nonentity and “a gap between the insiders and outsiders opens; as it is reinforced by law and popular opinion, it widens. Consciously or unconsciously, the insiders reshape their own identities in ways that justify the exclusion of the outsiders.”⁷⁴

One might raise the question, how could these women be indifferent to the Holocaust if their husbands played such significant roles in Hitler’s government? Given the pervasive nature of the campaign to disenfranchise and later annihilate the Jews, claiming ignorance of the greatest genocide in history, even while annually huddling in the Berghof, is both impossible and farcical. While the wives of the Nazi elite frequented the Berghof, they certainly spent at least minimal time in German cities. Even Eva Braun left the Berghof to visit Munich and undoubtedly witnessed signs of Jewish persecution. As early as the mid-1930’s women could have seen boarded up Jewish shops, anti-Semitic slogans and cartoons, public humiliation of Jewish men, women, and children by the SS, and the yellow Star of David the Jews were forced to wear on the outside of their clothing.⁷⁵ Surely these women must have noticed these

⁷³ Victoria J. Barnett, *Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust* (London: Greenwood Press: 1999) 117.

⁷⁴ Barnett, 101.

⁷⁵ Lambert, 340.

widespread signs of Hitler's long-term plan for Europe's Jews. Surely they must have noted the sudden disappearance of political dissidents, the handicapped, and the Jews in their respective cities. Only those living underground could have lived through the Third Reich without exposure to the beginnings of genocide. It is much more likely that these women ignored these transparent indicators. The indifference Barnett discusses in her book therefore applied to the women of Hitler's inner circle as well. Indifference to the plight of the "other" is the most likely explanation for their silence and corresponding inaction.

Indifference allowed the female elite to sever themselves from the world around them and the human ties of conscience that bound them to their fellow men and women. The perception of the world outside of one's own as peripheral allowed these women to be "more centered on themselves and their own needs...less conscious of others and less concerned with them."⁷⁶ As Barnett argues, the distance excludes "the other" from the realm of human obligation and "the other" no longer belongs to "the circle of persons towards whom obligations are owed, [and] to whom rules apply..."⁷⁷ With respect to the high society women hauled up in Obersalzberg, it seems the Berghof bubble came to physically represent a growing distinction between insiders and outsiders that festered indifference.

This cultivated indifference aided these women in ignoring the several attempts made by more outspoken members of their clique to break the silence and expose the horrors carried out in the name of purifying the German race. Traudl Junge recounted the following incident in an interview for the television series *The World At War*, which aired in February 1974. Junge's interview presents an instance in which subtle reminders of the outside world permeated the relaxing atmosphere of the Berghof. On this occasion, Heinrich Hoffmann, Hitler's flamboyant

⁷⁶ Barnett, 111.

⁷⁷ Barnett, 100.

personal photographer, referenced the concentration camp Dachau in a joke intended to entertain the members of Hitler's social circle. The joke as recounted by Junge ran as follows:

Hoffmann: Here's a riddle, mein Führer: You, Göring and Goebbels are all standing under an umbrella in the middle of the road. Which of you gets wet?

Hitler: I don't know, that's a stupid question, who? I don't know.

Hoffmann: None of you mein Führer, because it isn't raining.

Hitler shook his head.

Hitler: What a stupid joke, I can't laugh. I don't understand, Hoffmann. Dear me Hoffmann, you're getting old.

Everyone laughed.

Hoffmann: And just think mein Führer, the man who told me that joke is now in Dachau!

Hitler was visibly upset.

Hitler: That's impossible, how can you tell such a lie. I don't believe you Hoffmann. That's a really stupid joke.

Hoffmann: Oh but he really is in Dachau! Mein Führer - he lives there,

*Hoffmann said this triumphantly, which made Hitler laugh a lot.*⁷⁸

This passing reference to a concentration camp illustrates an instance in which the bubble these women lived in was penetrated by reality. During one of Hitler's many social gatherings at the Berghof, Hoffmann mentioned the Jewish situation in his joke, and the other women present, including Traudl Junge, allowed the subtle reference to pass. This was undoubtedly not the only anecdote concerning the Jews mentioned in the presence of the Berghof women. The women at the Berghof certainly heard many more casual references to the Jewish situation while socializing after dinner or walking casually around the grounds. In fact, after Hitler's evening

⁷⁸ Interview with Traudl Junge as featured in *The World At War*: 20 Feb. 1974. Season 1 Episode 16. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2xbEbbdbtg>>

briefing, the Berghof guests would gather around the fireplace for a nocturnal chat. Guests would pull sofas and armchairs into a large semi-circle, eat cakes and pastries, drink whatever they pleased, and chat well into the night. Surely guests occasionally referenced the Jews during these midnight chats in the form of passing allusions or lighthearted discussion. It is difficult to believe that references to the Jews never occurred while these women spent copious amounts of time around arguably the most anti-Semitic members of the Nazi Party. Did they never discuss the many anti-Semitic cartoons or articles featured in Julius Streicher's weekly Nazi publication, *Der Stürmer*? **(Figure 7)** Did the women never discuss the mysterious disappearances of friends or friends of friends? Did they never discuss the yellow stars of David the Jews were forced to wear after 1941?

In this interview, Junge did not mention a single woman innocently asking for an explanation of Dachau in response to Hoffmann's joke. Traudl Junge herself recounted the anecdote as if on some level she understood what Hoffmann was referring to at the time. This intimation of a general, tacit understanding amongst the Berghof women suggests that these women possessed at least some knowledge of Dachau and the concentration camp system, even if such knowledge took shape around casual references.

To this point, Gitta Sereny's postwar interview with Margret Speer, wife of Hitler's chief architect Albert Speer and frequent guest at the Berghof, reveals the general atmosphere of suspicion amongst the elite wives. Though living in a separate reality, the whispers of atrocity at times permeated their environment, as previously shown in Hoffmann's joke, and produced a general feeling of unease. In an interview, Sereny asked Margret Speer if the Führer or any of his deputies ever spoke of anything serious or mentioned the existence of the concentration camps in front of the women at the Berghof. After pausing to think, she replied "We really did live very

much on the outside. Of course we knew *something*⁷⁹ was going on, but if one thought about them at all, it was as prison camps, for criminals, I mean.”⁸⁰ What Margret Speer meant by *something* remains unclear. While we will never know how much she or the other women knew about the systematic effort to exterminate the Jews, as she confessed, the women did indeed know something. It seems as though Albert Speer’s statement to Gitta Sereny about his knowledge of Nazi horrors applies to his wife and the other Berghof wives as well: “...we saw only what we wanted to see and knew only what we wanted to know.”⁸¹

The notion that the female guests at the Berghof understood the plans their husbands were orchestrating for the future of the Jewish people is further supported by Henny von Schirach’s⁸² question to Hitler during one of the many evening chats at the Berghof. During one of Dr. G.M. Gilbert’s postwar interviews with Baldur von Schirach, Gauleiter of Vienna, von Schirach described the incident which transpired between his wife and Hitler and eventually precipitated his fall from grace. While sitting in his cell awaiting judgment at Nürnberg, von Schirach told Dr. Gilbert of his wife’s last conversation with Hitler. At the Berghof in 1943, Henny von Schirach approached Hitler about the Jews she had seen dragged out of their homes and loaded onto cargo trains against their wills. She asked Hitler, while he sat by the hearth with his guests, if he knew about the terrible way in which the SS were treating the Jews. As Traudl Junge remembered, she asked Hitler quite suddenly, “Mein Führer, I saw a train full of deported Jews in Amsterdam the other day. Those poor people- they look terrible. I’m sure they’re being very badly treated. Do you know about it? Do you allow it?”⁸³ Her husband recounted to Dr. Gilbert how Hitler fell disturbingly silent after she posed this question, at which time he chimed

⁷⁹ My own italics.

⁸⁰ Gitta Sereny, *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth* (London: Vintage, 1996) 195-6.

⁸¹ Sereny, *Albert Speer: His Battle With Truth*, 208.

⁸² Heinrich Hoffman’s daughter and later Baldur von Schirach’s wife.

⁸³ Junge, 88.

in with questions of his own about the treatment of the Jews. He then remembered “He flew at me with such rage that I thought I would surely be arrested. I fell from grace after that.”⁸⁴ The next day, Henny and her husband returned to Vienna, and neither of them was invited to the Berghof again. Henny had questioned the unquestionable, spoken of the unspeakable, and had thereby exceeded her rights as a guest at Hitler’s residence.

Both von Schirach and Traudl Junge’s account of the incident insist that Henny von Schirach questioned Hitler in front of his guests. The women of Hitler’s inner circle were present. They heard the disturbing details of what Henny had seen and asked no further questions. They remained silent. They valued their position in Hitler’s inner circle more than they valued the truth.

While many of the women within Hitler’s circle “chose to ignore the signs, the rumors and the sudden absences, substituting blind loyalty to Hitler and their men folk for any attempt to face reality,”⁸⁵ some women at the Berghof understood reality perfectly, and in fact urged the extermination of the Jews. Gerda Bormann, wife of Martin Bormann, Hitler’s personal secretary, displayed her vast knowledge of Nazi policy in her letters to her husband between 1943 and 1945. In her correspondence, she not only demonstrated her understanding of the Final Solution, but urged it on account of the inherent evil of the Jewish race.

An early Nazi supporter, Martin Bormann joined the NSDAP in 1928 and became Reichsleiter in 1933. Until Rudolf Hess’s mysterious flight to Britain in 1941, he served as his chief secretary. After Hess’ disappearance, Bormann filled his vacancy despite protests from Göring and Goebbels and, through his significant bureaucratic skills, perpetually rose in power within Hitler’s inner circle. In 1943, Martin Bormann became Hitler’s personal secretary and

⁸⁴ G.M. Gilbert, *Nuremberg Diary* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1947) 24.

⁸⁵ Lambert, 328.

rarely left his side, eventually following him to the bunker in 1945. Until Hitler's death, Bormann remained a faithful and fervent follower, and recounted much of his experience with Hitler in letters to his wife, Gerda.

Gerda Bormann was perhaps the only woman at the Berghof who fulfilled the Nazi feminine ideal. She never wore lipstick, bore ten children for the Reich, and dressed in traditional German dress. Traudl Junge remembered her as a pleasant woman who nevertheless stuck out amongst the lavishly dressed and made-up women at the Berghof. Junge regarded Gerda as:

a silent woman, and every year in the spring, when we moved to Obersalzberg, she was pregnant with another child. Pale and inconspicuous, with thick braids of hair wound round her head, she would sit in her armchair beside the Führer counting the hours until she could finally leave this circle of elegant, carefree women.⁸⁶

Gerda did not just fit the Nazi ideal in physicality or fecundity, she also fervently believed in Nazi dogma. As illustrated through her letters, Gerda Bormann represents the extent to which some Berghof women understood and supported Nazi anti-Semitic policies.

In one particular letter to her husband addressed "Dearest Heart," Gerda lambasted the Jews of Europe and advocated for their removal from German society. In this letter, written from Obersalzberg in September of 1944, Gerda wrote:

And yet, it cannot possibly be the meaning of history that Jewry should make itself the master of the world. It is terrible how powerful it is everywhere. And whatever way the war ends, it will always mean a strengthening of the Jewish stock and the Jewish purse. The Jews don't spill their blood in battle, they manage to get away from the danger of bombs...and even during revolts and guerilla fighting they only egg the others on from safe hide-outs. Disease and dirt cannot hurt that vermin. So, how shall they ever get reduced in numbers?⁸⁷

Her words mirror propaganda from Julius Streicher's *Der Stürmer*, in which the Jews were frequently portrayed as vermin, and illustrate her individual, iniquitous passion for the

⁸⁶ Junge, 77.

⁸⁷ H. R. Trevor-Roper, ed. *The Bormann Letters: The Private Correspondence Between Martin Bormann and His Wife from January 1943-April 1945* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1954) 105.

elimination of Europe's Jews. Though undoubtedly influenced by the Reich's ubiquitous propaganda, Gerda's letters illustrate the transformation of the many anti-Semitic cartoons and diatribes she had undoubtedly seen or heard into her own personal loathing.

Her written harangue continues with a profound sense of urgency with regard to the fate of her children. Believing the Jews to be the source of all evil in the world, she supported their removal from society so as to create a world free of Jews and therefore safe for her growing children:

In future history lessons, it must be the main point to expose that danger constantly and to unmask its disguises. If it is done with some exaggeration, it does not matter. Every single child must realize that the Jew is the Absolute Evil in this world, and that he must be fought by every means, wherever he appears.⁸⁸

As evidenced in this letter, Gerda Bormann had not only taken notice of propagated anti-Semitism, she had internalized it. Additionally, Frau Bormann had learned to attribute all of Germany's problems to a nefarious Jewish influence. The world, she claimed, was plagued with unrest caused by the Jewish population:

Just now there isn't a single country in the whole world where there are genuine conditions of peace. It is incredible that a handful of Jews should be able to turn the whole globe topsy-turvy! Because-as Goebbels says-we aren't fighting the three Great Powers, but a single power that is behind them, something that is much worse, and this is the reason why I can't at present imagine how we shall get peace ever, even if we win the war. Oh, Daddy, I must quickly tell you about little Volker. It didn't work well with him in the play-pen...It is a good thing the children are here and lead one back to reality again and again.⁸⁹

Here, Frau Bormann expressed her concern for the stability of the world in light of the continued existence of the Jews alongside banal details of her son's life. The ease with which she transitioned from anti-Semitism to the details of her family life illustrates the extent to which Frau Bormann internalized Goebbels' fatalistic descriptions of the apocalyptic danger of

⁸⁸ *The Bormann Letters*, 106.

⁸⁹ *The Bormann Letters*, 136.

worldwide Jewry. She not only regarded the Jews as second-class citizens but as a subversive population conspiring to wreak havoc upon the civilized world. Furthermore, Frau Bormann placed more importance on winning the war against the Jews than on the war against the Allied Powers, as emphasized by her belief that the Allies were simply puppets of their respective Jewish populations. To Frau Bormann, the war against the Allies was essentially a war against the power which backed them—the Jews.

In addition to her ardent anti-Semitism, Frau Bormann possessed vast knowledge of Third Reich social and political policy. Her husband, Martin Bormann, frequently enclosed memos and copies of documents in his letters to his wife, keeping her updated and acutely aware of the inner workings of the Nazi Party. For example, on September 27, 1944, Martin Bormann attached two copies of memoranda to the *Gauleiters*⁹⁰ concerning the newly established *Volkssturm*⁹¹ in his letter home to his wife “so that [she] know what the task is.”⁹² The memos detailed the organization of the *Volkssturm*, described the qualities each member of the new organization should possess, and included an urgent demand for haste made by the Führer himself. In addition to memos, Martin Bormann frequently referenced the location of high ranking party officials and elaborated on their current tasks and emotional states. While he seems to have taken great pains to refrain from transcribing the exact details of his conversations with Hitler, Goebbels, Speer, and others in his letters to Gerda, he often emphasized the importance of said discussions, noting for example on September 3, 1944, “Yesterday I had a conference that lasted hours, all about the total war—Goebbels was with me from lunch time to 6 o’clock, with a single short interval.”⁹³ While it is unclear what Bormann meant by total war in this reference,

⁹⁰ Party leaders of local NSDAP branches

⁹¹ The German Home Guard. It was created as a type of militia during the last years of the war.

⁹² *The Bormann Letters*, 124.

⁹³ *The Bormann Letters*, 96.

Gerda's own references to the war on the Jews indicate that she understood that Germany's total war required complete mobilization of the German populace and the eradication of the Jewish populace. Total war to Gerda, as emphasized in her many written diatribes to her husband, meant the eradication of European Jewry.

References to discussions with key party leaders appear throughout the Bormann letters, and because the collection of letters is incomplete, it is reasonable to assume that more letters existed at one time, letters that perhaps revealed more about Gerda's knowledge of Nazi policy than the ones in this collection. The frequency of such references along with the nonchalant way in which Martin included important information within his letters supports the fact that Gerda was privy to a great deal of confidential information. In this sense, it is perhaps more important to note what is not in this collection than what actually is. Bormann referred to important and rather enigmatic policy in his letters that a reader unaccustomed to the inner workings of the Nazi party would find utterly confusing. He did not, for example, explain to Gerda what the *Volkssturm* was, leaving us to assume that Gerda already understood. Similarly, Gerda and Bormann made no mention in their letters of what the SS was doing to ensure the eradication of the "Absolute Evil in this world,"⁹⁴ leaving us once again to assume Gerda already knew of the SS efforts to cleanse Europe of its primary enemy.

While it is impossible to categorically say what Gerda knew and when she knew it, it is clear that her husband kept her highly informed. Additionally, based on Gerda's own hatred of the Jews, it is reasonable to assume that she welcomed the concentration camps as a means to isolate the Jews from her growing children, even if she did not understand the extent of death camp extermination policies. Essentially, it is difficult to believe that a woman who thought the Jews must be fought "by every means possible" would not welcome extermination.

⁹⁴ *The Bormann Letters*, 106.

Ultimately, the women of the Berghof represent a group of privileged women who spent many hours sipping tea, taking walks, gossiping, and dining with the architects of the Third Reich. They enjoyed immense material privilege and, as members of Hitler's inner circle, or in the case of Traudl Junge, employees of Hitler himself, they were privy to information unknown to the rest of the population. As the Heinrich Hoffmann and Frau von Schirach anecdotes suggest, the reality of the Final Solution occasionally pervaded their isolated world of privilege, only to be quickly dismissed. Discussion of such unpleasant facts was unnecessary and distracting; the women of the Berghof either already understood the extent of SS extermination policies or they knew "something" and refused to ask further questions. Their quiet and luxurious bubble did not need to be tainted with the detailed knowledge of Nazi crimes.

Because they were isolated in the mountains of Obersalzberg, the Berghof women could successfully ignore reality. When talk of the concentration camp and death camp systems entered their world of luxury, they either deliberately chose to ignore the details or, like Gerda Bormann, viewed such atrocities as necessary to rid Germany of her prime enemy. Yet, their distance provided them with a convenient buffer to reality and a means to live their lives isolated from the events taking place at their husbands' command. While the Berghof women surely knew *something*, as Margret Speer confessed to Gitta Sereny, their distance from the actual camps allowed them to remain comfortably unaware of sadistic details. Because they never saw the camps, they had only a vague understanding of concentration camp realities and could therefore picture them as they wanted to see them. However, the reality remains; high society surely knew something. Perhaps high society wives chose to think of the camps as Margaret Speer did, as prisons or interment facilities for Germany's racial and political enemies. Perhaps their limited

understanding of the camps enabled them to view these camps as they wanted to view them and, with little information to threaten imagined images, they were able to remain content.

However, the raving antipathy of Gerda Bormann speaks to the idea that even if high society women had known about the systematic extermination of Germany's racial inferiors, they may not have been opposed to it. In fact, they may not have been distressed by the idea of extermination at all. We will never truly know how these women would have felt if given the full story of Nazi extermination policies, but what we do know is that one would have been hard pressed to find a high society woman who knew nothing. Their proximity to Third Reich leaders, the mention of the Jewish situation by women such as Henny von Schirach, and the anti-Semitic propaganda urging the destruction of European Jewry all served to provide high society women with enough information to warrant at least some understanding. Therefore, their guilt lies not in their vast knowledge of Nazi crimes, but in their cultivated indifference. That is, high society women were complicit in Nazi crimes not for what they knew, but for what they kept themselves from knowing. As Annemarie Kempf, Albert Speer's personal secretary during the Third Reich, admitted, "we are responsible for what we failed to do, even if, closing our eyes to it, we did not 'consciously know' what it was."⁹⁵

And yet, the Berghof women represent only a piece of a much greater picture of indifference amongst the female elite. Some German women lived in the direct vicinity of and in some cases within the concentration camp grounds, and therefore did not have the luxury of distance from Nazi crimes to serve as an alibi for innocence. These women, like the Berghof women, lived lives of luxury; as wives of all-powerful camp commandants, they enjoyed substantial privilege. Concentration camps were in some sense, "production site[s] of a whole industry whose revenues flowed into the organization's coffers and helped pay for the salaries

⁹⁵ Gitta Sereny, *Albert Speer: His Battle With Truth*, 363.

and all the advantages in kind that were granted to superior officers...”⁹⁶ Unlike the Berghof women, the wives of camp commandants lacked the physical distance from the camps to cultivate a fallacious image of camp life or claim ignorance of brutalities committed in their own backyards. Their complicity is intensified by their proximity to the atrocities of the Holocaust.

⁹⁶ d’Almeida, 212.

Chapter 3: Inside the Concentration Camps and the SS

Before investigating the complicity of commandant wives living in the direct vicinity of the concentration camps, it is important to examine the evolution of the concentration camp system and the SS organization as a whole, especially as it pertains to the process by which a woman became involved with the SS. Examining the evolution of the concentration camp system from prison facilities to extermination centers yields important information about the crimes witnessed by commandant wives. For example, a woman who lived on the grounds of Dachau in 1939 experienced an environment completely different from a woman living on the grounds of Auschwitz at the height of extermination in 1944. Therefore, a distinction between camps as well as a basic understanding of the timeline of camp evolution is vital to any discussion of complicity amongst this group of women. Additionally, the process by which women became involved with the SS yields important information about their involvement. The women I intend to focus on entered the SS by marriage to SS men who were later appointed commandants of various concentration camps. Though plenty of women enlisted as female *Aufseherinnen*, camp overseers, or were drafted to work in camps for female prisoners such as Ravensbrück in the final years of the war, discussion of the crimes these women committed is beyond the scope of this study.

The Camps:

The first SS-run concentration camp, Dachau, was established in March of 1933, shortly after Hitler was officially named chancellor and immediately after the Reichstag fire. Initially, early camps such as Dachau functioned as incarceration facilities for political prisoners in which political enemies of the Reich, including Communists and Socialists, were forced to perform

pointless labor. Prisoners in the early concentration camps of Dachau and Buchenwald, for example, performed hard labor which often led to death by extreme exhaustion. Labor was therefore used as the primary instrument for debilitation and eventual annihilation in the early years of the camps. While the early camps exclusively housed political opponents of the Reich, with the passage of the Nürnberg Laws in 1935, the landscape of the camps began to change; Anti-Semitism had been codified and Germany had a new enemy to imprison, the Jews.

Additionally, Germany began to identify new enemies such as Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, and Gypsies. By 1937, camps which had originally held political enemies of the Reich served as prisons for racial enemies as well. As Paul Neurath, an Austrian political prisoner incarcerated in Dachau after the Anschluss of 1938 remembered:

Eventually all sorts of prisoners were thrown together: political and nonpolitical, guilty and guiltless, Communists and dissident National Socialists, Jews and Gentiles, ministers and murderers, pimps and secretaries of state, vagabonds and Jehovah's Witnesses, professional criminals and homosexuals, 'asocials,' and gypsies.⁹⁷

What had begun as a means to protect the National Socialist Party from dissidents now served as a system to free Germany of its undesirables.

Soon after *Kristallnacht*, or the Night of Broken Glass,⁹⁸ a pogrom against the Jews in which Jewish stores and synagogues were vandalized and violence against the Jews reached a new level of intensity, 30,000 Jews entered the concentration camp system.⁹⁹ In fact, the makeup of the prisoners in the camps changed significantly even before *Kristallnacht*; the Nürnberg Laws of 1935 caused the number of nonpolitical prisoners to overtake the number of political prisoners. Dachau, established explicitly as a camp for political prisoners in 1933, captures the

⁹⁷ Paul Neurath, *The Society of Terror: Inside the Dachau and Buchenwald Concentration Camps*, ed. Christian Fleck and Nico Stehr (London: Paradigm Publishers, 2005) 5.

⁹⁸ November 9-10, 1938.

⁹⁹ Neurath, 307.

shift in the influx of prisoners in 1938. In March of 1938 the ratio of Jewish prisoners to non-Jewish prisoners was 300: 2,200 and the ratio of political prisoners to non-political prisoners was 900:1,600. In September of 1938, three months before the pogrom, the ratios had already changed dramatically. That month, the ratio of Jews to non-Jews had changed to 2,300 : 3,200 and political prisoners to nonpolitical prisoners had changed to 1,250: 4,250.¹⁰⁰ While the number of non-Jews was still greater than the number of Jews, nonpolitical prisoners far outnumbered political prisoners. As reflected in the makeup of the concentration camp prisoners, Germany's internal struggle had transformed from a political war to a racial one.

While the makeup of prisoners in Dachau changed as the war against the Jews and other undesirables escalated, Dachau remained primarily a camp for political prisoners. Therefore, the increasing roundup of Germany's enemies required more camps to be built. Using the first concentration camp, Dachau, as a model, the Reich used prison labor to erect more camps, and the SS used the systems and practices which had proven successful in Dachau at the new facilities. By September 1939, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, Flossenbürg, Mauthausen, and Ravensbrück were already operating, though not in a systematic extermination capacity.¹⁰¹ Therefore, even before the creation of Auschwitz in May of 1940, the German concentration camp system was fully in place. Only after Germany's invasion and corresponding occupation of Poland did the Reich realize the need to construct more camps to hold Polish Jews and the Reich's various other enemies who lived within its newly conquered territories.¹⁰² Situated between the Vistula and the Sola rivers, and located near essential railroad connections, the Polish town of Oswiecim served as the perfect location for a concentration camp to

¹⁰⁰ Neurath, 112.

¹⁰¹ Hermann Langbein, *People in Auschwitz*, trans. Harry Zohn (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004) ix.

¹⁰² Langbein, ix.

accommodate Polish prisoners (**Figures 8 and 9**). In May of 1940, Auschwitz was officially designated a concentration camp and SS Captain Rudolph Höss became its commandant.¹⁰³ Additionally, Heinrich Himmler ordered the construction of a large camp for Soviet POWs at Birkenau (also known as Auschwitz II) in March of 1941. Most of the Soviet prisoners were dead by the time Birkenau was classified as an official concentration camp one year later in March of 1942.¹⁰⁴

With the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, the early stages of implementing the Final Solution began to take shape. Initially, SS killing squads lined up victims and shot them in mass executions in front of mass graves dug by the prisoners themselves. Noting the negative psychological effects such mass executions had upon the SS men, Himmler and others sought another means to dispose of Germany's undesirables.¹⁰⁵ The systematic killing of individuals with disabilities had long been in practice under Germany's euthanasia program. Starting in the winter of 1939, six killing centers within Germany equipped with gas chambers and crematoria killed 80,000 disabled patients in under two years.¹⁰⁶ Thus, Germany had a model for the Final Solution. Before the camps had the means to gas prisoners, they sent selected prisoners to euthanasia facilities.

For experimental purposes, the SS attempted to gas a group of Soviet POWs with hydrogen cyanide, also known as Zyklon B, in August 1941.¹⁰⁷ This gas proved so successful that the use of Zyklon B became the preferred extermination method to dispose of Germany's enemies after this date. Zyklon B maintained the distance between murderer and victim and was

¹⁰³ Langbein, ix.

¹⁰⁴ Langbein, x.

¹⁰⁵ Rudolph Höss, and Steven Paskuly, ed. *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz* (New York: Da Capo, 1996) 28.

¹⁰⁶ Langbein, x.

¹⁰⁷ Langbein, x.

more effective than the carbon monoxide which had been used in the euthanasia facilities.¹⁰⁸ As Rudolph Höss remembered, “Only gas was suitable since killing by shooting the huge numbers expected would be absolutely impossible and would also be a tremendous strain on the SS soldiers who would have to carry out the order as far as the women and children were concerned.”¹⁰⁹ The SS had found an effective method for extermination.

According to Rudolph Höss’ memoir, Heinrich Himmler approached him in the summer of 1941, before the official implementation of the Final Solution at Wannsee, and informed him he had chosen Auschwitz as the site where systematic extermination would begin.¹¹⁰ Gas chambers and crematoria were built in Auschwitz, and by the time the first transports of Jews arrived in Auschwitz in February 1942, the camps were fully equipped to carry out the kind of mass extermination which had begun in the euthanasia facilities. The extermination operation was moved from Auschwitz I to what became known as Auschwitz II (Birkenau) in March 1942.¹¹¹ By early 1942, systematic extermination policies were in place, and the SS were able to dispose of Germany’s enemies quickly, cleanly, and without face to face involvement. Soon, Treblinka, Belzec, Sobibor, and Chelmo began to function exclusively as death camps.

Marrying into the SS:

When the Nazis came to power, the SS organization offered a way for men of pure German stock to share in the power and prestige of the National Socialist movement. Even before Hitler took power in January of 1933, Himmler had managed to build a highly feared and respected organization, and by 1934, the SS claimed close to 200,000 men, all of Aryan stock.

¹⁰⁸ Höss, 30.

¹⁰⁹ Höss, 28.

¹¹⁰ Höss, 27.

¹¹¹ Langbein, *People in Auschwitz*, x.

While status and economic standing varied greatly within the SS ranks, in general, the SS was a highly respected and extremely selective corps. According to Tom Segev, the SS can be characterized as:

A male aristocracy, a religious order, a mob, a large family, all in one. More than anything else it was an army: brutal and sentimental, pragmatic and dogmatic, insensitive and romantic—all at the same time. It fostered its own world view and system of values, a mixture of overbearing pride and self-pity, violent nationalism and supernatural, pan-European racism, an almost ascetic self-denial, and an erotic cult of youth and manliness.¹¹²

Therefore, even lower-level SS men considered themselves members of a selective organization and racial elite, bound together by a sense of purpose. They were the future of Germany and as such, represented a type of male aristocracy. Regardless of economic gains, which at times were negligible, SS men enjoyed the prestige which accompanied SS membership.

Pure Aryan blood became a prerequisite for membership within the SS, and in 1931, Heinrich Himmler, convinced of its absolute importance, wrote “We are like a plant-breeding specialist who, when he wants to breed a pure new strain, first goes over the field to cull the unwanted plants. We, too, shall begin by weeding out people who are not suitable SS material.”¹¹³ Himmler, like many other high-ranking Nazi officials, believed in a pureblood doctrine with an unmitigated fanaticism. He envisioned the SS as an order of racial elites, a *Blutgemeinschaft*¹¹⁴ to stand as the racial example of what Germany’s future could be.

Applicants to the SS were subjected to intense physical and psychological evaluations, and were

¹¹² Tom Segev, *Soldiers of Evil: The Commandants of the Nazi Concentration Camps*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1987) 62-63.

¹¹³ Robin Lumsden, *Himmler’s Black Order: A History of the SS, 1923-1945* (United Kingdom: Sutton Publishing, 1997) 65.

¹¹⁴ Blood community.

ultimately categorized as racially suitable or unsuitable.¹¹⁵ Racial selectivity applied to the SS wives as well.

In December of 1931, Himmler, believing the responsibility of the SS to be the continuation and fortification of the German race, issued a marriage order to all SS men.¹¹⁶ In order to marry, an SS man had to adhere to strict guidelines pertaining to his selection of a wife, to ensure that their offspring be strong and pure. The Marriage Order defined the SS as “an association of German men, defined according to their Nordic blood” and stipulated that “consent to marry will be given solely on the grounds of racial or physical considerations, and with a view to congenital health.”¹¹⁷ Before husband and wife could be married, the SS member had to receive permission from an office created specifically for the purpose of granting marriage licenses to SS members. Only after a couple had been approved could they marry. Any SS man who married without consent was dismissed from the SS. In 1937, 300 SS men were expelled from the order for marrying without approval.¹¹⁸

In order to receive a marriage license, both man and wife had to visit a doctor who inspected them for hereditary disease and determined whether or not the woman could bear children. Family history documents were required to ensure that there had been no Jewish blood in the family since 1750. In addition, the couple had to submit testimonies from third parties verifying their family histories and two photographs of the couple dressed in nothing but bathing suits to ensure they both had perfect Aryan figures.¹¹⁹ Finally, the SS officer had to submit the answers to the following questions to his superiors:

¹¹⁵ Lumsden, 65.

¹¹⁶ Segev, 75.

¹¹⁷ Lumsden, 70.

¹¹⁸ Lumsden, 71.

¹¹⁹ Segev, 75.

Can she be depended on? Does she love children or not? Is she friendly or not? Frugal or wasteful? A homebody or does she like to enjoy herself? Do you know of mental illness in her family? Do you know of any suicides in her family? Has she or anyone else in her family worked for the victory of the movement? Do you think she is worthy of marrying an SS man?¹²⁰

As evidenced by the copious amount of paperwork required to receive a marriage permit, the SS placed extreme importance upon racial concerns within marriage. As an elite group of supremely pure Aryan specimens, the SS could not risk having a woman taint SS offspring. Essentially, the SS commanded that the SS man “put racial and national considerations above his emotions in choosing a wife.”¹²¹ Though sixty percent of SS men remained single, those who wanted to marry oftentimes had to choose between marrying a woman and remaining within the SS.¹²²

Emmy Hirschenberg desired to marry an officer from the SS Death’s Head Formation by the name of Günther Tamaschke, and together they submitted all the necessary materials and waited in hopes that their marriage request would be approved. However, the SS investigation into Emmy’s family history revealed unfavorable information. After further investigation into her family history, the assigned SS investigator sent the couple a return document asking Emmy to elaborate on her grandfather’s suicide and the reasons her uncle and her cousin were imprisoned in a political concentration camp. Heinrich Himmler himself commented on the marriage request, circling items in green pencil and demanding explanations. In response, Emmy had to submit written answers to the questions posed by the SS investigator and Himmler. Explaining her grandfather’s suicide, she wrote, “Grandfather Franz Hirschenberg committed suicide in 1919 after his third wife made his life miserable because he was unemployed.” She then explained that her uncle and cousin had been members of the Social Democratic Party and

¹²⁰ Segev, 76-77.

¹²¹ Segev, 75

¹²² Ralph M. Leck, “Theoretical Issues: Conservative Empowerment and the Gender of Nazism: Paradigms of Power and Complicity in German Women’s History.” *Journal of Women’s History*. Vol. 2. No. 2 Summer 200. p. 149.

had been thrown into Dachau because of their party membership. According to Emmy, they had since reformed their ways. After giving these explanations she wrote “I hope that they will now expunge the past and not oppose the realization of my love.”¹²³ Permission was eventually granted though many couples were not so lucky.

In order to further emphasize the *Sippe*, or exclusive tribe component of the SS, Christian wedding ceremonies were replaced with pagan ceremonies (**Figure 10**). The SS wedding ceremony took place outdoors beneath the sky rather than in the church and “an eternal flame burned in an urn in front of which the couple swore oaths of loyalty, exchanged rings, and received the official SS gift of bread and salt, symbols of the earth’s fruitfulness and purity.” Additionally, the new couple was presented with a copy of *Mein Kampf* as they passed through an archway created by the arms of other SS men raised in salute.¹²⁴

In hopes that the offspring of the newly married couple would produce a racially pure population to offset the significant loss of German men during World War I, the SS demanded that man and wife reproduce quickly and as often as possible. Alongside the Marriage Order in 1931, still two years before the Nazis officially took power, Himmler announced that it was the “patriotic mission of every SS couple to produce at least four children, and where that was not possible the SS pair were expected to adopt racially suitable orphans and bring them up on National Socialist lines.”¹²⁵ After the birth of a couple’s fourth child, Heinrich Himmler himself sent the family a letter of congratulations and a silver candlestick which was engraved with the words “You are a link in the eternal racial chain.”¹²⁶ Himmler deemed the production of SS children so important that in a memorandum in February of 1944 he linked promotion with

¹²³ Günther Tamaschke’s personnel file as cited in Tom Segev’s *Soldiers of Evil*, 77.

¹²⁴ Lumsden, 71.

¹²⁵ Lumsden, 71.

¹²⁶ Lumsden, 72.

reproduction. That is, any SS member who sought a promotion had to include details of his marriage, the age of his wife, and the age of his children in his promotion request. If two years had passed after a child had been born and the wife was under forty and not pregnant, an explanation of why the couple had not tried to have more children had to be attached to the promotion application.¹²⁷

The emphasis placed on race in marriage and childbirth reveals the fact that the racial and moral purity of anyone associated with an SS man was just as important as the genetics of the SS man himself. SS candidates were subjected to thorough screenings which included physical examinations to determine that the candidate was “tall, of flexible body and limbs, with strong bones and muscles”¹²⁸ and of course a member of the Aryan race. Though the process of standing naked in a line with other SS candidates to be inspected was humiliating, the social status SS men stood to gain if they were accepted was worth the temporary degradation. Along the same lines, women often tolerated personal questions and invasive physical exams because the benefits of marriage to an SS man far outweighed the humiliation associated with the invasive application process. By marrying into the SS, women had much to gain by way of social status. Though marriage to a lower-level SS man did not provide much by way of material wealth, the woman entered into an inner circle of racial elites. Those who married high-ranking SS men gained both status as racial elites and material wealth.

Life in the SS- *Siedlungen*

Wives of SS men often lived on the grounds of the concentration camps in housing developments known as *Siedlungen*. The *Siedlungen* consisted of houses and apartments for SS

¹²⁷ Lumsden, 73.

¹²⁸ Segev, 72.

families and, depending on the camp, gardens, schools for SS children, swimming pools, casinos, brothels, hospitals, movie theatres and various small shops.¹²⁹ Within these *Siedlungen*, the SS families lived in small communities with all of the amenities of a small town. The homes of SS families at Dachau, built by prisoners from 1937-1938, were located on a single street known as “Straße der SS,” or SS street. The Dachau commandant and his family lived in a villa, as was most often the case, on a separate street known as “Am Geisterwald.”¹³⁰ The SS officers’ houses in Buchenwald were constructed along an asphalt road paved by camp inmates known as Eicke Street. Eventually, ten luxury villas, equipped with every convenience stood along this road, each villa with massive basements, private garages and spacious terraces with views of the Thuringian countryside.¹³¹

Unbelievable amounts of corruption took place among those living in these villas, especially at Buchenwald under Commandant Karl Koch. Once, in the summer of 1942, Koch sold 200 preserved ducks about to spoil, which he had managed to collect despite rationing, and sold them to the prisoners.¹³² As the SS forced prisoners to work until death, “into these officers’ houses, year in and year out, in quantities difficult to describe, flowed the fruits of an economy built on corruption.”¹³³

Additionally, the number of SS-*Angehörige*, or SS dependents, living in the *Siedlungen* was by no means a small population. For example, between 1940 and 1945, the SS- *Siedlungen* at Auschwitz housed 7,000 SS-*Angehörige*, including women and children.¹³⁴ The SS-*Angehörige* who lived within these communities lived seemingly normal lives despite the gross

¹²⁹ Gudrun Schwarz, *Eine Frau an seiner Seite: Ehefrauen in der „SS-Sippengemeinschaft“* (Hamburg: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997) 112.

¹³⁰ Schwarz, 113.

¹³¹ David A. Hackett, ed. *The Buchenwald Report* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995)43.

¹³² Hackett, 43.

¹³³ Hackett, 43.

¹³⁴ My own translation. Norbert Frei, Thomas Grotum, Jan Parcer, Sybille Steinbacher and Bernd C. Wagner, ed. *Standort-und Kommandanturbefehle des Konzentrationslagers Auschwitz 1940-1945* (Munich: K.G. Saur, 2000) ii.

abnormality of their living arrangement. As evidenced by the presence of zoos, falconries, and swimming pools, *SS-Angehörige* lacked for nothing while camp prisoners longed for an extra ration of bread.

Daily Auschwitz briefings issued by the commandant illustrate the extent to which comfortable living at the *Siedlungen* took place amidst unimaginable atrocity. Within the many briefings issued between 1940 and 1945, Commandant Rudolph Höss¹³⁵ noted upcoming entertainment opportunities for *SS-Angehörige* alongside *Belobigungen*, commendations which recognized the killing totals of particular SS guards. For example, a particular briefing on October 8, 1943, acknowledged the shooting accomplishments of *SS-Rottenführer* Wilhelm Reichel alongside a list of “Lost and Found” items. The inclusion of both of these items in the same brief captures the way in which banal living took place hand in hand with Holocaust atrocities. In this brief, Commandant Höss acknowledged the “vigilance” and “quick-wit” of Wilhelm Reichel, who managed to shoot and kill two prisoners attempting to escape.¹³⁶ After a brief description of the episode, Höss extended his esteemed acknowledgments to Reichel and then quickly moved on to other orders of business, including a list of lost and found items, and an *Aufenthaltsgenehmigung*, or a list of visitor approvals for the upcoming weeks. No line separated the SS murders from the banal; the discussion of one simply flowed into the other.

Likewise, family life for the women and their children living in the *SS-Siedlungen* seems to have operated effortlessly alongside their husbands’ occupational lives. As evidenced by the inclusion of entertainment opportunities alongside murder totals in the Auschwitz briefings, the atrocities on the other side of the fence were a recognized reality which failed to disturb

¹³⁵ Most of the briefings in this collection were written and signed by Commandant Rudolph Höss, although his replacement, Baer, signed some as well.

¹³⁶ Norbert Frei, Thomas Grotum, Jen Parcer, Sybille Steinbacher and Bernd C. Wagner, eds. *Standort-und Kommandanturbefehle des Konzentrationslager Auschwitz 1940-1945* (Munich: K.G. Saur, 200) 340.

everyday living. The briefings included announcements about intramural sports, gym classes for men, women, and children, community nights, and - during the Christmas season - announcements indicating the arrival of Christmas trees for the SS families.¹³⁷

However impervious SS-*Angehörige* were to SS brutalities, everyday life was by no means isolated. The visitor permits listed throughout the collection of Auschwitz briefings document countless spousal visits, giving new meaning to dropping in on a spouse at work. Even children visited their fathers at work (**Figures 11 and 12**). By July 12, 1943, children visiting SS guards on the job had become so commonplace that Commandant Höss included a paragraph on children's visits in his briefing for that day:

I hereby forbid [such visits] and reference as reason the danger posed by an escape attempt and the necessary execution of the weapon from watchtowers. Furthermore, an association of children with prisoners has a moral downside...The SS must give women and children this respective directive and observe that their children remain far from the prisoners and that they do not stop at the barracks or at the work place¹³⁸

As the documentation of spousal visits and Höss' warnings about children's visits indicate, the fence which separated the SS-*Siedlungen* from the camps was extremely permeable and at times nonexistent. This was especially true for wives of SS camp commandants.

Concentration Camp Commandants

Concentration camp commandants usually held ranks hierarchically parallel to that of lieutenant colonel (*Obersturmbannführer*) or major (*Sturmbannführer*) in the army. Because commandants were subordinate to the SS bureaucracy, which operated out of the SS

¹³⁷ Norbert Frei, Thomas Grotum, Jan Parcer, Sybille Steinbacher and Bernd C. Wagner, Eds. *Standort und Kommandanturbefehle des Konzentrationslagers Auschwitz 1940-1945* (Munich: K.G. Saur, 2000) 202.

¹³⁸ Norbert Frei, Thomas Grotum, Jan Parcer, Sybille Steinbacher and Bernd C. Wagner, Eds. *Standort und Kommandanturbefehle des Konzentrationslagers Auschwitz 1940-1945* (Munich: K.G. Saur, 2000) 306.

headquarters in Oranienburg, they fell in the middle of the SS hierarchy.¹³⁹ Although in terms of the entire SS hierarchy the camp commandants occupied a subordinate role to the bureaucracy, in their respective concentration camps, they ruled. In his memoir, Rudolph Höss described his authority as commandant of Auschwitz in the following way¹⁴⁰:

In every concentration camp the true ruler of the camp is the camp commander. There is little doubt that the Kommandant leaves his mark on all of prison life, more or less, depending on his energy and intent. There is also little doubt that the Kommandant sets policy and is the controlling authority and, in the final instance, is responsible for everything...the Kommandant sets the guidelines, makes the regulations, and gives the orders for the whole organization of all prison life as he thinks best.¹⁴¹

In addition to the organization and regulation of the camp, commandants were also responsible for the camp's finances. As a result, they often took bonuses for themselves and became entangled in financial schemes. Karl Koch and Hermann Florstedt, for example, were both sentenced to death by the SS before the end of the war due to their immense corruption at Buchenwald.¹⁴² Aside from the power of the camp's purse strings, the commandant's general authority over the camp allowed for a significant amount of corruption. Rations and restrictions did not seem to apply to them, and as Ruth Göth, wife of the commandant of the Plascow camp, Amon Göth, remembered, "The camp was a kingdom to its commandant, and within it he was its king."¹⁴³

Corruption was prevalent throughout the camp on all levels, but the camp commandant's supreme authority and consequential privilege provided him with an especially large opportunity for corruption. For example, rations on tobacco and wine were especially stringent amongst the

¹³⁹ Segev, 23.

¹⁴⁰ Höss couches this statement in between statements about how the commandant gave the orders but never actually carried them out. He does this in order to save himself from further guilt. He claims that everything, that is, the actual extermination, was carried out by the camp's executive officers. However, throughout the memoir he proudly attests to how orderly he kept his camp and how his authority was supreme. Therefore, we can only read his hesitation in this example as an attempt to protect himself from further scrutiny.

¹⁴¹ Höss, 120.

¹⁴² Segev, 26.

¹⁴³ Segev, 24.

rank and file SS. Yet, Ilse Koch, wife of Buchenwald commander Karl Koch, took baths in Madeira.¹⁴⁴ To finance this luxurious lifestyle, Koch accepted enormous bribes primarily from the criminal in Buchenwald known as Meiners. Meiners administered the prisoners' canteen and created price markups which provided him with profits. Through such schemes, Meiners accumulated 50,000 to 60,000 marks a month, all of which ended up in Koch's pockets.¹⁴⁵ Ilse Koch also reaped the benefits of Meisner's contraband and, on one occasion, received a diamond ring valued at 8,000 dollars procured by Meisner, presumably from a Buchenwald prisoner.¹⁴⁶

Additionally, according to a former Buchenwald inmate, Franz Eichhorn, Commandant Karl Koch seized shipments of food meant to feed the SS staff. Once, Koch seized an entire truckload of lemons for himself and his wife, only distributing what he deemed sufficient to high-ranking SS officers.¹⁴⁷ As these examples demonstrate, Koch operated in a truly arbitrary manner, using his authority to procure luxury for himself and his wife. Though many commandants adhered to strict orders and did not engage in corrupt money garnering schemes, the example of Karl Koch demonstrates the extent to which the position of commandant allowed for fraud.

As wives of commandants, women such as Ilse Koch reaped the benefits of their husband's positions and lived lives of luxury, often at the expense of camp prisoners. Living in the direct vicinity of the concentration camps, the wives of camp commandants pursued agendas to enhance their own material wealth, taking full advantage of their ability to claim prisoners' possessions as their own. Ignoring the brutality transpiring just outside their homes and at times

¹⁴⁴ David A. Hackett, ed. *The Buchenwald Report* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995) 44.

¹⁴⁵ Hackett, 121.

¹⁴⁶ Hackett, 121.

¹⁴⁷ Hackett, 122.

directly participating in it, these women oftentimes abandoned their humanity in favor of material acquisition.

The question of how the wives of camp commandants - and all those who participated in the concentration camp system for that matter - were able to commit such awful crimes and employ such a thick indifference to genocide seems to be the natural question here. Put quite simply, men and women successfully distanced themselves from the prisoners by categorizing the prisoners as subhuman. Women such as Ruth Göth, wife of the commandant at Plascow, Amon Göth subscribed to the idea of the subhuman *Untermensch* and thereby did not view the prisoners as fellow human beings, but as vermin to be exploited and eventually exterminated. Ruth Göth never abandoned her belief in race theory and in an interview with Tom Segev in Munich in 1975, she stated “They were not human like us. They were so foul.”¹⁴⁸ This fervent conviction allowed men and women to distinguish their own humanity from the prisoner’s humanity. Killing prisoners was as banal as swatting an irksome fly. If murdering prisoners was accepted as perfunctory, stealing from them was merely opportunistic. The immorality of stealing from prisoners does not seem to have bothered many of these women. Frau Höss, wife of Auschwitz Commandant Rudolph Höss, for example, was not bothered by unscrupulous profiteering in the least; in fact, she loved her life at Auschwitz, a life built from the pilfered goods of Auschwitz prisoners. Admiring her comfortable lifestyle in her grand villa, she remarked to Stanislaw Dubiel, “*hier will ich leben und sterben*” (I want to live here until I die.)¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Segev, 201.

¹⁴⁹ Deposition of Stanislaw Dubiel on August 7, 1946 in the appendix of Jadwiga Bezwinska, ed. *KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS: Höss, Broad, and Kremer* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1984) 291.

Chapter 4: The Commandant Wives

As the previous chapter illustrated, SS family life and camp happenings occurred alongside one another. Therefore, SS wives who lived in the *Siedlungen* knew a great deal about the atrocities which transpired in the camps just beyond their fences. As Gitta Sereny argued, “No one who has gone into these matters can continue to believe that SS men never told their wives about their activities.”¹⁵⁰ Frau Münzberger, wife of Gustav Münzberger, who served at a euthanasia institute and then at Treblinka, admitted quite comfortably to Sereny after the war that she had most certainly known what her husband did in the camp. She stated, “Well, I knew after a while what he was doing. He wasn’t supposed to say of course, but you know what women are. I probed and probed and finally he told me. It was awful of course, but what could *we* do?”¹⁵¹ Frau Münzberger was acutely aware of what was happening to the Jews and other undesirables in the concentration camps. Most of the SS wives did. The wives of camp commandants arguably knew even more and, married to the supreme camp authority, were in a unique position to take a stand. None of them did.

The following case studies examine the lives of four camp commandant wives: Rosina Kramer, Hedwig Höss, Ilse Koch, and Theresa Stangl. Much of the primary source material in this section comes from postwar interviews with the four women. Therefore, their statements must be read carefully, understanding that much of what they have to say is specious and motivated by their desire to establish their own innocence. Despite this limitation, their statements yield important information about their knowledge of Nazi crimes. Each of these women possessed different degrees of knowledge of Nazi atrocities and are thereby complicit in

¹⁵⁰ Gitta Sereny, *Into That Darkness: An Examination of Conscience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) 106.

¹⁵¹ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 106.

Nazi crimes in different ways, but they are united by both their privileged positions and their failure to protest Nazi racial policies in any meaningful way.

Wifely Devotion: Rosina Kramer:

In December 1931, Joseph Kramer joined the Nazi party and became a member of the SS the following year. In the autumn of 1934, just one year after Hitler came to power, Kramer entered the concentration camp service and remained within that service, without interruption, until the British liberated Bergen-Belsen in April of 1945.¹⁵² Originally trained in Dachau to serve as a commanding officer, Kramer proved himself so successful in this role at the Natzweiler camp that he was appointed commandant of Natzweiler within one year. While Kramer was stationed at Natzweiler, Germany began to put its plan for the systematic extermination of the Jews into practice, and Kramer played a role in the process from the beginning. In August 1943, Kramer supervised the gassing of eighty prisoners at Natzweiler and sent their bodies to the University of Strasbourg for research purposes.¹⁵³ Therefore, his transfer to Auschwitz in May 1944 did not introduce him to gassing practices, though it did place him in charge of extensive gassing systems for the first time. When Kramer arrived in Auschwitz in May 1944, the camp had been divided into three sub camps; Kramer was appointed commandant of Auschwitz II, also known as Birkenau.¹⁵⁴ He served as Birkenau's commandant until he was transferred to Bergen-Belsen to serve as its commandant in December 1944.

Frau Rosina Kramer married Joseph Kramer on October 16, 1937, while he was serving at Natzweiler and, the two lived together as husband and wife until Joseph Kramer's execution in

¹⁵² Raymond Phillips, ed. *The Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-Four Others: The Belsen Trial*. (London: William Hodge and Company, 1949) 156.

¹⁵³ Segev, 51.

¹⁵⁴ Phillips, *The Belsen Trial*, 157.

1945. Though she eventually remarried, changed her name, and moved to a small town where she could maintain anonymity, she curiously ended up spending her retirement a few kilometers from Bergen-Belsen and spoke in idealistic terms about her husband's days with the SS as late as 1975. When asked about her husband's membership in the SS in an interview with Tom Segev on March 5, 1975, Rosina Kramer stated in an eerily worshipful tone, "My husband would always tell me how much the movement changed his attitude towards the future and to life in general. The movement gave him great hope. He would say that for him, Nazism was a great emotional experience...It allowed him to believe in himself once again."¹⁵⁵ Thirty years later, Frau Kramer still spoke of her husband's membership in the SS as a type of redemption for his lost soul. There is nothing critical in this statement which one would expect time and hindsight would have encouraged. Instead, her words border on reverence and adulation.

Additionally, the outcome of the war seemed to have little effect on Frau Kramer's opinion of the SS. She claimed her husband "gave himself over to Nazism with all his heart. I think he remained ever grateful to his movement. Without the party and the SS he would have remained a failure for the rest of his life."¹⁵⁶ Insisting thirty years after the war that her husband would have remained a failure for the rest of his life had he not joined the SS speaks to an implausible ignorance. Considering that her husband's time in the SS resulted in his execution, the inverse of her statement seems true. Surely, given his execution for war crimes, she could not think that the SS made his life successful. Her persistent belief that the SS saved her husband from failure illustrates the extent of her delusion. Frau Kramer, with full knowledge of her

¹⁵⁵ Segev, 49.

¹⁵⁶ Segev, 49.

husband's position as commandant at Natzweiler, Birkenau, and Bergen-Belsen, and of the atrocities which transpired in both camps,¹⁵⁷ still could not admit to the sinister nature of the SS.

Perhaps if Frau Kramer had not lived on the concentration camp grounds, her lasting adulation for the SS would sound deluded, but slightly more understandable. However, Frau Kramer, like the many other wives of camp commandants, lived in the SS-*Siedlungen*. As she stated at her husband's trial after the war, while her husband served in three different concentration camps, "except for a few short intervals I have been always with him."¹⁵⁸ Additionally, Frau Kramer visited her husband on the job on Sundays, which were her husband's off-duty days.¹⁵⁹ On these days, she actually walked through the camps and undoubtedly witnessed the atrocities occurring within them.

In contrast to many of the other commandant wives, Frau Kramer had little trouble admitting to her knowledge of camp proceedings after the war, undoubtedly finding it pointless to deny knowledge of atrocities occurring just beyond her front door. During cross examination at her husband's trial by Colonel Backhouse, she made the following statements:

Colonel Backhouse: You said that Höss had been sent to Auschwitz for the incoming transports. What transports were these?

Frau Kramer: I believe these were the transports destined for the gas chambers.

Colonel Backhouse: You knew about the gas chambers then?

Frau Kramer: Everybody in Auschwitz knew about them.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ By 1972, Frau Kramer had sat through the Belsen Trial and listened to the allegations against her husband. By the time she made these statements to Tom Segev, she was completely aware (though perhaps still in denial) of the charges brought against her husband and the atrocities which transpired within the concentration camps.

¹⁵⁸ Phillips, 182.

¹⁵⁹ Phillips, 182.

¹⁶⁰ Phillips, 183.

Quite matter-of-factly, Frau Kramer admitted to her knowledge of the gas chambers. Curiously, the prosecution did not press further. The question following this admission returned to her husband's own guilt. Though other women were on trial for war crimes at the Belsen Trial, it appears as though Frau Kramer's own guilt was only important insofar as it cast light on her husband's wrongdoing.

Interestingly, while she admitted to her knowledge of the systematic gassing of the prisoners and conceded that indeed everybody in Auschwitz knew about the proceedings, she vehemently denied her husband's involvement in extermination. When asked if her husband ever mistreated any prisoners her answer was quite simply, "No."¹⁶¹ Other sources, including a *New York Times* article written on the Belsen Trial, indicate that Frau Kramer cared less about admitting to her own knowledge of the Holocaust than about admitting her husband's own involvement. The *New York Times* reporter who observed the Belsen Trial reported on October 11, 1945, that Frau Kramer called her husband a "kind-hearted family man who worried because prisoners had to sleep on bare floors."¹⁶² In response to Frau Kramer's continued attempts to depict her husband as kind, other Nazis on trial allegedly giggled, especially female SS guards Irma Grese, Irma Lothe, and Herta Ehlert, who reportedly "shook with laughter."¹⁶³ Another cause for laughter was Frau Kramer's assertion that her husband understood his duty as Commandant to be that of a benevolent caretaker. Under oath, she stated, "He thought that his duty was to take care of them [the prisoners] and that is what he was doing night and day."¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Phillips, 183.

¹⁶² "WIFE SAYS KRAMER KNEW HE DID WRONG: Other Prisoners Laugh as She Asserts He Loved Family, Worried Over Victims Says He Knew He Did Wrong Calls Hadamar Killings Merciful." *New York Times* (1857-Current file) [New York, N.Y.] 11 Oct. 1945,4-4. ProQuest Historical Newspapers *The New York Times* (1851 - 2005).

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

Frau Kramer remained faithful to her husband's memory many years after his death and never appeared to question his involvement in concentration camp atrocities. When Tom Segev interviewed her for his book *Soldiers of Evil* in March 1975, she continued to assert her husband's innocence and seemed to have given little thought to her own guilt. Ultimately Frau Kramer believed that what happened to the Jews was unavoidable and that she and her husband had been merely pawns in an inevitable historical happening. In one of her many conversations with Segev, she noted, "Papa¹⁶⁵ believed that everything happened as it was supposed to happen" and that they needed to be thankful that they were not born Jews, since that would mean they would have to die.¹⁶⁶ According to Rosina Kramer, the heavens willed the extermination of the Jews, and her husband merely stood by, a passive observer of inevitable historical happenings. The brutality of Joseph Kramer is well-documented, and the assertion by his wife that he merely watched others carry out extermination speaks to a deluded wifely devotion. Joseph Kramer served as the commandant of several concentration camps and, as the supreme authority at the camps, undoubtedly played a leading role in extermination and torture; Rosina Kramer remained by his side through it all, preferring to believe in her husband's implausible innocence.

During cross-examination at the Belsen Trial on October 10, 1945, Major Winwood asked a question of Joseph Kramer that I believe should have been asked of his wife as well. After several questions pertaining to Kramer's devotion to National Socialism, Major Winwood asked Kramer, "Did you prefer to be a party to wholesale murder rather than be arrested yourself?" and Kramer replied "Yes."¹⁶⁷ It appears as though Rosina Kramer made a similar, critical decision out of fear; she preferred to pretend her husband was a benevolent man who

¹⁶⁵ In all of the statements I have read from Rosina Kramer she refers to her husband as "Papa."

¹⁶⁶ Segev, 53.

¹⁶⁷ Phillips, 181.

distressed over the dismal living conditions of his prisoners rather than face reality. In this way, she too was a party to wholesale murder

The Unprincipled Opportunist: Hedwig Höss:

Between October 1946 and April 1947, Rudolph Höss, the former commandant of Auschwitz wrote his memoirs while sitting in a jail cell in Warsaw, Poland. At the suggestion of the Polish War Crimes Commission, Höss wrote about the implementation of the Final Solution, camp regulations, and detailed many of the gruesome crimes he oversaw, all while waiting to be sentenced to death. Within the memoirs are detailed descriptions of plans for mass annihilation and an obvious obsession with order, often in place of conscience. Alongside his description of the gas chambers and the daily arrival of Jewish prisoners are candid portrayals of his family life, the family's handsome villa on the Auschwitz grounds, and their material comfort. Interestingly, each description of family life is followed by an insistence upon his family's innocence, especially the innocence of his wife, Hedwig Höss. As he wrote repeatedly throughout his memoir, most notably after his detailed description of gas chamber mechanics, "My wife never understood my troubled moods and merely blamed them on the problems connected with my work."¹⁶⁸ At Himmler's insistence, Höss allegedly discussed the plans to institute the Final Solution with nobody, not even his wife. Höss took great pains in his memoirs to maintain his wife's ignorance of the atrocities taking place in her backyard, frequently emoting about the private nightmare he had to reluctantly keep to himself.

Despite his insistence to the contrary, Höss' descriptions of his familial relationships make it rather clear that Hedwig Höss understood what transpired at Auschwitz and knew more than her husband was prepared to admit. Even before Frau Höss had attained concrete details,

¹⁶⁸ Höss, 163

her husband's admitted withdrawn behavior surely aroused her curiosity. During his time as commandant at Auschwitz, Höss described himself as terribly conflicted: "More and more I was withdrawing into myself. I buried myself in my work and became unapproachable and visibly hardened. My family suffered because of it, particularly my wife, because I was unbearable to live with."¹⁶⁹ Höss' withdrawn behavior caused his family great suffering and clearly indicated that the work he engaged in outside of their home was having a negative effect upon him. Additionally, her husband's hardened nature was not a development Frau Höss ignored or took lightly. As Höss wrote, "My wife tried repeatedly to tear me away from this isolation. She invited friends from outside the camp to visit us, as well as my comrades from the camp, hoping that this would draw me out and help me to relax."¹⁷⁰ Hedwig Höss' concern for her husband's mood, as illustrated by her continued efforts to bring him out of his depression, underscores her understanding of the intensity of his work. Whether or not she knew at this time what exactly that work entailed remains unclear, but she undoubtedly had her suspicions.

The evidence of Frau Höss' extensive interaction with both male and female Auschwitz guards further contradicts her husband's assertion of her innocence. SS guards frequently attended dinner at the Höss Villa and spent hours drinking and undoubtedly sharing stories about camp life (**Figures 13 and 14**). Aniela Bednarska, a household servant of the Höss family, noted after the war that Frau Höss threw receptions twice a month for Auschwitz SS guards and their respective wives.¹⁷¹ Lower-level camp guards and their spouses attended these bi-monthly gatherings alongside SS officers, visiting SS members, and Reich dignitaries such as Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS and overseer of the concentration camps and extermination camps.

¹⁶⁹ Höss, 125.

¹⁷⁰ Höss, 124.

¹⁷¹ Gudrun Schwarz, *Eine Frau an seiner Seite: Ehefrauen in der SS-Sippengemeinschaft* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1997) 126.

Himmler visited the Höss Villa twice, and according to Stanislaw Dubiel, spoke cordially with Frau Höss on each occasion. During these visits, Himmler would hold the Höss children on his knees like a loved relative. The photographs of ‘*Onkel Heini*’ playing with the children were enlarged and hung on the walls of the Höss home.¹⁷² Throughout her time at Auschwitz from late 1941 to the summer of 1944, Frau Höss hosted the masterminds of the Holocaust and their minions within her home. They enjoyed the comforts of warm food, drink, and companionship while Jewish prisoners suffered a stone’s throw away.

Additionally, Rudolph Höss noted in his memoirs that female guards often approached Frau Höss for relief and comfort from the agony they endured on the job. As Höss described, “Several of them poured out their troubles to me, and even more so to my wife. We could only console them by pointing out that at the end of the war their troubles would be over.”¹⁷³ It is difficult to believe that the many female Auschwitz guards who came to Frau Höss for empathy never mentioned the horrendous atrocities and systematic gassing of the Jewish prisoners. Witnessing the needless death of innocent people would naturally be at the center of their grief and troubles, and the aspect of their work experience for which they sought comfort. Despite this rather blatant indication that Frau Höss was well aware of Auschwitz’s function, her husband continued to insist upon her innocence in his memoirs. However, slips such as this, however slight, seem to reveal Frau Höss’ deep knowledge.

Perhaps the greatest evidence of Frau Höss’ knowledge of Nazi crimes is the location of the Höss Villa as it was located on the northwest corner of the Auschwitz grounds. Situated in the direct vicinity of the bunkers and only separated from the camp by a barbed wire fence, the screams of tortured prisoners could be easily heard from within the home. Commandant Höss

¹⁷² Deposition of Stanislaw Dubiel on August 7, 1946 in the appendix of Jadwiga Bezwinska, ed. *KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS: Höss, Broad, and Kremer* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1984) 288.

¹⁷³ Höss, 149.

allegedly complained that the screams of tortured prisoners disturbed his midday naps.¹⁷⁴ If the screams could be heard from inside the villa and were loud enough to disturb one's sleep, then Frau Höss also assuredly heard them from her flower garden paradise that stretched up to the barbed wire fence separating their peaceful refuge from concentration camp horrors.

If the allegations of Hedwig Höss' knowledge of the atrocities of Auschwitz can be supported by such a vast amount of evidence, why did her husband, in his memoirs, repeatedly lie about her involvement? As Stephen Paskuly writes in the introduction to the Höss memoirs, "Where Höss does consciously lie is in regard to his wife, Hedwig, and her knowledge of the mass killings, in order to protect her and their children from the inevitable postwar stigma and finger pointing."¹⁷⁵ If Rudolph Höss deliberately omitted information in his memoirs so as to protect his wife, the question becomes, how much did he omit and how much did Hedwig truly know?

On the eve of his sentencing, Höss spoke with the Nürnberg prison psychiatrist G.M. Gilbert about his relationship with his wife while they lived on the grounds of Auschwitz. During one of their several sessions, Höss revealed the intricacies of his marital relationship, insisting upon normalcy until pressed further by Gilbert: "Well it was normal- but after my wife found out about what I was doing, we rarely had desire for intercourse. Things looked normal outwardly, but I guess there was an estrangement, now that I look back..."¹⁷⁶ According to Höss, after his wife discovered the extent of his involvement in the mass killings, intercourse between the couple occurred infrequently. Höss described a woman disgusted with the brutality carried out by her husband who could no longer bring herself to be with him in a physical way. Yet, a woman

¹⁷⁴ Schwarz, 118.

¹⁷⁵ Stephen Paskuly, ed. Introduction to *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz* (New York: De Capo, 1996) 21

¹⁷⁶G. M. Gilbert. *Nuremberg Diary* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1947) 259

profoundly revolted by her husband's actions still does not illuminate the entire picture. It does not, for example, nullify her enthusiasm for making personal use of prison labor, ransacking repositories, or continuing to live in the villa at Auschwitz which she referred to as Paradise. Despite her alleged horror, Frau Höss continued to live comfortably in her villa. As Höss described in his memoirs, "Yes, my family had it good in Auschwitz, every wish that my wife or my children had was fulfilled. The children could live free and easy. My wife had her flower paradise."¹⁷⁷ As the following anecdotes will suggest, Frau Höss certainly did not allow her disgust for happenings at Auschwitz to prevent her from reaping the benefits of her status and prestige.

During their first year on the Auschwitz grounds, Frau Höss urged her husband to establish a sewing studio staffed with female prisoners to sew her extravagant clothing. Because of mounting jealousy amongst the other wives, the sewing studio eventually came to produce high fashion for many wives of SS officials. Each prisoner produced two dresses per week and an SS official picked up the new dresses every Saturday afternoon. Only if one of the women were especially pleased with a particular dress did they reward the imprisoned seamstress with an extra portion of food. The female prisoners sewed everything from extravagant formal wear to everyday clothing, providing the SS wives, including Frau Höss, with free labor and free clothing.¹⁷⁸

Additionally, Auschwitz prisoners including Stanislaw Dubiel acquired the material for Frau Höss' gowns from repositories containing the confiscated belongings of Jewish men, women, and children sent to the gas chambers. Besides clothing, these repositories contained everything from basic household items including sugar and flour to jewelry to thousand-dollar

¹⁷⁷ Höss 164

¹⁷⁸ Irene Guether, *Nazi Chic?* 5.

bills. Dubiel testified in 1946 that he took “sugar, flour, margarine, various baking powders, condiments for soup, macaroni, oat-flakes, cocoa, cinnamon cream of wheat, peas and other food-stuffs,” and noted that Frau Höss “never had enough of them; she would always start talking about what she needed for her household, thus letting me know what I should supply her with.”¹⁷⁹ What Frau Höss did not need for herself she sent to her relatives in Germany, thus using the camp repositories to satisfy the tastes of her extended family as well. Frau Höss had accumulated such an enormous amount of pilfered goods that four large vans were required to move the Höss family out of the Villa when Frau Höss and the children went to join Rudolph Höss in Berlin after his transfer.¹⁸⁰

Rudolph Höss seemed to forget the endless luxury incurred by his family from these repositories when he asserted in his memoirs, “The newly arriving treasure was demoralizing for the SS, who were not always strong enough to resist the temptation of these valuables which lay within such easy reach. Not even the death penalty or a severe prison sentence was enough to stop them.”¹⁸¹ It appears his own wife could not resist the temptation of the valuables taken from Nazi victims. Höss’ statement here illustrates yet another example of “white lies and black lies, attempts at self-justification, and embellishment”¹⁸² in an effort to protect his wife from official and unofficial judgment after his death.

Furthermore, according to Stanislaw Dubiel, a malicious anti-Semitism accompanied Frau Höss’ unprincipled opportunism. As Dubiel testified:

They [Rudolph and Hedwig Höss] were both bitter enemies of the Poles and the Jews. They hated everything Polish...She [Hedwig Höss] said about the Jews that they must

¹⁷⁹ Deposition of Stanislaw Dubiel on August 7, 1946 in the appendix of Jadwiga Bezwinska, ed. *KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS: Höss, Broad, and Kremer* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1984) 289.

¹⁸⁰ Deposition of Stanislaw Dubiel on August 7, 1946 in the appendix of Jadwiga Beswinska, ed. *KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS: Höss, Broad, and Kremer* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1984) 291.

¹⁸¹ Höss, 41.

¹⁸² Höss, 3.

disappear from the face of the earth to the last man, and at the proper time the turn of even the English Jews would come.¹⁸³

Based on this testimony from Dubiel, it seems unlikely that Frau Höss would have protested the extermination process overseen by her husband. On the contrary, her apocalyptic language seems to insist that she would have welcomed extermination if not zealously supported it. Either way, it is clear that Frau Höss was not only an unscrupulous opportunist; she was also an anti-Semite who supported the elimination of the Jewish race.

Despite Rudolph Höss' concerted effort to exonerate his wife from blame, the testimony of Stanislaw Dubiel coupled with Höss' unintended poignant disclosures reveal a disturbing story of a woman who reaped the benefits of her position as the commandant's wife, with little concern for morality. Frau Höss lived in a luxurious villa on the grounds of Auschwitz, complete with a flower garden, and used prisoner labor to satisfy her desire for a lavish lifestyle. For Frau Höss, Auschwitz was a Nazi fitting room.¹⁸⁴

Ilse Koch “The Bitch of Buchenwald”

Karl Koch met his second wife, Ilse Koch(1906-1967) in 1934 while serving as the commandant of Sachsenburg. At the time they met, Ilse was already a party member and was working as Koch's secretary. Ilse allegedly found Karl's SS uniform attractive and the two began a relationship. Even before they were married, Ilse and Karl would walk through the camps together observing the prisoners.¹⁸⁵ After a long courtship, the two were married in accordance with SS pagan ritual on May 29, 1937. The Koch ceremony took place at midnight in an oak grove near Sachsenhausen, where Koch was serving at the time (**Figure 15**). The bride and

¹⁸³ Deposition of Stanislaw Dubiel on August 7, 1946 in the appendix of Jadwiga Bezwinska, ed. *KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS: Höss, Broad, and Kremer* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1984) 292.

¹⁸⁴ d'Almeida, 210.

¹⁸⁵ Segev, 142.

groom were surrounded by a circle of SS men from Koch's unit, and each man extended his arm into the circle in salute.¹⁸⁶ A few months later, in July 1937, the Kochs moved to Buchenwald where Karl became the new camp's commandant. He remained the commandant of Buchenwald until the Kochs received a punitive transfer to Majdanek in 1942. In 1944, Karl Koch was ordered to return to Buchenwald where he was tried for corruption and was consequently executed by the SS in April 1945.

When the Kochs first arrived in Buchenwald, they immediately began to assert their power. Buchenwald "became the personal kingdom of Koch and his wife. And they were its absolute rulers. There they built their opulent house and there they gave birth to their three children."¹⁸⁷ A large villa was constructed to house the Koch family just outside the camp gates, and at the special request of Ilse, a private riding hall was constructed in 1939 with building costs estimated to be around a quarter of a million marks.¹⁸⁸ During the construction of the riding hall, between twenty-five and thirty prisoners died because Ilse insisted that the construction of the enormous wooden building, adorned on the inside with wall mirrors, be constructed at an accelerated pace.¹⁸⁹ After the riding hall was complete, Ilse spent a few mornings a week riding there and demanded that the SS band, made up of prisoners, provide musical accompaniment for these morning rides.¹⁹⁰ Ilse and her family wanted for nothing.

As evidenced by her luxurious lifestyle, Ilse Koch regarded herself as a member of the new nobility. To emphasize her royalty, Ilse ordered prisoners to address her as *gnädige Frau* or "most gracious lady," a term used to address the German noble lady in the eighteenth and

¹⁸⁶ Günther Morsch, ed. *Von der Sachsenburg nach Sachsenhausen: Bilder aus dem Fotoalbum eines KZ-Kommandanten* (Berlin: Metropol, 2007) 337.

¹⁸⁷ Segev, 142.

¹⁸⁸ Hackett, 43.

¹⁸⁹ Hackett, 43.

¹⁹⁰ Hackett, 43.

nineteenth century. Those who did not address her by this title were beaten. As a noble lady, she was provided with domestic servants to perform all household chores. As Buchenwald survivor Kurt Dietz remembered:

At a prescribed time I had to wake the children, wash and dress them, take them to the toilet, and wipe their bottoms. Then the dog had to be fed and taken for a walk and the coffee made and brought to the ‘gracious lady’ in her bed, in which she often lay shamelessly uncovered¹⁹¹

Kurt Dietz and Koch’s other domestic servants performed all of the household duties which the Nazi housewife was to perform dutifully and joyfully. Koch used her free time around the house to torture prisoners with her sexuality. As Dietz noted, she would lie about her house in revealing outfits, tempting prisoners functioning as servants to stare at her. Punishment awaited those who so much as glanced at her provocative dress.

Furthermore, flaunting her body as a means to torture prisoners was not an activity reserved for her home. At her trial after the war, reports were submitted which recounted how Ilse liked to walk through the camp dressed provocatively, note the prisoners who turned to look at her, and then demand that they be punished for their audacity.¹⁹² Dr. Konrad Morgen, the man who led the corruption investigation against the Kochs in 1944, testified against Ilse Koch at all three of her postwar trials and in 1971 told David Binder, a special reporter to *The New York Times*, that Ilse was “no innocent angel. She was a hussy who rode on horseback in sexy underwear in front of the prisoners and then noted down for punishment the numbers of those who looked at her. She lay around in her garden in front of prisoners. Simply primitive.”¹⁹³ Her sexual perversity also took a voyeuristic form. On a particular Sunday in February 1938, Ilse and four other SS officers’ wives stood at the barbed wire fence to watch prisoners who were forced

¹⁹¹ Hackett, 336.

¹⁹² Segev, 143.

¹⁹³ David Binder, “Ilse Koch’s Posthumous Rehabilitation Sought by Son.” *The New York Times*. Proquest Historical Newspapers *The New York Times* (1951-2005) May 7, 1971. pg 8.

to stand naked at roll call. They stayed and stared lewdly at the prisoners who were forced to stand there for three hours.¹⁹⁴

Though Ilse Koch had no formal authority over the camp, she used her position as the commandant's wife to satisfy her sadistic urges alongside her sexual perversions. As Buchenwald's queen, Ilse Koch made "sport of tormenting inmates and selecting them for death" by riding her horse through the camp, whipping any prisoner who "caught her attention."¹⁹⁵ The West German court which convicted Ilse in 1949 included numerous accounts of Ilse's sadism in its guilty verdict. Ilse beat countless prisoners with her own hands and ordered her husband or other SS guards to beat others. As the camp commandant's wife, SS guards at Buchenwald obliged her every whim and often beat or kicked a prisoner to death at her instigation.¹⁹⁶ The court argued that such beatings brought her sexual pleasure and a psychiatrist who testified at her trial diagnosed sexual aggression as an explanation for her extreme sadism.¹⁹⁷

Ilse Koch so terrified the prisoners that she became known as "die Hexe von Buchenwald," or "the witch of Buchenwald." At some point, this reference was mistranslated, and Koch became known to the American Press as "the bitch of Buchenwald," but her reputation for brutality is captured in both epithets. Koch was a known and feared woman amongst the prisoners. Furthermore, Koch not only tormented prisoners while they were alive, but used their dead bodies for one of the most disturbing projects to emerge from the Holocaust.

The most contested of accusations against Ilse Koch surfaced during her trial in 1947. The prosecution presented several prisoners who testified that Ilse would walk through the

¹⁹⁴ Hackett, 143.

¹⁹⁵ Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany*. (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2001) 113.

¹⁹⁶ Arthur L. Smith, *Die Hexe von Buchenwald*. (Köln: Böla und Cie, 1983) 37.

¹⁹⁷ *Justiz und NS Verbrechen: Sammlung Deutscher Strafurteile Wegen Nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945-1966*, vol. VIII, Univerity Press, Amsterdam, 1966, pp-30-137 as referenced by Tom Segev in *Soldiers of Evil* pp. 143.

camps looking for prisoners with distinctive tattoos, order those prisoners to be killed, and then demand that the tattooed skin be fashioned into household objects.¹⁹⁸ Accusations as to Ilse's involvement in the tattoo project arose at both her trial in 1947 and at her retrial by the West Germans in 1950. The original indictment against her read:

In the concentration camp workshops, commodities including lampshades were manufactured out of human skin. A table lamp, whose cover was made of tattooed skin and whose stand was made of a prisoner's skeleton whereby the light was turned on by pressing a white button on the toe, was given to Koch as a birthday present and brought back to the Koch Villa. Here [in the Koch Villa], all visitors would be shown the lamp. Also here were the shrunken heads and other skulls...It is no longer possible to know who first came up with this idea. However it is certain that the defendant [Ilse Koch] was significantly involved in its implementation.¹⁹⁹

Ever since the Military Governor of the American occupied zone reduced Ilse's prison sentence, ruling that the bulk of evidence brought against her had been hearsay, Ilse's involvement in the manufacturing of tattooed skin has been contested. Most of the works consulted for this thesis insist that, regardless of whether it was Ilse's idea to manufacture human skin, she certainly played a significant role in the process. Based on the other examples of Ilse's sadism, the idea that she played a role in fashioning household objects out of human skin is not unfounded.

Ilse Koch's involvement in the tattoo project has long been contested, but the fact that lampshades and other objects were made from the skins of prisoners is indisputable. Aside from the many photographs used during the postwar trials as evidence of unprecedented, organized cruelty, several testimonies from both concentration camp survivors and former Nazis themselves attest to the existence of such a practice. For example, Martin Bormann, the oldest son of Martin and Gerda Bormann, told Gitta Sereny about his own personal encounter with such items at a therapy group for children of high-ranking Nazis in 1990. Home at the Berghof for the

¹⁹⁸ Emil Carlebach, Willy Schmidt, and Ulrich Schneider, eds. *Buchenwald ein Konzentrationslager: Berichte, Bilder, Dokumente* (Bonn: Paul-Rugenstein Verlag, 2000) 81.

¹⁹⁹ My own translation. Emil Carlebach, Willy Schmidt, and Ulrich Schneider, eds. *Buchenwald ein Konzentrationslager: Berichte, Bilder, Dokumente* (Bonn: Paul-Rugenstein Verlag, 2000) 81.

holidays in 1944, the young Martin Bormann was told to follow Frau Hedwig Potthast,²⁰⁰ Himmler's mistress, to the attic of her new house. There, Frau Potthast showed her guest Himmler's special collection of human furniture. Martin Bormann remembered:

When she opened the door and we flocked in, we didn't understand what the objects in that room were- until she explained, quite sarcastically, you know...It was tables and chairs made of parts of human bodies. There was a chair...the seat was a human pelvis, the legs human legs---on human feet. And then she picked up a copy of *Mein Kampf* from a pile of them...She showed us the cover---made of human skin...²⁰¹

Based on the other evidence of sadism and cruelty, it is not so difficult to imagine Ilse Koch taking part in this endeavor as well. It does not appear that Ilse had any lines she would not cross. Though it has never been categorically proven, Ilse Koch's name has become inextricably linked to the tattooed skin project, and given her brutal nature, not wrongfully so.

Ultimately, the example of Ilse Koch tells the story of a private woman who used her position as wife of a commandant to live out her perverse fantasies. She not only lived a luxurious lifestyle funded by the confiscated wealth of incoming prisoners, but personally beat innocent inmates and singled out for death anyone who caught her eye.

Blinded by Love: Theresa Stangl

According to her mother, Theresa Stangl, born Theresa Eidenbröck, the oldest of five children, was a precocious child. At the time of her birth in 1907, her parents owned a successful and well-established family business in Steyr, a province in Upper Austria. Although Theresa's father eventually ran his business into the ground, the family managed to maintain a comfortable lifestyle and held on to enough money to finance Theresa's rather extensive education.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Himmler acquired a second property near Berchtesgaden to house his 'second family' with Hedwig Potthast, his former secretary. Together they had two children. – Gitta Sereny, *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth*, 309.

²⁰¹ Sereny, *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth*, 309-310.

²⁰² Gitta Sereny, *Into That Darkness: An Examination of Conscience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) 41-42.

According to Theresa's sister Heli Eidenbröck, their mother insisted that the family devote a significant portion of the money to Theresa's education and as a result "she was given all kinds of opportunities we never had. My mother thought she was so clever, so pretty. She went to boarding school you know, a convent. She really became quite different to the rest of us. We had nothing to say to each other..."²⁰³ Though Heli insisted in later years that the two became closer and "better friends than they had been," she had been acutely aware during her childhood of Theresa's separateness as smarter, prettier, and ultimately more loved by her mother than the other four children.

Theresa herself noted her superiority to the other children in an interview with Gitta Sereny in 1972, and remembered being proud of her academic accolades. When asked about her weaknesses she replied, "Weaknesses? Yes, I had weaknesses, but it's only now I realize what they were: I was proud of being clever in school, of always having the best marks; the teacher used to say to my mother, 'I can't measure her by the class average-it doesn't apply to her.'"²⁰⁴ Treated reverently by her mother, Theresa grew up imbued with a sense of her own separateness and self-importance which appears to have manifested itself most prominently in her post-war assertions of her own innocence.

The young Theresa enrolled in a school for social work in 1928, though her true passions remained theatre and dance. Shortly after, she met her future husband, the infamous Franz Stangl under whose tenure as commandant of Treblinka, the largest of the five Nazi extermination camps, 900,000 Jews were murdered.²⁰⁵ Upon meeting him she remembered "The moment I saw him I said to myself, here is someone I like. I liked his looks, his manners, just everything about

²⁰³ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 43.

²⁰⁴ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 43.

²⁰⁵ The estimated total for Jews killed in Treblinka under Franz Stangl is 900,000 though many say the total was actually higher. Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 21.

him.”²⁰⁶ Though she graduated from social work school in 1932 and worked as a governess in Florence for the princely family of Corsini, she returned to be with Franz two and a half years later, and the two were married in October of 1935.²⁰⁷

Franz Stangl’s ambition took him far. He began as an Austrian police officer and ended his career as a concentration camp commandant. Theresa was drawn to this ambition and was exceedingly proud of his many promotions. However, Theresa insisted that Franz’s Nazi Party membership served as a significant blow to their relationship, mostly it seems, because he had lied about it:

I have always had a feeling for truth, a kind of hunch if you like, even about future events...And the thought that he had lied to me all this time, he whom I believed incapable of lying...You see I was an Austrian, with all my heart and soul. And then, I was devout- I always have been. What I believed in happened to be the Catholic Church; it was the Church of my country and I was brought up in it. But mainly I just believed in God. And to think-oh, it was a terrible blow, just a terrible blow. My man...a Nazi...It was our first real conflict- more than a fight. It went deep.²⁰⁸

It is impossible to know how reliable this statement is; it is perfectly plausible that Theresa commandeered the memory and melded it to reflect favorably upon her. Regardless, despite her alleged anger and disgust, Theresa Stangl stood by her husband all the way to Treblinka and through to the end of the war.

Given the things she would witness, and the corresponding lies she would force herself to believe, Theresa’s thoughts on truth are especially interesting here. According to this quote, Theresa always believed strongly in the importance of truth, a mindset she claimed was rooted in her Catholic faith. Yet, her references to her faith in the Catholic Church and God sound ironic and disturbing beside the passive stance she would later take toward her husband’s occupation. Her deep faith in a religion which ostensibly stands for peace and justice is violently contradicted

²⁰⁶ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 44.

²⁰⁷ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 43-44.

²⁰⁸ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 47.

by her knowledge of death camp atrocities and her corresponding inaction. Apparently her “feeling for truth” did not cause a repulsion great enough to abandon a man who oversaw extermination.

After Franz Stangl joined the Nazi party, he continued to advance within its ranks. By the time Franz Stangl arrived at Sobibor in 1942 to replace SS-Obstürmführer Imfried Eberl as camp commandant, he was already a veteran of the T-4 Euthanasia Institute at Schloss Hartheim.²⁰⁹ Familiar with the practice of gassing undesirables, while at Sobibor, he helped to erect the camp’s extermination facilities. When he arrived at Sobibor for the first time, only four buildings stood: the Sobibor railway station, the station building, a forester’s hut, and a barn.²¹⁰ A German staff along with Ukrainian guards and a group of twenty-five Jewish prisoners built the extermination facilities from scratch, though Stangl claimed he never knew what he was building. When they had finished constructing the first gas chamber, the German staff tried out the mechanism on the twenty-five Jewish men who had helped them to construct it.²¹¹ Sobibor became fully operational in May 1942. One month later in June 1942, Frau Theresa Stangl, still at home in Austria, wrote to her husband informing him that she had been requested to supply details about their children’s ages.²¹² She had been granted a visit to Poland.

Soon after Theresa had written to her husband about the age-request forms, she arrived in Poland with her two daughters who were six and four years old at the time. The family stayed approximately twenty miles from the camp in a town called Chelm in the house of the chief

²⁰⁹ Tiergartenstrasse 4, frequently referred to as T-4 was the location of a nondescript villa in Berlin where the first secret operation to begin “mercy-killings” of the mentally and physically handicapped was orchestrated. While none of the office workers, so called “desk murderers” at T-4 ever actually killed anybody, it was here where the idea of euthanasia as a systematic process began.- Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 49.

²¹⁰ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 108.

²¹¹ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 114-115.

²¹² Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 114.

camp surveyor Baurath Moser.²¹³ Wanting to spend more time with his family, Franz Stangl moved his wife and two daughters into a fish-hatchery belonging to Count Chelmicki, which was approximately five kilometers from the Sobibor camp.²¹⁴ While staying with the Chelmickis, Theresa began to understand the dynamics of her husband's job; one of Franz Stangl's co-workers drunkenly told her of the fate of the Jews in Sobibor.

According to Frau Stangl, she was so distraught by the idea of her husband taking part in these extermination efforts that she met him on the path he took home from the camp. After she confronted him, he replied that his work was purely administrative, similar to the work he did while at T-4. Following Franz's initial denial, Theresa remembered the conversation proceeded as follows: "I said 'how can you *be* there and have nothing to do with it?' And he answered 'My work is purely administrative and I am there to build-to supervise construction, that's all.' - 'You mean you don't see it happen?' I asked. 'Oh yes,' he answered. 'I see it. But I don't *do* anything to anybody.'"²¹⁵ It appears this explanation satisfied Theresa. While in her interview with Gitta Sereny in the 1970s she claimed she cried, and did not let him touch her for several days, she admitted, "I finally allowed myself to be convinced that his role in the camp was purely administrative-of course, I *wanted* to be convinced, didn't I?"²¹⁶ She had traveled to Sobibor, stayed five kilometers from the extermination center, heard from her husband himself that he watched the exterminations, and she still did nothing.

It is difficult to believe that Frau Stangl, a woman whom a teacher had described as beyond averages, could have been so deluded. Even a person of limited intelligence could have

²¹³ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 131.

²¹⁴ The distance of the fish-hatchery from the camp has been disputed. Stangl claimed it was five kilometers from the camp, but a Polish man by the name of Pan Gerung, the custodian of Sobibor, claimed "But the fish-hatchery was four kilometers from the camp, through the woods."-Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 132.

²¹⁵ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 136.

²¹⁶ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 137.

made the connections she allegedly failed to make. For example, she conceded that her husband had told her he was the *Höchste Charge*²¹⁷ at Sobibor, but did not understand that he was the camp commandant. She stated “Of course, I didn’t know he was the commandant: I never knew that. He told me he was the *Höchste Charge*. I asked what that meant and he said again he was in charge of construction and that he enjoyed his work.”²¹⁸ Apparently, in Theresa’s mind, “highest charge” did not translate to “in charge.”

Frau Stangl allegedly retained her innocence as to her husband’s authoritative position when he was transferred from Sobibor to Treblinka in September of 1942 as well: “At Christmas, you see, he had told me again that he was the highest ranking officer in Treblinka and I had asked him- again -what that meant. Because he’d never mentioned being Kommandant - never. He answered that it meant everyone had to defer to him, and do what he said”²¹⁹ The distinction Frau Stangl continued to draw between ‘highest ranking officer’ and ‘commandant’ appears ludicrous and indicative of the enormous effort she employed to continue her comfortable delusion. She understood that the other SS officers in the camp deferred to her husband’s authority, yet convinced herself that he did not occupy the authoritative position within the camp. While these distinctions appear utterly irrational, they are perfectly understandable; if everyone had to defer to her husband’s authority, then extermination took place with his knowledge and on his orders. By claiming ignorance to the simple linguistic connection between ‘highest charge’ and ‘in charge,’ Theresa attempted to exonerate herself from blame. Admitting to her knowledge of her husband’s position meant admitting to her own passive complicity; it meant admitting she had known her husband had overseen countless exterminations and conceding she had still done

²¹⁷ “the highest charge”

²¹⁸ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 137.

²¹⁹ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 233-234.

nothing. However, her feeble attempt at claiming ignorance holds no water. Surely a girl at the top of her class could have connected the dots.

Curiously, while Theresa appeared determined to prove she never knew of her husband's actual position within Sobibor and Treblinka, she never claimed ignorance of systematic extermination. In most of Theresa's statements, she seemed distraught over her husband's personal involvement in the implementation of the Final Solution and only peripherally concerned with the Final Solution itself. Even if she succeeded in convincing herself that her husband served the camp in an administrative capacity, she could not have convinced herself that the Jews exterminated themselves. Even if she accepted her husband's individual innocence, the implementation of the Final Solution required that somebody be responsible.

Because Frau Stangl's interviews took place almost thirty years after the war, it is difficult to evaluate her original concern for the victims of the Holocaust. Had Germany won the war, her statements would have likely been quite different. However, even postwar statements which attempted compassion sounded slightly hollow. In an attempt to articulate her profound concern, Theresa insisted:

It is true, you know, although I cried oh so many times when I thought of those people they were killing, I never never knew there were children too, or even women. I, too rationalized it I suppose; I told myself, I suppose, that we were at war and that they were killing the men; men, you know: enemies...I know it isn't logical, but I suppose I didn't dare to think further.²²⁰

As she herself said, believing that women and children were left alone was completely illogical. However, even if it had only been Jewish men who were executed at Sobibor and Treblinka as she said she had believed, would that have been justifiable? According to Frau Stangl's statement, it would have been an unfortunate aspect of war. Apparently racial extermination fell under Frau Stangl's understanding of twentieth-century conflict, regrettable but necessary.

²²⁰ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 234

Theresa's passivity in one particular incident speaks to a concrete example of knowledge and inaction. Here, children were involved, further contradicting Theresa's statement that she had thought women and children were untouched by the Nazis. Before Franz Stangl moved his family to the fish-hatchery outside of Sobibor, the Stangl family stayed with Baurath Moser, the chief surveyor at Sobibor. Moser had two young Jewish girls who were called the *Zäuselns*, "tousle-heads," who served as his domestic servants. While Frau Stangl stayed there, the two girls helped her with the children and busied themselves tending to other domestic tasks.

However, the two girls served their real purpose at night. Frau Stangl remembered:

Although I hadn't any notion of the true situation, there were things that made me wonder: you see, the walls of the house were very thin and I would hear Baurath Moser in the room next to ours when I was in bed. He had both the girls-the *Zäuselns*-in there and...well...he did things to them, you know. It would start every night with his telling them what to take off first and then what next and what to do and so on...it...it was very embarrassing.²²¹

In actuality, Frau Stangl did have a notion of the 'true situation.' At night in the room adjacent to the one she shared with her two daughters, Moser sexually abused two Jewish girls. Frau Stangl listened night after night with her own young daughters sleeping next to her as Moser used two young girls as his sexual playthings. She never approached Moser and never spoke of the episode with her husband. The injustice, exploitation, and abuse of the Holocaust manifested itself in the room adjacent to hers, and she did nothing.

Ultimately, Frau Stangl knew. She knew of the mass exterminations which took place at Sobibor and Treblinka where her husband ruled, and she knew what Baurath Moser did to his young Jewish slaves. She knew and yet she did nothing but rationalize. In her interviews with Gitta Sereny she claimed revulsion, depression, and extreme sadness during her time as the commandant's wife. If this were true, why did she continue to passively stand by her husband?

²²¹ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 135.

In a particularly revelatory interview with Franz Stangl, who was apprehended in February 1968 and lived out the remainder of his life in a prison cell until he died naturally in 1971, Gitta Sereny posed the following question, which, adjusted slightly, could have been posed to Theresa as well:

There were people in Germany who stood up for their principles; not many, it is true, but some. Yours was a very special position; there were less than a dozen men like you in all of the Third Reich. Don't you think that if you had found that extraordinary courage, it would have had an effect on the people who served under you?²²²

As the wife of a camp commandant, Theresa Stangl occupied a venerable position. If Franz Stangl was one of a dozen such men in the Third Reich, Theresa Stangl was one of a dozen such women. It is therefore not unreasonable that the question posed to Franz be posed to Theresa as well. Had she found the extraordinary courage to stand up for her alleged principles, other commandant wives may have observed her example. At any time, Theresa could have allowed reality and her alleged disgust to penetrate her blind faith in her husband's goodness, but she did not. Even after the war and the shattering of whatever illusion she had created with respect to the death camps, she escaped with her husband and children first to Damascus and then to Brazil, stood by her husband's side after he was apprehended in February 1968, visited him in his cell during his trial, and loved him until he died of natural causes in his jail cell in June 1971.

²²² Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 231.

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Frau Kramer, Frau Höss, Frau Koch, and Frau Stangl represent different degrees of guilt and were complicit in Nazi crimes in different ways. Frau Kramer's continued devotion to her husband, despite the accusations against him, speaks to an unbending and deluded fidelity. Frau Höss seems to have greatly enjoyed her position as the commandant's wife. She took full advantage of her access to prison labor and confiscated goods. Ilse Koch, a sadist, used her position in Buchenwald to prey on a permanent supply of victims. Theresa Stangl appears to be the most contrite of all the women I examined. Though she was not an opportunist like Frau Höss or a psychopath like Ilse Koch, she remained devoted to her husband until the day he died. During her time as Commandant Franz Stangl's wife she allegedly suffered much mental turmoil, but this turmoil was not enough to inspire her to take a stand. This observation speaks to the cumulative conclusion to be drawn from these four case studies. As different as each woman's experiences was, all of these women lived in close proximity to Holocaust atrocities and none of them were moved to action.

Frau Kramer and Frau Stangl cultivated an image of their husbands' roles within the concentration camps which exculpated them from blame, and managed to convince themselves of things their proximity to the camps invalidated. Frau Koch's involvement in atrocities takes the most obvious form. As the wife of the Commandant Karl Koch, she used her position as the queen of Buchenwald to express her sadistic urges while Frau Höss used her position in Auschwitz to satisfy her greed. Not all of these women were sadists, nor were they all profiteers, but all of them did nothing to attenuate the crimes taking place all around them. In this way they are alike, despite their disparate experiences, and their guilt by inaction unites them.

*

Conclusion:

At the end of her final conversation with Theresa Stangl, Gitta Sereny prepared Theresa for her last question. Before she asked Theresa what she deemed to be her most important question she insisted that, before she answered, Theresa should leave for a while, lie down, and think about her reply because, to Sereny, her reply would “determine your own position; the degree, if you like, of your own guilt.” With that, Sereny posed her final question:

Would you tell me what you think would have happened if at any time you had faced your husband with an absolute choice; if you had said to him: ‘Here it is; I know it’s terribly dangerous, but either you get out of this terrible thing, or else the children and I will leave you.’ What I would like to know is: if you had confronted him with these alternatives, which do you think he would have chosen?

Frau Stangl then followed Sereny’s advice and retreated to her bedroom for over an hour. When she returned, it was clear she had been crying. Finally, she replied:

I have thought very hard. I know what you want to know, I know what I am doing when I answer your question. I am answering it because I think I owe it to you, to others, to myself; I believe that if I had ever confronted [Franz] with the alternatives: Treblinka-or me; he would...yes, he would in the final analysis have chosen me.²²³

When she looked inside of herself and truly thought about the dynamics of her relationship with her husband, Frau Stangl understood that she had possessed a certain power. Frau Stangl had the power to put the question ‘me, or Treblinka’ to her husband and know what the answer would be. Yet, she never did. None of the high society women I have examined asked this simple question of their husbands. Neither the women in Hitler’s inner circle nor the wives of camp commandants utilized their power as wives in this most fundamental way.

²²³ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 361.

The next morning, understanding the enormity of what she had said and the effect such an admission had upon her own conscience, Frau Stangl left a note with the concierge at Gitta Sereny's hotel. In the note, she had written:

I want to beg to correct an answer to a question you asked me where I had, at the time of our talk, too little time to ponder my reply. The question was whether my husband, in the end, would have found the courage to get away from Treblinka had I put before him the alternative 'me, or Treblinka.' I answered your question – hesitatingly- with, 'He would have chosen me.' This is not so, because as I know him –so well- he would never have destroyed himself or the family. And that is what I learned to understand...I can therefore in all truthfulness say that, from the beginning of my life to now, I have always lived honourably.²²⁴

While this letter rescinded her previous, probably more truthful answer, it also illustrated Theresa Stangl's understanding of her threatened honor. After she had time to sit with the guilt her previous answer had generated, she desperately desired to save herself from that introspection. Believing that her own actions would have had no effect on her husband's decisions was easier than knowing she could have rendered Treblinka short of a commandant with one simple question.

The other commandant wives I examined share in this guilt, and the opportunism of Frau Höss and the sadism of Frau Koch demonstrate that many high society women were not just indifferent bystanders, but active participants in Nazi injustice. Wives of key party leaders, the other component of high society I examined, also lived indifferently to the iniquity carried out on their husbands' command. Unlike the commandant wives, these women had physical distance between themselves and Nazi atrocities, a fact many later used as vindication. Surely, as their maintenance of power and privilege relied on a regime which rendered others so powerless, it was easier to feign ignorance to Nazi crimes than to acknowledge that their luxury came at the price of the suffering of so many others. Yet, as was shown, Holocaust realities often permeated

²²⁴ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 362

the high society bubble, and as Margret Speer admitted, they did indeed know *something*.

Though Margrit Fischer was not a member of high society, but rather a schoolteacher and wife of historian Fritz Fischer, her admission to Alison Owings seems to encapsulate the reality of high society wives' claimed ignorance. Frau Margrit Fischer claimed that she "...actually only wanted to see the good. The other I simply shoved aside."²²⁵

Nazism was an oppressive ideology, and because of its inherent paternalism, it is tempting to disregard the female perspective in the analysis of Nazi crimes and to label private women of the Nazi era as victims of a fascist and sexist regime with no power to deter the onslaught of its racial policies. Yet, this view ignores the evil that many women did perpetrate, excuses female inaction, and invalidates the acts of resistance for which many women risked their lives. Resistance was possible. Many female resisters defied the regime in subtle ways such as carrying two shopping bags to avoid greeting party members on the street with a salute.²²⁶ Others, such as Wilhelmine Haferkamp, used the *Kindergeld* granted to women who bore a certain number of children to provide food for the prisoners working close to their homes.²²⁷ Still some rebelled in more audacious ways by housing Jews in empty rooms in their homes, heading the illegal KPD and SPD after the male leaders had been arrested, and, in the case of Sophie Scholl and the underground *Weißerose* organization, distributing anti- Nazi leaflets.²²⁸

The aforementioned acts of resistance were carried out by everyday Germans without connections to key party leaders. High society women had access to Hitler's inner circle; they were married to key party officials and concentration camp commandants. Their privileged status

²²⁵ Alison Owings, *German Women Recall the Third Reich* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993) 13.

²²⁶ Stephenson. *Women in Nazi Germany* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2001) 109.

²²⁷ Alison Owings, *German Women Recall the Third Reich* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993) 21.

²²⁸ Cosner Sharon and Victoria Cosner, *Women Under the Third Reich* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998) 138.

and their marital connection to the architects of Third Reich horrors provided them with even greater opportunity for action. Resistance was possible, perhaps even more so for the privileged, yet none of the high society women I examined protested Nazi policies in any way.

The Allied powers appear to have subscribed to gender assumptions common in Western culture through most of the twentieth century when they liberated Germany, and they therefore brought very few women to trial. Of the women I examined, only Ilse Koch was tried by the Allies. In 1947, a United States military tribunal convicted Koch of beating Buchenwald prisoners and singling out others for execution. One year later, a review board convened by the United States Military Governor of the U.S. occupied zone in Germany, General Lucius D. Clay, concluded that the bulk of the evidence which had been brought against Koch in 1947 had been hearsay. Her sentence was reduced from life at hard labor to four years imprisonment. She was released early in 1949. Interestingly, the West Germans retried her upon her release and sentenced her once more to life in prison.²²⁹ She committed suicide in her prison cell in 1957.

Koch's arrest, trial, release, and retrial illustrate the unsettled question of female complicity in the Holocaust. Historians and lawyers to this day still do not know how to adequately deal with the actions or inactions of the Third Reich's female population. For example, in September 2006 eighty-four year old Elfriede Rinkel was extradited from the United States to stand trial for crimes committed over sixty years before. Elfriede had served as a dog-handler at Ravensbrück from June 1944 until the camp was abandoned by the Nazis in April 1945.²³⁰ After the war, she moved to America and married Fred Rinkel in 1962, a Jewish man who had lost both of his parents in the Holocaust. She kept the secret of her wartime occupation

²²⁹ David Binder. "Ilse Koch's Posthumous Rehabilitation Sought by Son." *The New York Times*. Proquest Historical Newspapers *The New York Times* (1951-2005) May 7, 1971. p. 8.

²³⁰ Michael Scott Moore, US Sends Elderly Widow Back to Germany. "*Der Spiegel International Online*. 21 September 2006 p. 2.

from her husband for forty-two years, but after her husband's death, the story came out. What is most interesting about the story is the reaction from Kurt Schrimm, chief of the German bureau that investigates former Nazis. In a statement to *Der Spiegel*, Schrimm stated "We will not be pursuing her case. For us there is one crime that is important, and that is murder. There is no evidence that she committed murder."²³¹ Apparently, training dogs to frighten prisoners, living off of goods confiscated from gas chamber victims, consciously ignoring Holocaust realities, and enjoying the luxurious lifestyle made possible by the death of innocent people are not significant enough crimes to be pursued. Only murder counts. Elfriede Rinkel, like the majority of women in my study, escaped indictment.

²³¹ Michael Scott Moore, "US Sends Elderly Widow Back to Germany." *Der Spiegel International Online*. 21 September 2006, p.2.

Illustrations



Figure 1: A Girl from Schwaben on the cover of NS-Frauen-Warte: Magazine for NS Women, July 1943.

KL-Dachau: February 11, 1936 – A BdM Leader Visits a Concentration Camp (BAK 152/A6/7/13A)



KL-Dachau: May 1936 – BdM Leaders Visit a Concentration Camp (BAK152/M/30)

Figure 2: BdM Girls Visit Dachau in May 1936.²³²

²³² Daniel Patrick Brown: *The Camp Women: The Female Auxiliaries Who Assisted the SS in Running the Nazi Concentration Camp System* (Atglen PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2002) Illustrations.



Figure 3: Print from the National Socialist Women's Organization²³³

²³³ Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.



Figure 4: Eva Braun in a chic gown as photographed by Anton Sahr in the early 1940s²³⁴

²³⁴ Angela Lambert, *The Lost Life of Eva Braun* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006) First Photograph Section.



Figure 5: On the Berghof terrace in 1943. Left to Right: Lieutenant Colonel Gerhard Engle, Heinrich Hoffmann (with Traudl Junge behind him). Walther Hewel, Gerda Bormann (back view), State Secretary for Tourism Hermann Esser.²³⁵

²³⁵ Traudl Junge, *Until the Final Hour*, ed Melissa Müller (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2002) Photograph Section.



Figure 6: Photo at the Berghof picturing members of Hitler's inner circle (left to right) Joseph Goebbels, Eva Braun, Hans Hauptner, Albert Speer, unknown woman.²³⁶

²³⁶ Angela Lambert, *The Lost Life of Eva Braun* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006). First Photograph Section.



Figure 7: *Der Stürmer* November 1937 (Issue #47)

Title: The Economy and Jewry

This issue accuses Jews of every manner of economic misdeed. The cartoon is titled "Demon Money." A Jewish monster, engraved with the Star of David and the symbols for the American dollar and British pound has its claws on the planet.²³⁷

²³⁷ German Propaganda Archive: <http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/sturmer.htm>



Figure 8: Map of the nine main concentration camps in Germany during World War II.²³⁸

²³⁸ Daniel Patrick Brown, *The Camp Women: The Female Auxiliaries Who Assisted the SS in Running the Nazi Concentration Camp System* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2002) Illustrations.

CONCENTRATION CAMPS IN POLAND

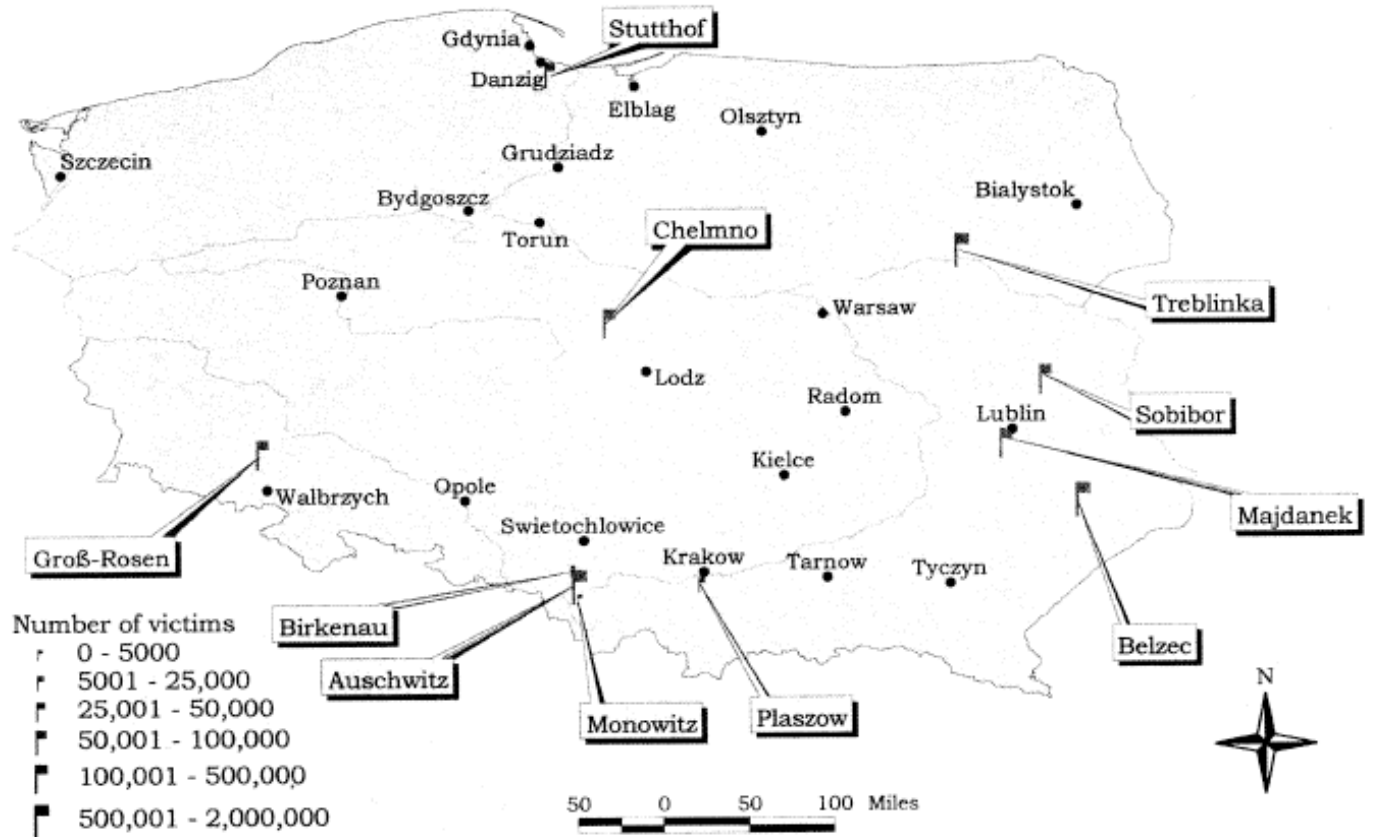


Figure 9: Map of the eleven main concentration camps in Poland during World War II²³⁹

²³⁹ Daniel Patrick Brown, *The Camp Women: The Female Auxiliaries Who Assisted the SS in Running the Nazi Concentration Camp System* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2002) Illustrations.



Unbekanntes SS-Brutpaar
(Archiv KZ-Gedenkstätte Dachau)

Figure 10: Photo of an unknown married SS couple proceeding through the ceremonial salute arch²⁴⁰

²⁴⁰ Gudrun Schwarz, *Eine Frau an seiner Seite: Ehefrauen in der SS-Sippengemeinschaft* („Hamburg: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997) 28.



Freizeitvergnügen des zehnjährigen Sohnes eines KZ-Kommandanten.
(Ella Silbermann-Shiber)

Figure 11: A drawing from the eleven-year old son of a concentration camp commander²⁴¹

²⁴¹ Gudrun Schwarz, *Eine Frau an seiner Seite: Ehefrauen in der „SS-Sippengemeinschaft“* (Hamburg: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997) 221.



SS-Angehörige im Konzentrationslager Dachau



Die SS-Siedlung im Konzentrationslager Dachau
(Archiv KZ-Gedenkstätte Dachau)

Figure 12: (Above) *SS-Angehörige* inside Dachau. (Below) The *SS-Siedlungen* in Dachau.²⁴²

²⁴² Gudrun Schwarz, *Eine Frau an seiner Seite: Ehefrauen in der „SS-Sippengemeinschaft“* (Hamburg: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997) 105.



Villa Höß mit Blumengarten
(Archiv des Staatlichen Auschwitz-Museums)

Figure 13: The Höss Villa in Auschwitz. Pictured with Frau Höss' infamous flower garden²⁴³

²⁴³ Gudrun Schwarz, *Eine Frau an seiner Seite: Ehefrauen in der „SS-Sippengemeinschaft“* (Hamburg: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997) 136.

auf dem Marsch — auf dem Rücken
 der Blätter
 mit Gefolge der ersten vertriebenen Kriegsgenossen
 in Waffens-SS ruhte ich Stunden der
 Ruhe in der stillen Umgebung in aller Ruhe
 für Kameraden.
 Dafür dank ich die Mutter Göß.
 Die Kinder wünschte ich von Herzen
 die Folgen.
 Für alle Gesundheit, Glück und Zufriedenheit
 Gelobt sei was hart macht!
 (Hitler)

auf dem 20/21.9.42

Dr. Stubaß
 SS-Stubaf

Aus dem Gästebuch der Familie Höß¹¹

Figure 14: The Höss Guestbook.

Translated from the German: “On the march to the south of Russia, as the chief doctor of the first armed battlefield hospital of the Waffen SS, I spent hours in comfort and relaxation in old and wonderful companionship.

For that, I thank you, Mother Höss

To you, Rudolph I wish these prosperities

To you all, health, good fortune, and contentment

Gelobt sei was hart macht! (Hitler) Auschwitz, den 20/21.9.42, Dr...SS-Stubaf²⁴⁴

²⁴⁴ Gudrun Schwarz, *Eine Frau an seiner Seite: Ehefrauen in der „SS-Sippengemeinschaft“* (Hamburg: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997) 127.



Figure 15: The Koch Wedding²⁴⁵

²⁴⁵ Günter Morsch, ed. *Von der Sachsenburg nach Sachsenhausen: Bilder aus dem Fotoalbum eines KZ-Kommandanten* (Berlin: Metropol, 2007) 336.

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