

## The hidden perpetrators Female involvement in National Socialism and its biographical adaption

### *As perpetradoras ocultas*

#### *Envolvimento feminino no Nacional-Socialismo e sua adaptação biográfica*

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**Abstract:** Women who were not persecuted by the Nazi regime were integrated in various ways into the Nazi society and so contributed to its stabilization and perpetuation. The question of the ways in which women contributed to Nazism and so to its crimes was suppressed after the Nazi defeat. On the basis of their gender, women were constructed as victims of the war and the hardships of the post-war period. In Austria specifically, this victim construction was blended with a national victim discourse that depicted Austria as the first victim of Hitler's Germany, so allowing the denial of Austrians' participation in Nazi crimes. In this context, this article aims to show, through three reconstructed biographies how, with the help of victim constructions, the biographical subjects extenuate and deny their own involvement in the Nazi society, in so doing positioning women's activity as exterior to the practice of a perpetrator group constructed as male.

**Keywords:** National Socialism. Female biographies. Perpetrator. Victim discourse.

**Resumo:** Mulheres que não foram perseguidas pelo regime nazista estavam integradas de várias maneiras na sociedade nazista e assim contribuíram para sua estabilização e perpetuação. A questão da maneira como mulheres contribuíram com o nazismo e assim com seus crimes foi suprimida após a derrocada do nazismo. Com base em seu gênero, mulheres foram construídas como vítimas da guerra e do sofrimento do período pós-guerra. Especificamente na Áustria esta construção de vítima foi combinada com um discurso nacional de vítima que apresenta a Áustria como a primeira vítima da Alemanha de Hitler, permitindo a negação da participação de austríacos nos crimes nazistas. Neste contexto, esse artigo pretende demonstrar, a partir da reconstrução de três biografias como, com a ajuda da construção de vítima, as biografadas acentuam e negam seus próprios envolvimento na sociedade nazista. Dessa maneira coloca a atividade das mulheres como exterior à prática do grupo de perpetradores, construído como masculino.

**Palavras-chave:** Nacional-socialismo. Biografias femininas. Perpetrador. Discurso de vítima.

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## Introduction

Following the Nazi defeat in 1945, Austrian society was confronted with the question of its culpability. While Germany saw the establishment of a multiphase discourse that enabled “normal Germans” to distance themselves<sup>1</sup> from the murderers,<sup>2</sup> in Austria a so-called national victim discourse (see e.g. Uhl, 2005), which made the Austrian perpetrators totally disappear, took root.

In reality, however, after the annexation – commonly referred to as the *Anschluss*<sup>3</sup> – of Austria by Hitler’s German Reich in 1938, applauded by a large section of the Austrian population, many Austrians had in fact participated in a perpetrator group whose involvement went beyond the direct commission, preparation or organization of murder. Austrians joined the NSDAP out of conviction,<sup>4</sup> made careers in Nazi organizations and assumed important official positions, took part in public degradation ceremonies, denounced others and enriched themselves with expropriated Jewish property as Aryanisers or became teachers of the antisemitic and racist ideology. All such activities, although not carried out in the framework of military structures such as the Wehrmacht, SS and the machinery of the concentration and death camps, nonetheless, in interaction with biographical, social and institutional structures, created a practice that facilitated and in part directly contributed to the murder and persecution of Jews and other groups targeted by the Nazi ideology. This practice included not only direct acts of violence, but also actions of incitement to or the provision of opportunities for that violence.

Over the past two decades, above all in Germany, empirical research has been conducted that has increasingly brought to light the full range of these contributory activities and shown the degree of latitude available to individuals (e.g. Paul, 2002; Wildt, 2002). However, the bulk of this research deals with men in a variety of military and official contexts; little attention has been paid to women. Especially in this context, the continuing invisibility of women

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Goldhagen (1996) was one of the authors who initiated a critical debate among historians and in the wider public sphere on these matters with his book *Hitler’s willing executioners*.

<sup>2</sup> The relevant research suggests a figure of between 200,000 and 250,000 for the number of German and Austrian perpetrators of the Holocaust (Pohl, 2003, p. 29). These estimates do not include the many foreign collaborators who participated in the murders via paramilitary formations.

<sup>3</sup> On 12 March 1938 units of the Wehrmacht entered Austria to the applause of many Austrians leading to the so-called *Anschluss* of Austria to Germany. Austria then became the “Ostmark” of the German Reich. The persecution of political opponents and of Austria’s Jewish population began simultaneously.

<sup>4</sup> In 1942 the Nazi party (NSDAP) had 700,000 Austrian registered members (see Pollak, 2003, p. 179). Even prior to 1938, when the NSDAP was illegal in Austria, the party had Austrian members who were illegally active or went into exile in Germany.

is manifested in the fact that, in both the scientific research into perpetration and public discourse, a very narrow image of the perpetrator prevails: that of a man acting in the framework of military structures who abuses, tortures and murders. Since most criminal acts took place in the context of such military structures, to which women had only limited access, women were indeed rarely perpetrators of such acts. Few women worked as concentration camp guards<sup>5</sup> and they were not employed as soldiers. The institutionally shaped and gender-divided spheres of activity permitted women little space for engaging in direct violence. Moreover, aggressive, egoistical and destructive behaviour does not fit into the social image of the caring and maternally protective woman. Thus, female camp guards who maltreated inmates were publicly labelled “beasts” (Weckel and Wolfrum, 2003) and constructed as “the opposite of womanhood” and so “different to normal people” (Duesterberg, 2002, p. 227). Apart from this “abnormal” minority, the majority of women are constructed as victims on grounds of their gender, for example as the victims of bombing raids and the privations of wartime. Violent behaviour is excluded by these victim constructions, which thus have a denying and de-thematizing effect. The interpretative schema of “women as victims” meshes in Austria with the *prima facie* un-gendered national victim discourse that swiftly took root in post-war Austria in order to legitimize a collective exculpation for the crimes of National Socialism. It offers multi-faceted interpretative proposals that have enabled the majority of Austrians to downplay and deny responsibility for their own actions.

In a situation where the question of women’s activity under National Socialism has been suppressed and a wider research programme into that activity is still pending, my aim in this article is to show, through three women’s biographies,<sup>6</sup> how they have taken up and applied these victim constructions to their own experiences in order to thematize and deny their involvement in thought and deed in the Nazi society through dilution and extenuation. To enable a clearer understanding of the three examples, I will first outline the discursive-historical context in Austria.

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<sup>5</sup> Some 4,000 women worked as camp guards (see Eschenbach et al., 2002; Erpel, 2007; Mailänder Koslov, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> The biographies summarized here were reconstructed from biographical-narrative interviews and are presented in detail in my book, *Heroisierte Opfer. Bearbeitungs- und Handlungsstrukturen von 'Trümmerfrauen' in Wien* (Pohn-Weidinger, 2014). The book is based on a biographical and discourse-analytical study of the biographies of women who were not persecuted by the Nazi regime and were involved in the Nazi society.

## The national victim discourse

A few weeks after the collapse of National Socialism in Europe the future Austrian Chancellor Leopold Figl gave a speech that contained the idea that would come to exemplify Austria's post-Nazi self-image and Austrians' retrospective definition of their role under Nazism:

For seven years the Austrian people languished under the Hitlerite barbarism. For seven years the Austrian people were subjugated and oppressed, no freedom of expression or avowals of faith were possible, brutal terror and force compelled people to blind subservience (Figl *apud* Uhl, 2005, p. 50).

This statement continued a process of constructing a narrative of Austria as the “first victim of Hitler’s Germany” and a reading of the *Anschluss* as an occupation, a reading that ignores the fact that a large proportion of the Austrian population supported it. The Provisional Government comprised of Socialists, Christian Democrats and Communists succeeded in getting the idea of Austria as the first victim of Hitler’s Germany into the “Proclamation on the Independence of Austria” issued on 27 April 1945, the founding document for the restoration of the Democratic Republic of Austria. The formula had already appeared in the Moscow Declaration of 1943. However, another passage in the Moscow Declaration referring to Austria’s responsibility for participation in the war was dropped,<sup>7</sup> on the grounds of Austrians’ alleged powerlessness. This victim theory swiftly took root as the dominant discourse in all spheres of Austrian society:

Narrowly connected with the myth of Austria as the first victim of Nazi Germany was the view that a completely new Austria had been born with the declaration of independence, an Austria that had nothing in common with the ‘Ostmark’ of the years 1938-45. The aim of the so called ‘Stunde Null’ (zero hour) myth was to deny all continuities between the Third Reich and the Second Republic and to create an Austria that had overnight rid itself of its past (Pollak, 2003, p. 180).

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<sup>7</sup> “The Government of the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union and the United States of America are agreed that Austria, the first free country to fall victim to Hitlerite aggression, shall be liberated from German domination. They regard the annexation imposed upon Austria by Germany on March 15, 1938 as null and void. They consider themselves in no way bound by any changes effected in Austria since that date. They declare that they wish to see reestablished a free and independent Austria, and thereby to open the way for the Austrian people themselves, to find that political and economic security which is the only basis for lasting peace. Austria is reminded, however, that she has a responsibility which she cannot evade for participation in the war on the side of Hitlerite Germany, and that in the final settlement account will inevitably be taken of her own contribution to her liberation” <<http://www.erinnerungsort.at/thema2/moskau.htm>>.

The victim discourse enabled Austrians to feel free from responsibility for the (violent) crimes committed; to ward off and deny that responsibility. A cloak of silence fell over Austrian involvement. After May 1945 nobody in Austria talked about who was responsible for the planned annihilation and the millions of murders of Jews and other targeted groups. The national victim discourse worked quickly and durably, since it offered Austrians a wide range of ways of interpreting their own Nazi pasts, their involvement in the Nazi society and their participation in its crimes. In the front rank stood the notion that they themselves had been the first victims of Hitler's Germany and that it was the Germans who were ultimately the perpetrators and primarily responsible for what had happened.

The national victim discourse offers two main interpretative frameworks: Firstly the image of Austria and Austrians as victims of the war and its consequences, including bombing raids, displacement and war-related captivity and then as the victim of occupation by the Allies,<sup>8</sup> particularly the Red Army. In relation to the latter topic, victim status is above all ascribed to women as victims of rape by Soviet soldiers.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, one was the victim not only of the war, but also of Nazism, which systematically used violence to spread terror. Over the years this argument developed into an equation between National Socialist rule and the Allied occupation – one had suffered under both. These interpretations enabled Austrians to perceive themselves as victims and deny their complicity.

It took several decades before a shift took place and attention began to be paid to the issue of Austrian culpability. This was the result of a number of both internal and external events that enabled critical scholars, journalists, survivors and former resistance fighters,<sup>10</sup> with the support of the critical

<sup>8</sup> Until the State Treaty of 1955, which guaranteed Austria's independence and neutrality, the country was divided into four sectors by the four occupying powers and governed by an Allied Commission for Austria.

<sup>9</sup> The *topos* "rape" shaped the image of the maltreated German and Austrian "peoples". Estimates of the number of rapes still vary widely. In order to be able to view themselves as a victim collective, the rapes were used as a *topos* regardless of the concrete cases. This did not in any way mean that women raped by allied soldiers were able to speak openly about their ordeal. This sexual violence against women was, like any other violence against women, placed under a social taboo.

<sup>10</sup> One of the crucial institutional actors was the Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstands ([www.doew.at](http://www.doew.at)) founded by former resistance activists and scholars in 1969. The organization continues to play a central role as a research centre and archive. Its members continue to work on the historical re-appraisal of the past. They also conduct research into and monitor current developments in the spheres of right-wing extremism and antisemitism as well as engaging in various communication activities (e.g. in schools).

media, to establish a counter-discourse that transformed the national victim discourse into a co-responsibility thesis (Uhl, 2005, p. 77). One such event was the exhibition entitled “War of annihilation: crimes of the Wehrmacht, 1941-44” organized by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research in 1995. The exhibition demonstrated that without “the cooperation of the Wehrmacht, however, the Einsatzgruppen and the units of Higher SS and Police Leaders would have been unable to realize the mass murder of the Jewish population of the Soviet Union” (Hamburg Institute for Social Research, 2004, p. 8, see also Heer, 2004). The previously reigning image of the “clean Wehrmacht” that, unrelated to any crimes, had loyally and bravely “defended the Fatherland”, thus freeing millions of soldiers from the need to admit that they had seen or known or done anything, began to crumble. The exhibition provided the visual evidence that ordinary soldiers had been involved in the mass murders and had even photographed their deeds, and that this was true not only for German, but also for Austrian troops.

The public debate unleashed by such events led to a transformation of the national victim discourse that was reflected in a new tone in statements by the Austrian political leadership. Thus in 1991 Chancellor Franz Vranitzky acknowledged the co-responsibility of Austrians in a speech to the Austrian National Assembly and in 1994 President Thomas Klestil, on a state visit to Israel, declared that in Austria there had been not only victims, but also perpetrators.

It can cautiously be stated that in recent decades a slow process of acceptance of Austria’s guilt-ridden Nazi past has set in among some sections of Austrian society. The caution is justified by the fact that, at the level of biographical self-constructions, as developed by the women I interviewed, the interpretative proposals provided by the national victim discourse continue to operate undisturbed as the framework for their interpretation of their own activities under National Socialism. In what follows I will show concretely how this happens, i.e. how the women use the interpretative proposals of the national victim discourse in relation to their life stories, at the same time transforming them in order to interpret their own actions and those of their families as actions that played no role in the establishment and maintenance of the social system in which the Shoah was planned and implemented. The aim is to show the manifold ways in which the biographical subjects interpret their experiences and actions under Nazism after 1945 and integrate them – meaningfully – into their overall life story.

The following life stories have been reconstructed on the basis of biographical-narrative interviews (Schütze, 1983).<sup>11</sup> In 2008 I asked a total of 16 women who were born between 1921 and 1928 in Vienna and grew up there to recount their life and family histories.

### Three biographies

#### *The guilt of the father*

Hildegard Bauer<sup>12</sup> was born in Vienna in 1926. Her father was a low-ranking civil servant and her mother a seamstress. Her father joined the Nazi party in the early 1930s and, when the party was banned in Austria in 1934, moved to Germany where he rose swiftly up the party hierarchy. When Hildegard and her mother joined him, she became an active member of Nazi youth organizations in which she took on leadership roles. When the family returned to Vienna in 1938, her father took up a prestigious official position, reflecting the high regard in which he was held as a former illegal Nazi party member. The whole family experienced a swift rise up the social ladder and profited from the Nazi system, for example through moving into an “Aryanized” dwelling. Through her family Hildegard was directly integrated into the Nazi system not only ideologically, but also in her everyday life. Her life story up to 1945 points to an involvement in the institutional structures of the Nazi system: She volunteered for the Reich Labour Service,<sup>13</sup> in the context of a vocational competition she won a journey in the German Reich,

<sup>11</sup>Methodology is not dealt with in detail in this paper. The interviews were analyzed using the method of biographical case reconstruction. This sequential and reconstructive method developed by Gabriele Rosenthal was used together with Objective Hermeneutics (e.g. Oevermann *et al.*, 1979), Fritz Schütze’s Text Analysis Method (1983) and Wolfram Fischer’s Thematic Field Analysis (1982). An essential point is the distinction of two levels: “(1) the analysis of the lived-through, the experienced life history (the genetical analysis) and (2) the analysis of the narrated life story” (Rosenthal, 1993, p. 60). This division takes into account the active inter-penetration of past, present and future (see Rosenthal, 1993, p. 17): “The purpose of the genetical analysis is the reconstruction of the biographical meaning of experiences at the time they happened and the reconstruction of the chronological sequence of experiences in which they occurred. The purpose of the analysis of the narrated life story is the reconstruction of the temporal order of the life story in the present time of narrating or writing.” (Rosenthal, 1993, p. 61, see also the essay by Gabriele Rosenthal in Portuguese (2014)).

<sup>12</sup>The names have been changed. The biographical case reconstruction are published in detail in German, see Pohn-Weidinger, 2014.

<sup>13</sup>Men and women between the ages of 18 and 24 had to perform several months of labour service in the RAD framework. The division of labour between the genders changed in the course of the war. Before and in the initial stages of the war, women worked in agriculture and nursing, later they were employed as, among other things, military auxiliaries. This work was meant to serve as a “service of honour” to the “German people” and to inculcate the National Socialist mentality into the youth (see Trybek, 1992).

she worked in an armament factory and started to train as an actress. In line with this smoothly flowing life story, she experienced the collapse of National Socialism in May 1945 as the trigger for the collapse of her previously stable family. Her father was interned and brought before a Viennese People's Court. His indictment raised the question of guilt and responsibility for participation in National Socialism for Hildegard in a particular way. At the time of the trial she had already developed strategies to protect herself from facing the question of her father's guilt. She did not attend the trial, so actively avoiding confrontation with the facts. Shortly after her father was released as unimportant, her parents divorced. Hildegard then married a man who was grief-stricken on account of his war crimes and in the course of her life repeatedly sought contact with victims of National Socialism. This suggests that she was unconsciously working through the problem of her father's and her family's guilt.

How does Hildegard talk now about this period? Before embarking on her account, she asked whether she should begin with the political or the familial. This distinction permeates the whole interview and runs counter, as we have seen, to her experience: In her childhood and youth, politics and the family were intertwined; politics shaped Hildegard's life to a high degree. In the course of her account she weaves an integrated life story by shifting back and forth between the political and the familial. She presents her pre-1945 life as a carefree period filled with everyday concerns; there are no tales of victimhood or suffering. When she talks about "politics" she fails to specify what she means by this. She says nothing about her parents' work in the Nazi structures,<sup>14</sup> which she actively experienced. She does not mention how they lived out Nazi ideas. In this way the family's National Socialist ideology is rendered content-less – such matters as antisemitism are not mentioned. An unusual feature of Hildegard's narrative strategy is that, unlike all the other women I interviewed, she does not employ any kind of victim discourse in order to downplay her and her family's involvement. On the contrary she talks in detail about the fact that, even before 1945, she had begun to free herself from National Socialism and today she would shun everything *völkisch* and expresses her aversion towards those who continue to deny knowledge of what happened. She therefore explicitly rejects the national victim discourse and presents herself as someone who has thought things through. However, the

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<sup>14</sup>Hildegard does not say what her mother did under National Socialism. The failure to mention what the mothers did or thought is a common feature of all the interviews. In this way, women's political convictions are rendered invisible. They appear as non-political people who did not play a voluntary part in the establishment of the Nazi system.



decisiveness of her opposition to denial and self-exculpation falters when it comes to her father. When she starts to respond to follow-up questions about his internment and case, her voice becomes uncertain; she repeatedly breaks off and resumes in subdued tones. She asks herself whether he committed murder, and immediately answers “no”. This denial corresponds to her refusal to attend the trial and hear the charges against her father in detail. In relation to the general assessment of Austrians’ responsibility for Nazi crimes, she does not use victim constructions and openly distances herself from such efforts; however, when it comes to her father she resorts to the tried and tested self-justificatory discourse according to which as a “stupid Nazi” he did not know what he was doing. By viewing herself as connected to her father and so suggesting that she too was led astray, she applies this exculpation strategy to herself. She thus presents the active steps that her father and she took to get involved in the Nazi system as failings in which personal initiative played no role. This argument plays only a small role in the interview as a whole and was raised only in response to a follow-up question by the interviewer. When she is talking on her own behalf, the rejection of the national victim discourse dominates and she presents herself as someone who finds it intolerable for Austrians to present themselves as victims. In fact, however, the vehement rejection of the national victim discourse *in general* and her self-presentation as a woman who has thought things through offers a strategy that enables her to evade the *specific* question of her own and her father’s guilt. Instead of an active confrontation with her and her father’s actions, the guilt question had, throughout the course of her life story, been transferred outwards, for example by contacting Jewish families and feeling happy when they did not break off contact after she admitted to being the daughter of a leading Nazi.<sup>15</sup> In focusing almost exclusively on her father and her family history before and after the Nazi period, her own activities fade into the background. When she does talk about her own life under Nazism, she depoliticizes her experiences, focusing for example on when she was an actress in a theatre, presented as non-political arena, or on her work in the armament factory.

### ***“Him I loved like no other”***

Katharina Müller was born in 1928. In 1938 her father joined the Nazi party and Katharina joined the Hitler Youth and later the Union of German

<sup>15</sup> Seeking out “Jews” in order not to be held responsible for the deeds of family members represents a form of externalization of one’s own guilt issues onto the victims and survivors and is one of the recognized patterns of guilt avoidance by Nazi perpetrators and their descendants.

Girls (Bund Deutscher Mädel – BDM). In 1942 she began to train as a teacher.<sup>16</sup> In the final months of the war she and her mother fled Vienna for a town in Western Austria where they experienced the entry of US troops. In autumn 1945 she returned to Vienna and at the beginning of 1946 resumed her teacher training. Katharina's biography is the one with the clearest links to Nazism. She was an enthusiastic National Socialist, had no reservations about joining Nazi organizations and was preparing to transmit the Nazi ideology to the future generation as a teacher. National Socialism provided her with a basic framework for thought and action. As a 16 year-old, she experienced the collapse of Nazism as a turning point in her own life story. Under the new social and political conditions, she was compelled to begin to change her former understanding of herself and the world if she wished to remain employable. The need to change related to, for example, her "belief in the Führer", her antisemitism and her thinking in terms of the categories of greater and lesser worth. How does Katharina Müller thematize this past and integrate it into her biography after 1945? In order to answer this question, it is important to introduce an additional experience. As a child she was sexually abused by a priest. She was also subjected to terrible outbursts of rage and violence from her father. The evidence suggests that this violence too was probably sexual in nature. However, she talks about her father's sexual violence more in hints and with less narrative detail than she does about that of the priest. In relation to these events she uses the discursive interpretation pattern of "seduction". Let me give an example of what this in fact means. In her interview she describes an occasion when the priest took her on his knee as a child; she became physically aware of something "strange" without naming this "strange" thing more precisely. She continues: "and then I went home, but to this day I sometimes think what might sometimes have happened there and what in fact happened there [...] I often think, what the men – how they in fact allow themselves to be seduced, or seduce or, really seduce." Today she wonders who is seduced and who seduces – who in fact bears the responsibility. She is unsure how she should interpret this situation, but by interpreting this event in terms of "seduction",<sup>17</sup> she becomes able to talk about it. In saying "allow oneself to be seduced, or seduce, or, really seduce", she moves from passive to active, and then reinforces the activity still further with the addition of "really". Her current thoughts refer to her experiences with the

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<sup>16</sup>In June 1943 she began to keep a diary, which she made available to me and is therefore included in my reconstruction of her biography.

<sup>17</sup>Her diary reveals that she experienced such situations on several occasions.

priest. Something happened that she finds it hard to classify. In attempting to understand who is the seducer and who the seduced, she is trying to clarify for herself what responsibility she herself might have for this experience. At the level of the immediate experience itself this amounts to an assumption of guilt of the kind to which victims of sexual assault often feel impelled, since the socially mediated attitude to such assaults always takes into consideration the potential “guilt” of the person affected.

In the post-war victim discourse, the topos of seduction is strongly emphasized in relation to women (Uhl, 2005, p. 55). The idea of the “women seduced by Hitler” serves to transfer guilt onto the person of Hitler. Katherina too presents herself as someone who loved her “Führer” to the point of madness. In this way she depoliticizes her own actions and Nazi worldview. Katharina uses the interpretation pattern of “seduction” in order to integrate her biographical experiences under National Socialism into her life story in a sanitized way. This strategy is closely related to the sexual violence she experienced, which she also thematizes in terms of seduction. So, through the “seduction” interpretation, she is able to address two relevant biographical themes: her own Nazi beliefs and the experience of sexual violence. The interpretation pattern firstly structures the assumption of responsibility for the sexual assaults, an assumption related to the experienced “potential” guilt for the sexual violence. Secondly, the same pattern enables her to repudiate responsibility for her active collaboration and activity in the Nazi society. The interpretation pattern is thus coupled with the social status of being a woman since the role of seductee is reserved for women. In relation to National Socialism, this position enables her to renounce her role as a perpetrator – in the sense of a convinced National Socialist and participant – and thus deny her guilt through a perpetrator-victim reversal.

### *A story of social advancement*

Emma Zednik was born in 1921 in Vienna where she grew up in poverty. She had no opportunity to learn a trade and at the age of 14 had to take up unskilled factory work. Emma’s early experience of poverty decisively marked her future life. While her parents did nothing to encourage her to seek a better life than theirs, at an early age Emma developed the desire to improve her social status so that when, at the start of Nazi rule in Austria in 1938, increased efforts were made to get more women into work, Emma seized the opportunity to train as a secretary. She actively strove to get a new job in the administration of the Reich Labour Service (Reichsarbeitsdienst – RAD) and, owing to her ties to Nazi officers, was able to get out of completing her own labour service,

so avoiding the hardships inflicted on many of her peers. Moreover, in 1943 she married a man from a higher social bracket. In her efforts to escape from her socio-economic background, Emma experienced Nazism as a positive factor. She was probably not an ideologically committed National Socialist, but she actively took the opportunities it offered her. It was precisely this active component of her behaviour under the Nazis that would become problematic after 1945. However, various passages in her account show that even during the Nazi period she experienced things that she found problematic to which she reacted by averting her gaze and pretending not to know what was going on. This becomes clear in her account for example of how, on her way to work, she saw Jewish children who had been thrown out on the streets. In recounting this situation she shows empathy and expresses the fact that she doesn't understand how anyone could do this to children. However, she then goes on to relate how she then chose another route to work in order to avoid the sight and locations of the persecution.<sup>18</sup> This avoidance served Emma as a means of self-defence and gives expression to her powerlessness. In her account she connects this experience to the reproach that the whole world must have known but no country took in the persecuted, despite knowing that they were to be murdered. By linking her own powerlessness with the failure of the great powers to intervene, she displaces responsibility from herself onto larger structures.

A further strategy is a de-ideologized presentation of the RAD and its distancing from the "Nazi bigwigs" who were Germans and whom she didn't like. Here we find that element of the national victim discourse that ascribes responsibility to a small number of powerful German men in order to minimize the individual's room for manoeuvre. In relation to her German superiors, Emma claims that she was always in danger, even of ending up in a concentration camp, if she said a word out of place. While the danger of denunciation was indeed serious, Emma is using this argument to claim the right to be treated as a potential victim. Overall, her life story under Nazism shows that she took the opportunities on offer and bettered herself. The active component of her behaviour is left out of her account. Under National Socialism she deliberately avoided direct experience of the persecution of the Jews. She does not totally omit reference to this, but presents herself as someone who was not in a position to do anything and who didn't understand exactly what was going on. Emma's basic strategies under Nazism were avoidance and

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<sup>18</sup>Rosenthal (1992) describes this process, in which the everyday exclusion and humiliation of Jews was excluded from consciousness, in detail.

the displacement of responsibility. In attributing responsibility to others (big countries, Germans), she presents herself as incapable of initiative.

## Conclusion

As these biographical sketches show, these are not women whose behaviour fits directly into the standard image of a perpetrator. However all three were in various ways integrated into the Nazi society through their families and life stories and can in that sense be described as involved and participating. They had been part of a perpetrator group that was not defined by particular actions, but was characterized by a gamut of violence-filled individual and institutional activities that taken together made the Shoah possible. Then, under a new social system with different values and norms, they were obliged to re-interpret their activities under Nazism and integrate them into their life stories. Those actions that had now become problematic could, with the help of the interpretation pattern of the national victim discourse, be re-interpreted or denied. However, as I have tried to show, the national victim discourse was taken on board in line with their experiences so that, in this respect, the discursive interpretation pattern meshes with the meaning they ascribe to their own actions and experiences. This connection is yet another reason why the national victim discourse continues to operate in everyday life despite the fact that it no longer enjoys its former legitimacy in the public sphere. The effectiveness of the national victim discourse lies, it seems, in the fact that it can be coupled at many levels with individual experiences, such as, for example, through the topoi of the “seduced women”, the “Germans as Nazis” or the “non-political men and women” – this latter connecting up with the image of women as non-political that is also produced in other discourses and ideas. The biographical subjects can use this image to deny responsibility for their own activities, which contributed to and maintained the Nazi system. In this way, the role of women not only as perpetrators, but also as co-responsible and participating is actively suppressed not only in the public sphere, but also in the biographies of the women themselves.

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