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Hitler's Baby Farms: The Lebensborn Project

John C. Faulkner

Following his rise to power in 1933, Adolf Hitler instituted racial purity programs designed to reverse Germany's declining fertility rate and increase its Aryan characteristics. Hitler's obsession with racial superiority provided the impetus for pro-natal programs designed to produce the first generation of biologically pure Germans. Babies bred under the Lebensborn Program, a racial purity experiment, were provided charter membership in Hitler's "master race." At the core of the Lebensborn Project, were clandestine baby factories that served as a breeding ground whereby racially superior SS (Schutzstaffel) soldiers impregnated pre-selected Aryan women of equal purity (as the Nazis understood it). During 1935-1945, Lebensborn – the "fountain of life" homes served as maternity wards for some 12,000 births of "racially sound" offspring that were envisaged as future rulers of the Third Reich. Lebensborn descendants remain stigmatized by the atrocities committed by their SS fathers and scarred by Hitler's perverted plan to enhance racial purity. Besides describing this sinister project, this paper examines the suffering victims sustained as Lebensborn progeny during the postwar era, with particular focus on their natural identity loss.

Germany experienced a marked decline in fertility between its political unification in 1871 and the onset of WWI.¹ Natural birth rates failed to replace those who died of natural causes and battle casualties. Between 1871 and the early 1930s, overall fertility declined by some 60 percent, marital fertility by 65 percent, and

¹ John E. Knodel, *The Decline of Fertility in Germany, 1871-1939* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974), 87.

illegitimate fertility by 54 percent.² During the 1920s and early 1930s professionalization left its impact as young women crowded German universities and took up jobs now which, in many cases led to postponement of marriage and motherhood. In an effort to increase birth rates, Hitler outlawed abortion, except where Nazi doctors determined the baby to be non-Aryan, defective, or otherwise undesirable.

Hitler's obsession with enhancing racial purity placed tremendous responsibility on racially desirable men and women to reproduce. Hitler placed a high value on the fertility role of all German women, especially those who could bear children. Almost immediately after Hitler assumed power, he implemented policies or changed existing ones to increase Germany's birthrates.³ Heinrich Himmler, leader of the SS, shared Hitler's concerns about low birth rates as evidenced by a comment he directed to a group of high-ranking SS officers. "A people who have many children have the prospect of world power and world rule, whereas a people with few children have only a death certificate."⁴ Although a rise in birthrates from 1934 onward appeared positive, Germans failed to reproduce in sufficient numbers to equal the large families of the late nineteenth century.

In a new twist, Hitler intended to fill Germany's empty cradles with racially acceptable Aryans. Serving as Hitler's chief racial executive, Himmler empowered his SS men not only to secure a New Order, but also to sire a large portion of it.⁵ Himmler knew SS men were the racially pure specimens that possessed characteristics that Hitler wanted extended to Germany's future

² Ibid., 246-247.

³ Herbert F. Zeigler, "Fight Against the Empty Cradle: Nazi Pronatal Policies and the SS Fuhrerkorps," *Historical Social Research* 38 (1986): 25.

⁴ Ibid., 26.

⁵ Ibid.

generations. In his view, the SS served as an example for the German Volk, and the SS uniform mirrored his image of superiority. Therefore, the progeny of SS soldiers represented Germany's future racial stability, as well as a prized gift for the Fuhrer. The SS held a special position of trust that included begetting and indoctrinating numerous racially valuable children.⁶ Himmler proposed that every SS soldier sire at least four sons, but preferred they produce at least one child per year. On 28 October 1939, Hitler actually demanded that each SS man sire a child before going onto the field.⁷ In December 1938, SS statistics revealed that existing marriages among SS leadership were producing 1.5 children on average.⁸

Other measures accumulated. The Law for the Promotion of Marriages found in Section V of the Law for Reduction of Unemployment transitioned women from the workplace back to home and hearth—a position that conformed to Hitler's preconceived views of women's roles.⁹ Civil servants and public administration employees received monthly child allowances based on the number of children they produced. Taxes benefited married couples with children but penalized those without.¹⁰ The return of women to home and hearth, and tax incentives that were designed to promote childbirth, fertile women failed to fill Germany's nurseries with human stock.

The success of Hitler's pro-natal measures and government-based incentives can be measured in part by a rise in fertility rates after he assumed power in 1933. The birthrate of 59 babies per 1000 women of child-bearing age in 1933 rose to 73 in 1934, and 77 for the next three years. During 1938 births climbed to 81. In 1939 and

⁶ Ibid., 27.

⁷ Ibid., 29.

⁸ Ibid., 30.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 28.

1940 births reached 85 and 84, respectively.¹¹ While birth rates were considerably higher than those recorded in the 1920s to 1933, they were much lower than what Hitler expected. He had relied upon tax incentives, coupon vouchers, and the idea of German nationalism to encourage fertile couples to conceive. Yet, those measures failed to yield higher birth rates. Hitler needed biologically sound, racially superior soldiers to accomplish his tainted goal. It was for this reason that Hitler designed a clandestine pro-natal experiment intended to produce especially pure Aryan babies.

It was on this premise that Himmler established Lebensborn or "fountain of life" in 1935, a division of the SS Race and Settlement Office.¹² Intended to foster the procreation of racially pure offspring, Lebensborn homes provided a clandestine rendezvous for SS soldiers and Aryan women to conceive babies of the highest racial quality. Lebensborn maternity homes sheltered racially desirable women and their babies during pregnancy and post natal care. Colonel Max Sollmann, who had joined the Nazi Party in 1922, served as administrative head of the new organization. Gregor Ebner, a specialist on problems of racial selection, and a close friend of Himmler filled the role of medical chief. In addition, doctors, nurses, bookkeepers, and ancillary personnel staffed some 15-20 homes located in Germany and later Norway.¹³ From its inception, Hitler intended Lebensborn to remain a secret in order to protect those patriotic citizens involved, as well as prevent harmful publicity that might undermine the experiment.

As chief overseer of Lebensborn, Himmler sought to avoid all negative images that could result from a Nazi based fertility

¹¹ Ibid., 50-51.

¹² Lucy S. Dawidowicz, "The Failure of Positive Eugenics," review of *Of Pure Blood*, by Marc Hillel, Clarissa Henry, and Eric Mossbacher, *The Hastings Center Report* 7 (October 1977): 43-44.

¹³ Marc Hillel, and Clarissa Henry, *Of Pure Blood*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 12-

program. Lebensborn homes opened their doors to mothers with illegitimate babies normally shunned by society. Hitler's intended this action to convert those who believed Lebensborn to be little more than SS stud farms into supporters of a kind of social welfare program. Although the Lebensborn birthrate fell within the national average, the illegitimate birth rate fell below the Reich's figure. This fall in illegitimate births indicated that SS men despite encouragement had failed to perform their biological duty for their Commander-in-Chief.¹⁴

Despite Nazi efforts to the contrary, from its inception Lebensborn received the reputation as a whore house for SS officers and soldiers. Furthermore, evidence suggested that Lebensborn homes were indeed established as maternity hospitals (six in Germany, nine in Norway, and one each in France, Belgium, and Luxembourg) for the purpose of caring for racially superior babies.¹⁵ Located mostly in the countryside, Lebensborn homes provided privacy and serenity. The SS provided daily sustenance, housing and medical care for women during pregnancy, labor and delivery services, as well as post natal recovery for some 8,000 women in Germany and about 6,000 in Norway.¹⁶ In addition, Lebensborn operated homes for "valuable" children, or orphans whose parents had been killed in war, as well as those children and adolescents kidnapped by the SS in occupied territories because of their Aryan features and potential breeding capabilities.¹⁷

The systematic kidnapping of Aryan children from Poland and countries that bordered Germany, added some 200,000 Aryan

¹⁴ Larry V. Thompson, review of *Der "Lebensborn e.V.": Ein Instrument nationalsozialistischer Rassenpolitik*, by Georg Lilienthal, *American Historical Review* 93 (June 1988): 729.

¹⁵ David F. Crew, ed., *Nazism and German Society, 1933-1945* (London: Routledge, 1994), 125.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 126.

children to the master race. From November 1939 to the summer of 1941, Himmler pursued the selection of "racially valuable" Polish children. He commented about the management of "his" children, "We are convinced that our own philosophy and ideals will reverberate in the spirit of these children who racially belong to us."¹⁸ Kidnapped children who passed SS racial fitness exams were sent to Lebensborn homes where SS staff served as surrogate families. Racially fit older children and adolescents were placed with "approved" families who indoctrinated them in German National Socialist traditions and customs. Hitler ordered that racially unfit children be interned in work camps. Eventually, most were exterminated.

Statistics compiled during the postwar period indicated the involvement of several hundred thousand girls and women in the Lebensborn experiment in some capacity. Max Sollman, Administrative head of the Lebensborn operation put forth the figure of 12,000 Lebensborn births during his testimony at the American Trial in Nuremberg of members of RuSHA (head office of German Race and Settlement) in 1947-48. Accepted by many historians as the "charitable organization hypothesis", Sollman's estimate cannot be confirmed or denied.¹⁹ According to surviving documents found at the Lebensborn home located in Steinhoring Germany, Dr. Ebner delivered more than 3,000 children there. A letter penned by Dr. Ebner on 22 January 1940 indicated "our homes are overcrowded and our needs urgent." A portion of the letter stated the Wienerwald home in Austria had 192 mothers on its registry in 1941, 250 in 1942, and seventy-two in the first quarter of 1943.²⁰

Falsification of birth records, the willful destruction of files by SS staff, and secrecies involving the experiment prevented Allied

¹⁸ Gitta Sereny, "Stolen Children," *Talk*, November 1999.

¹⁹ Hillel, and Henry, 89.

²⁰ Ibid.

officials from confirming the exact number of babies born under the auspices of the Lebensborn experiment. In addition, Germany and Norway sealed war records during the postwar era, increasing the likelihood that survivors would be unable to identify their natural parents and family. Fortunately, the registers of 2,000 births at the Steinhoring home escaped destruction. Found by Americans during the postwar years, those records included the name and rank of the "unknown" SS father, as well as full details about the mother. The information on the mothers included their home addresses, most of which listed Munich.²¹ The refusal of the SS men and even their Aryan partners to admit the existence of Lebensborn, much less admit their willing participation, added further confusion to a project already shrouded in secrecy.

Forged identities remained a central element of the Lebensborn Project from its inception to its demise after Allied victory in 1945. Fragmented identities characterized Lebensborn survivors, and today, in their 60s and 70s, they remain largely disconnected from their natural history. The stolen identities of Lebensborn children proved detrimental to locating their biological families for the purpose of foster placement and/or adoption during the postwar era. SS staff burned most Lebensborn files, including medical records as the Allied victory loomed. They literally abandoned all their maternity homes, leaving every mother, infant and small child unattended. In some cases, where there were no mothers in the homes, the children were completely abandoned leaving infants and toddlers in appalling conditions. But, Hitler and Himmler had intended that Lebensborn babies experience a closely supervised and well maintained SS environment.

At the outset the SS heaped lavish support on the Lebensborn venture for the purpose of breeding racially fit Aryans.

²¹ Ibid., 90.

Germans.²² Fathers and mothers were selected on the basis of their form, shape, and coloring. Blonde-haired, and blue-eyed, tall fathers and wide-hipped women were preferred for ease in childbearing; they were the parents selected to create children of pure blood.²³ Lebensborn children were “graded” according to desirability. The most desirable were adopted by SS families, while undesirables were either sterilized, or if found wanting, killed.²⁴

Munich served as the administrative headquarters for the Lebensborn organization. The first Lebensborn home, located in Steinhoring Germany, opened shortly after the SS purchased the home from author, Thomas Mann. Mann’s housekeeper, whom the SS retained for service, inherited Mann’s personal diary. A particular entry found in the diary shed light on the stringent qualifications the SS required for women who applied for admission to the first Lebensborn home: “Lebensborn girls who came to Steinhoring underwent thorough medico-racial examinations that included measurements of their head and the width of their pelvises.”²⁵ The entry suggested Mann had some knowledge of the Lebensborn experiment, or at least contact with staff who revealed that the applicants’ examination determined eligibility as well as admission to the experiment.

Under the close scrutiny of Himmler, administrators, nurses, and secretaries, all members of the SS or Nazi Party assisted in daily operations of Lebensborn.²⁶ The SS placed a medical officer in charge of each home. Medical officers served as registrars of births and deaths, maintained order in the homes, and had responsibility for all files, which were kept under lock and key. Only the assigned

²² Dan Bar-On, *Legacy of Silence: Encounters with Children of the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 285.

²³ Hillel, and Henry, jacket cover.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 72.

²⁶ Ibid., 50.

medical officer had access to Lebensborn files. The Reichsführer provided a personalized stamp for use on all correspondence to maintain privacy. Because much of German society frowned on unwed mothers and their offspring, Himmler implemented Order no. 106, which forbade taking photographs of women in all Lebensborn homes. Himmler held medical superintendents personally responsible for ensuring all staff obeyed the order.²⁷ Other orders followed, each designed to disguise the identities of the participants.

In addition to issuing detailed administrative directives, Himmler allowed mothers the privilege of withholding the name of their baby's father, except within Lebensborn confines. As of 20 January 1939, all birth certificates for illegitimate children born in Lebensborn homes were to be provided to the mother and father only.²⁸ The issuance of birth certificates to private persons, private organizations, including Nazi Party organizations was strictly forbidden. Order no. 119, effective 5 June 1939, revealed the extreme extent to which illegitimate children were valuable to Himmler and the Lebensborn operation. A part of the order referred to the ability of the SS to maintain secrecy about the origin of illegitimate children in Lebensborn homes for an "unlimited" time period. The order detailed that each Reich office was to provide a certificate that guaranteed automatically each child's Aryan credentials.²⁹

The fate of newly born babies resided primarily with the mother during her post natal care in a Lebensborn home. A mother had the option of surrendering the child for adoption by an SS family, or she could keep the baby and raise it herself. The SS offered financial assistance for post-natal exercises, and beauty treatments to mothers who surrendered their babies for adoption.

²⁷ Ibid., 51.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

A comprehensive adoption process ensured that Lebensborn babies would be graded on the basis of racial purity. SS families with financial means received first opportunity to adopt babies of highest quality. Lebensborn embraced the idea that the status of the adoptive families should be similar to that of the biological father and mother, and that there should be ideological and racial similarities as well. For example, a baby sired by a senior police officer or SS officer would not be adopted by "lesser ranks" such as a sergeant-major, much less a private.³¹

Childless couples received priority over SS families already blessed with children, but evidence suggested this preference was not always followed. One such example cited adoption records where the SS placed babies with families that already possessed three or as many as six children.³² In one surviving document, Peter Schutz, chief bookkeeper at the Lebensborn home in Steinhoring Germany spoke of a sexual liaison between SS Colonel Meier and a Fraulein Huber. Meier arranged for Huber to deliver their baby in a Lebensborn home. Thereupon he approached the SS headquarters and made arrangements to adopt the baby he had sired with Huber. Meier's fulfillment of his duty to sire children, and the subsequent increase to his own family received express notice from the Fuhrer who expressed his gratitude that Meier took his responsibilities seriously.³³ That Hitler noticed Meier's accomplishments is not surprising. Meier strategically accomplished two goals, by fulfilling his patriotic duty as a racially pure sperm donor, and his contribution of a desirable baby to Germany's stagnant population.

At the time of Meier's adoption, Schutz, a bookkeeper for the Steinhoring home had no children. The Fuhrer took notice of Schutz's failure to procreate, and denied him promotion. On his

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 53.

³³ Ibid.

papers, the Fuhrer wrote, "No children, promotion impossible."³⁴ In addition, Schutz reported that the SS preferred high ranked officers and placed lower ranking soldiers at the bottom of the waiting list for adoption. When mothers chose to keep their offspring, the SS forced the biological father to pay a fee for his child and contribute to the mother's stay at the Lebensborn home. Schutz reported that mothers and children were not allowed to leave Lebensborn homes until SS officials received proof that the mother had financial support for herself and her baby.

Himmler planned for Lebensborn to play the primary role in populating Germany with 120 million Aryans by 1980.³⁵ To ensure the promise of racial supremacy, Himmler sought financial support from bankers, industrialists, and German aristocracy. Those influential investors, considered associates and friends of Himmler, included the CEOs of IG Farben, Siemens, Krupp, Dresdner Bank, and various oil, pharmaceutical, and food industries. While most of the evidence of their financial support subsequently vanished, Himmler's personal letters of thanks to well known supporters remains intact and open to researchers.³⁶ Between 1940 and 1944 the Lebensborn organization received hundreds of millions of marks and at its height employed several thousand people. However, the supporters could not guarantee ongoing success of the experiment. Below the surface, a darker side of Lebensborn lurked.

Adding to the cruelty of this Lebensborn enterprise, buildings, linens, art works, and monies seized from Jews, i.e. persons considered to be the "enemy" of racial purity, provided additional resources to finance Lebensborn goals. The SS scouted Germany for the best, most private properties, which included hospitals, sanatoriums, villas, children's homes, and medical clinics and seized the properties from their legal owners. Those owners who

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 56.

³⁶ Ibid., 68.

refused to surrender were sent to concentration camps, and the occupants of those same establishments were sent away for "disinfection" and "special treatment."³⁷ The investment of monies and manpower that could have otherwise been used to finance Hitler's war efforts also hinted at Lebensborn's high value to the Third Reich's leadership. After Allied victory, Americans discovered 20 million Reichs marks, and smaller amounts of dollars, francs, guilders, and zlotys in the Lebensborn account at Munchner Bank.³⁸

As godfather of Lebensborn children, Himmler prided himself on his attention to detail, including the carefully chosen Germanic name given to each child in naming ceremonies that took place in front of an altar draped with a swastika. He stipulated that each child's weight and height be recorded at birth, and on each subsequent birthday until the child reached age 21. On birthdays, each child received a candle made by inmates at the Dachau concentration camp. Himmler's insistence that all left-handed children should be trained to use both hands provides further insight into the minute detail he invested in a "perfect" race.

In this same vein, Himmler paid careful attention to women who applied for admission to Lebensborn homes. On files of women with strong Nordic features, he commented, "Very good propagation, and "Desirable that she should have children."³⁹ Even the shape of the mothers' and children's noses interested him as did issues surrounding lactation and breastfeeding. In the case of Frau Anni O., Himmler personally came to the Lebensborn home where she lived to congratulate her on her increased breast milk production during the month of January 1940.⁴⁰ Sustaining the master race also required the true believers' willingness to deal with babies who failed to meet the Nazis' rigid racial purity guidelines. Surviving

³⁷ Ibid., 70.

³⁸ Ibid., 72.

³⁹ Ibid., 58.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

documents reveal incidences of abortions, premature births, false pregnancies, sterility, deaths of "wanted" babies, and the arrival of "unwanted" ones.⁴¹

A letter from a young girl, who wrote to the Lebensborn organization, hints at the appeal of this social experiment to young women: "I want to give three children to my Fuhrer straight away. What should I do?" she asked. Himmler answered personally: "Begin by doing what is necessary to have one."⁴² Other letters written to the Lebensborn organization revealed that some young girls expressed interest in marrying their baby's father. Sollman claimed to support every effort to persuade the father to marry the girl. Since only a small number of SS soldiers were unmarried, that claim might very well be propaganda to further legitimize Lebensborn as an ethical experiment. However, there were limits. In correspondence to a young girl who informed Ebner she wanted to marry her baby's father, Ebner responded, "We are not a matrimonial agency." The conflicting statements of Sollman and Ebner suggested the possibility that Lebensborn authorities adopted differing attitudes toward the marriage of natural fathers and mothers who conceived babies within the Lebensborn experiment.

The honor of becoming a Lebensborn mother carried with it a cornucopia of comfortable surroundings, nutritious foods, and the recognition for providing the highest level of service to the Fuhrer. That honor came with inconveniences as well. Lebensborn homes were, after all institutions of community living. SS officer's wives and unmarried women had to clean their own rooms. Resentment related to differing educational and social levels of women surfaced. The refusal of wives of high ranking SS officers or dignitaries to stay even one night after their delivery resulted in numerous reports of sudden departures.⁴³ Acts of outright hostility surfaced. Private

⁴¹ Ibid., 59.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

letters recorded accounts of bits of wire or nails in baby's broth, overflowing chamber pots not emptied for days, infants kicked by nurses while on those pots, and reprimands given to pregnant women for singing loudly. The realities of communal living in wartime Germany grew harsher as Nazi victories ceased. By 1944 Lebensborn experienced a different type of problem—one that began to unravel the seam of a loosely woven social experiment.

The Allied landing in Normandy in June 1944 forced the SS to evacuate most Lebensborn homes abroad. On 23 November 1944, Ebner wrote that all homes in Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France had been evacuated successfully.⁴⁴ All Lebensborn babies and staff were loaded on to SS trucks and trains for transport to the home in Steinhoring Germany. The SS believed Steinhoring to be part of the famous Alpine redoubt. Since Germany planned never to surrender, her prized master race would survive there, they reasoned.⁴⁵ By spring 1945 the Steinhoring home initially designed for fifty mothers, housed more than 300 babies, young children, women, nurses, and staff. Germany's elite lived in cramped, overcrowded conditions. Witnesses recalled violent quarrels, fights over a baby's cot, women in labor, and screaming children throughout the property.⁴⁶ As chaos ensued, and Allied victory loomed, Lebensborn administrative officials prepared for a final evacuation.

During the postwar Nuremberg trials, Father Koepfel, a village priest who lived near the Steinhoring home, reported that for days on end in the spring of 1945 "SS people" drove from the Steinhoring home with loads of linen, food, cutlery, and everything of any value. Baron von Feury, president of the Bavarian farmer's union confirmed Father Koepfel's account. And, he added that the SS people had fled Steinhoring days before the Americans arrived,

⁴⁴ Ibid., 207.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 208.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 209.

taking with them everything of value. Michael Brandmeir, the former Lebensborn storekeeper in Munich, added to Feury's account when he recollected the times he saw Sollmann and other staff pick out the best furs, linens, pictures, carpets, and food that had come from Poland. In addition, the 'important' gentlemen kept the best things for themselves, but the 'small' employees kept their share too.⁴⁷ Reportedly, cutlery with the Rothschild emblem, linens from upscale Jewish-owned hotels, and items that once belonged to the Hapsburgs had filled the Steinhoring home in happier times.

Now, the sudden departure of Lebensborn officials and staff who took all remaining food supplies, caused severe hardships for those left behind. Father Koeppel remembered that there was not so much as a sack of potatoes left behind to feed the women and children abandoned at Steinhoring. In addition, Koeppel recalled the huge bonfires at the Steinhoring home, presumably for the purpose of destroying birth certificates and compromising documents about the children's parentage. Koeppel, who made his way into the Steinhoring home shortly after arrival of the Allies reported that neighbors hated the Lebensborn home so much they damaged the home's interior by smashing everything they could find. Paula Hessler, the only Lebensborn nurse permitted by American officials to remain at the Steinhoring home and care for the children reported the SS burned all records, because they didn't want to leave any evidence behind.

On 15 May 1945 Americans in whose zone where the Steinhoring home was located, converted it to a children's home and placed Dr. Kleinle, a medical officer in the Wehrmacht, in charge. Upon entering the home he found more than 300 children, both German-born and those from occupied countries, living in complete disorder.⁴⁸ The few mothers who remained with their babies were German, Norwegian, Danish, Dutch, Belgian, and French. During

⁴⁷ Ibid., 210.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 212.

the many years Dr. Kleinle remained in charge of the Steninhoring home, he never witnessed even one father who returned for his baby. With exception of a few mothers who kept their babies, the rest had been abandoned by the SS officials. Dr. Kleinle reported extreme hardships that resulted directly from no food for the children, extreme shortage of staff, and the placement of illegitimate Nazi children into foster families.

Given these deplorable circumstances, children at the Steinhoring home lived in beds most of the day, and had little contact with adults other than nursing staff. Reports from Dr. Kleinle indicated that most three and four year olds could not talk. They expressed themselves like young animals, which, he suggested is typical of children raised in substandard institutions. Some of the children were intelligent, while some suffered from mental deficiencies. Still, others displayed physical handicaps. When asked if he witnessed any signs of a superior race, Dr. Kleinle responded, "Most certainly not."⁴⁹ In addition, he commented that Himmler's attempt to birth a Nordic super-race with the help of Lebensborn had ended in total failure. Kleinle added that when compared to children born outside the Lebensborn experiment, the SS offspring and kidnapped Aryan children showed no outstanding physical traits that could qualify them as superior.

The failure of Lebensborn to produce racially pure Germans, along with the irrational SS racist ideology that undergirded the diabolical experiment, condemned Lebensborn descendants to a cruel fate: No longer the paragons of a master race, they became victims of a perverted racial enhancement plan. The connection of Lebensborn children to SS fathers, who were now branded as criminals, added to society's altered view of them as Germany's damaged goods. Now, their Nordic traits proved to be heavy burdens, rather than reflections of their genetic superiority. Most Lebensborn children lived in webs of deceit concocted by their

⁴⁹ Ibid., 214.

adoptive families. Their true life histories remain lost in the dark recesses of the Nazi pro-natal program to which they were born. Starting in May 1945, the lives of Lebensborn offspring have been filled with physical abuse, deprivations, and neglect during the postwar years and decades. Those children who were bred to be perfect have not lived as Germany's elite, rather as SS bastards and whores. They became Germany's human rubbish.

On 4 November 2006 forty members of the *Lebensspuren* (traces of life) group gathered in Wernigerode Germany, a remote town in the Harz Mountains. This particular locale once housed the Lebensborn nursery where those men and women in attendance had lived as infants. More importantly, this visit marked the first time those men and women came back to the home where they were birthed as part of Hitler's nightmarish plan for achieving racial purity. Their physical features, remarkably similar to other people in their 60s, revealed nothing unusual. Most were of average height, sported grey hair, and displayed facial wrinkles. For all intent and purposes they appeared remarkably ordinary. Absent from those socially engineered men and women, intended to be the master race, were any signs of superhuman strength and markings that suggested hereditary superiority. The fabric that connected those men and women together was stained by their SS heritage.

One member, Herr Weber, discovered in 2002 that his father was not a young soldier who had died on a WWII battlefield, as his mother had told him. Rather, his father, a high-ranking SS officer, had overseen the deaths of thousands of people in what is now western Poland. Weber received hints of his existence from family members. He recalled that the quest for his past ended with the unpleasant discovery that he was an illegitimate child and that his godfather was none other than Heinrich Himmler.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Mark Lander, "Results of Secret Nazi Breeding Program: Ordinary Folks," *New York Times*, Late Edition, November 7, 2006.

Another member, Gisela Heidenreich, discovered that her father, a senior SS officer, had met her unmarried mother to sire a baby for Himmler. At first, Gisela's adoptive family told her that her birth mother was her aunt. Later, they told her that her father, an SS officer, had died. Yet, at four years of age, she woke to hear her uncle refer to her as "an SS bastard." Other unpleasant revelations followed. During her teenage years, Gisela discovered through coincidence that her father was still alive. The following quote revealed her anguish about being a product of the Lebensborn experiment. "I've learnt that this feeling of deep uncertainty about my identity is typical of us Lebensborn children," she said. "So many felt that something was wrong before they discovered the truth," then added: "Lebensborn was the opposite of the Holocaust."⁵¹

Dorothee Schmitz-Koster, who wrote a book about the Lebensborn experience, commented that the children were conceived through love affairs, and one-night stands. While some unmarried mothers kept their babies, most gave them to the SS to avoid the social stigma of having illegitimate children. Women who gave birth in Lebensborn clinics were often single, without financial means, and needed a home for their children. For those mothers, Lebensborn homes served as repositories for unwanted merchandise. Initially considered as valuable possessions by SS officials, those same women, during the postwar years, were regarded as SS whores, and if non-German, women who slept with the enemy.

Ruthild Gorgass, a product of the Lebensborn home located at Wernigerode, Germany revealed that her mother told her about the circumstances of her birth when she was a teenager. Ruthild's father, a manager of a chemical plant, had another family, and kept contact with Ms. Gorgass after the birth of Ruthild. While Ruthild thumbed through the Lebensborn picture album received from her mother, she commented, "My eyes aren't perfect." And, then added,

⁵¹ Ibid.

"We've got all the same illnesses and disabilities as other people have."⁵² Lebensborn progeny who were born in Norway shared similar accounts of their German counterparts.

In a CNN (Cable News Network) program that aired 2 May 2005, Correspondent Nic Robertson interviewed Sis Oster, who described her experience as a 12 year old Lebensborn survivor in Norway during 1954. Her maternal grandparents adopted Oster from the Lebensborn home where she lived after her biological mother abandoned her. As a youngster, Oster found a piece of paper that was actually a birth certificate that listed her name and that of her older sister. The birth record listed her German father's occupation as a soldier. At age eight, she discovered that her sister who was twenty years her senior was actually her mother. Oster quoted, "A lot of us really, really had bad time. We were shuttled around like cattle, sent to people, they got money to have us. And the teachers, and priests and everyone, they also treated us very badly."⁵³ Norway denied citizenship to many Lebensborn descendants after the war. Oster, who functions as a spokesperson for Lebensborn residents who live in Norway, petitioned her country's government for compensation for their unnecessary plight during the postwar years.

One of the highest profile Lebensborn, Anni-Frid (Frida) Lyngstad fared better than some. Born the daughter of a German soldier who was stationed in Norway during the occupation, Lyngstad's mother became a hate figure during the postwar years. In order to escape harassment in Norway, she took young Frida and moved to Sweden. Frida became one of the singers in Abba, an internationally popular band that produced several hit songs during the 1970s. The natural identities of most Lebensborn descendants were not revealed for many years after the war.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ "The Lebensborn," CNN, May 2, 2005.

During the postwar era Lebensborn records that survived in East Germany remained hidden for decades by Communists authorities. In West Germany some one thousand records that survived, with parents names intact, were placed in a repository open only to Lebensborn offspring. Wilhelm Lenz, head of the department for documents from the Third Reich, admitted that until recently, most Lebensborn either did not know, or suspect they were Lebensborn children.⁵⁴ The identities of some Lebensborn offspring were stolen by agents of East Germany's secret police agency (Stasi) who used the identities to pose as displaced Norwegians returning to their homeland. One such case involved a female agent who stole the identity of Aud Rigmor Harzendorf, a Norwegian Lebensborn child, and used the fake identity in the 1960s and 1970s to secure Norwegian documents she used while spying.⁵⁵

Harzendorf applied for a marriage license at age twenty-one and discovered her birth certificate and document of citizenship for her birth country were missing from the children's home where she lived prior to adoption. When Harzendorf finally located her birth certificate, she was startled to find that her natural mother, a bookkeeper for the Nazi army, and her father, an SS aviator were documented on her birth certificate. The birth certificate held the key to Harzendorf's past, and it provided clues that helped locate her natural mother. Harzendorf's journey to discover her natural family resulted in a one time visit with her mother, who died shortly after the reunion. Like most Lebensborn offspring, no one told them about their parent's role in the Third Reich. And, few, if any, were prepared for the suffering they would sustain during their adolescent and adult years.

The postwar experiences of Lebensborn survivors revealed varying levels of hostility directed at them. Paul Hansen, one of

⁵⁴ Carol J. Williams, "Children Uncomfortable Reminder of Nazi Past," *The Gazette* (Montreal), January 27, 2000.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

twenty children in the Lebensborn home near Oslo face abandonment following the war. Beaten in most of the asylum where he lived, denied an education, and never given an IQ test, Hansen was declared to be a congenital imbecile because his father was a German soldier.⁵⁶ Labeled as subnormal, he had to live with psychotic inmates who defecated in the room where he stayed. Hansen's biological parents fled Norway, leaving him at the mercy of anyone who would care for a "Nazi baby. He recalled that no one knew what to do with us, so they dumped us in a mental hospital where the inmates were chained to beds.

As Hansen's fate shows, some Norwegian health officials were prepared to label Lebensborn progeny as retarded. The scientific proof was little more than a commonly held perception that only half-witted Norwegian women would sleep with a Nazi. To Brandacher, who leads an organization named War Child Organization Lebensborn, and is suing the Norwegian government, explained that during the postwar years mothers were expelled from Lebensborn homes, locked in camps, and their children abused. Furthermore, he added, the Norwegians wrote brutal comments in their documents about us.⁵⁷ Brandacher considered Lebensborn to be shrouded in a conspiracy of silence, and a national disgrace for Norway, because everybody knew about it, heard about it, and no one talked about it.

Brandacher argued that most people exhibited blatant disdain for Lebensborn children during the postwar era. "Nobody cared," said Brandacher. "Everybody hated them, everybody beat them, everybody sexually abused them, and everybody urinated on

⁵⁶ Imre Karacs, "Heinrich Himmler: Behind the Aryan Breeding Plan," *The Independent* (London), August 3, 2001.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

them.”⁵⁸ He suggested that Norwegians treated “whore children” so badly, because of guilt associated with Germany’s occupation of Norway. More than two hundred thousand Norwegian men volunteered to work for Nazi Germany. Brandacher believes they needed something to hate in order to rid the shame they felt for not resisting Germany’s advances. Living as German outcasts, or “Nazi” babies, Lebensborn children bore the brunt of their illegitimacy and involuntary association with Nazis.

Norway was hardly an isolated case. During 1943 SS soldiers kidnapped Alodia Witaszek from her family in Poland. Her blonde hair and blue eyes qualified her as racially pure Aryan stock—a gift for the Fuhrer, as she remembered being called. The SS separated Alodia from her biological sister, also kidnapped, in order to demolish and reshape their identities. Some twenty years later, the International Tracing Service (ITS), a unit of the International Committee of the Red Cross, located in Bad Arolsen Germany, provided a collection of documents about some 250 children forcibly removed from their families in an attempt to provide Aryan specimens for Hitler’s mad dream of racial purity.⁵⁹

In many cases, Lebensborn children who were born in Norway became punching bags for Norwegians, most of whom hated Germans. Such was the case for Tove Laila Strand, whose SS father mated with her mother while stationed in Norway. Subjected to regular beatings with wooden coat hangers, Strand recalled that her abusive adoptive parents called her a “German child.” Worse abuse followed. During the eight years that Strand lived with them, her stepfather repeatedly raped her. Trying to put the horrible mistreatment in perspective, she recalled, “It wasn’t that strange, I

⁵⁸ “Born of a Norwegian Mother and a German Father in Norway During World War II,” *Independent on Sunday* (London), February 2, 2003.

⁵⁹ Melissa Eddy, “A Daughter for the ‘Master Race’,” *Decatur Daily* (Alabama), May 7, 2007.

was after all, the child of the enemy.”⁶⁰ In 2003, a 61 year-old Strand put in a guest appearance once on a Norwegian television program to discuss the Lebensborn experience. Some citizens were not moved by her revelations. Shortly after her appearance, a stranger approached Strand and spat on her. Then, Strand’s neighbor turned on her: “I don’t say hello to whore children and my tax money will certainly not go to paying your compensation.”⁶¹

Word of the Lebensborn victims’ plight also reached the English-speaking world. Personal accounts of Lebensborn survivors featured in the 7 November 2006 edition of *The Express*, a United Kingdom newspaper, revealed the extent of the victims’ emotional and physical turmoil. Dagmar Schmidt, whose father, a Waffen SS officer, and mother, a member of the League of German Girls, recalled being taunted to the point that she developed several nervous disorders. She added, “I know we will never have the sympathy of the concentration camp victims but we suffered badly too.” “We were victims of Hitler as well.” Hans Ulrich agreed. “We were brutalized as children because everybody knew our mothers weren’t really our mothers and that our fathers were the scum of Germany—SS killers.” Folker Heinicke, who was kidnapped by SS soldiers in modern day Ukraine, and adopted by a wealthy German family, remembered the nagging feeling that something was not right about him. He added, “That often happens when you have no mother, no father, no roots.”⁶² The willful surrender by natural mothers of their Lebensborn progeny to the care of the SS, left most Lebensborn children without biological roots and support of a natural family.

⁶⁰ “Born of a Norwegian Mother and a German Father in Norway During World War II,” February 2, 2003.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Paul Callan, and Allan Hall, “We’re Hitler’s Secret Children,” *The Express* (United Kingdom) First Edition, November 7, 2006.

As Lebensborn survivors speak out about their lives, they educate the public about their experiences as survivors of a clandestine racial purity program. Bjoern Drivdal, a Lebensborn survivor, who serves as secretary of the League Lebensborn of Norwegian Children of War commented that for half of the population, Lebensborn were German bastards, and for the other half "we were immoral love children." Arne Oeland chairs an association called Children of War Denmark. She acknowledged that in some cases, the dark Lebensborn secret became known through a family member who became intoxicated at a family gathering, or a mother who spilled the truth during an angry outburst at a child. In recent years, media coverage provided clues that led some Lebensborn adults to discover their sinister, troubled origins.

During spring 1945 Lebensborn children began to discover that their membership in the master race had expired. Although, they were bred to be perfect Aryan specimens, the children of Lebensborn lived on as orphans of shame, Germany's rubbish, and mere products of a failed social experiment. Abandoned by their SS caregivers, Lebensborn children learned to live at the mercy of social organizations and adopted families that attempted to wipe out all traces of their botched identities. On 10 October 1947 the trial of the Race and Settlement Head Office and the Lebensborn case opened at Nuremberg. After a lengthy deliberation, the court ruled that the Lebensborn Society existed prior to the war as a welfare organization and maternity home that cared for mothers married and unmarried, and children both legitimate and illegitimate. Lack of evidence that the Lebensborn organization participated in the kidnapping and murder of Aryan children, resulted in the acquittal of defendants Max Sollman and Gregor Ebner. However, the true instigators of Lebensborn had already departed. While imprisoned and awaiting trial, Heinrich Himmler ingested a lethal dose of poison on 23 May 1945. His inspirational Fuhrer, Adolf Hitler had already put a bullet in his own brain three weeks earlier in his bunker in Berlin.

During the postwar era, sealed Nazi records clouded the lives of Lebensborn offspring further, and prevented discussion of the social impact of Hitler's pro-natal plan for racial purity (as the Nazis understood it). Lebensborn represents a crude form of social engineering—one that held an irrational opinion of racial purity. In the twisted mind of Adolf Hitler, racial purity existed as nothing more than a delusion. Despite efforts to the contrary, Hitler's incubator failed to produce a scientifically proven race of biologically superior Germans. Ironically, Hitler did not possess the Aryan features he believed to be superior. Lebensborn descendants exhibit the same frailties and physical limitations as non-Aryans. And through no fault of their own, they still represent a dark, ugly side of German history. Shunned by today's society, the "master race" remains stigmatized by their Nazi heritage and soiled by the twisted scheme that bred them to be racially superior, forged their identities, wiped away their past, and then, finally, abandoned them.

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