

World news

Jess Smee in Wernigerode

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Victims of Hitler's plan for a master race

Climate of shame suppressed discussion of Third Reich's social impact



▲ German nurses take babies out for fresh air in the grounds of a former hotel in the Bavarian resort of Bad Wiessee in June 1945. Photograph: William Allen/AP

Blond hair, blue eyes: the Third Reich's sinister plan to boost the "master race" has left behind an emotionally charged legacy that lingers to this day. The Lebensborn Kinder - a long hushed-up aspect of Nazi history - were born in special maternity homes, places where mostly unmarried women and the wives of SS men gave birth to children with "good Aryan" blood.

Now in their 60s, a group of these children met this weekend in the eastern German town of Wernigerode, telling their stories in the hope of quelling the taboos and flamboyant myths about the murky Nazi institutions.

"It's high time to tell the truth," said Gisela Heidenreich, one of the 37 Lebensborn (source of life) children who travelled to the quiet town. "There's been too much talk about Nazi babies, women being kept as SS whores and tall blond people being bred."

The assembled group, who have travelled from far and wide, are notable for their diversity - a far cry from stereotypes of any unified Nazi master race. While a few have light blond hair, most are now grey.

Walking down the leafy streets after visiting Wernigerode's Lebensborn home, Gisela described the confusion she and her peers have suffered. Her eyes blazed as she spoke of the web of lies that dominated her childhood. First she was led to believe that her birth mother was an aunt. She was later told that her father, a married SS officer, was dead. She woke up to the fact that all was not as it seemed when she was four and heard her uncle refer to her as "an SS bastard".

"That was the first time that my world fell apart. My second shock came when I was a teenager and found out through mere coincidence that my father was alive," the tall, blond woman explained. "I've learnt that this feeling of deep uncertainty about my identity is typical of us Lebensborn children. So many felt that something was wrong before they discovered the truth."

For decades after the second world war a climate of shame suppressed discussion of the social impact of the Third Reich. That meant that many Lebensborn children only recently discovered their roots - especially those who grew up in the former communist east. Among those, some were astounded to read about their background in their Stasi secret service files, which were made public after the reunification of Germany in 1990.

The children represented a traumatic chapter in 20th century history and were often shunned by society. Kikki Skjermo, a lively woman who travelled here from Norway, described being stigmatised as a "Nazi child" during her childhood in a Norwegian children's home. When she later found her own mother she also met a wall of coldness. "She only touched me once, gently on the nose. I can remember that day so clearly," Kikki said.

The weekend meeting of the group called Lebensspuren (traces of life), is full of similarly painful stories. Since its creation four years ago, its members swap stories about tracing relatives and dealing with rejection and lies. There is the odd happy tale of reunited families, but for many it has been a battle against taboos and misinformation.

Folker Heinecke was only two years old when he was kidnapped in what is now Ukraine by Nazis because of his Aryan looks. He thinks his real name is Aleksander Litau. After growing up in East Germany, he was only able to search for his family when the wall came down.

He travelled to the rural town in Ukraine where records suggest he was found. "I walked around and, even though I have no memories of living there, it somehow felt strangely comfortable to me. I was sent to some houses where children were meant to have been kidnapped - but no one knew anything," the smartly-dressed 66-year-old said. "I'll keep looking."

Hartmut Mueller, who is sitting in front of him, nods and reaches over to hold Folker's hand. "I know what that's like. I know I've got two other siblings but I just can't find them anywhere."

In Wernigerode, the Lebensspuren organisers want to create a museum in the inconspicuous cream-coloured house that was formerly a Lebensborn home. The last Lebensborn baby was born there in 1945. It was kept as a maternity clinic for years afterwards - partly because the Nazi era equipment had been state of the art. When the home was cleared out in 1990, books were found listing the births which had taken place there.

Standing on its front lawn, a member of the Lebensspuren board stresses how important it is to document what happened, but always with a nod to the larger tragedy of Hitler's regime. The museum must remind future generations, "but certainly not stand as any sort of memorial", he says. "That is the crux of the dilemma for this generation. They are victims but at the same time, the children of criminals".

This unwieldy historical baggage impels Gisela to take her story to pupils in schools and colleges. "We all need to be aware of what happened, especially the younger generations," she said at the meeting. "The story of Lebensborn is so important because it's about families; mothers, fathers, children, it's something they can empathise with."

And for her - as with others gathered in the room - telling the truth is all-important. As she gives an impassioned speech to the crowded room, it is clear how her ruptured history has dominated her life. And her chosen career comes as little surprise - family therapy.

Backstory

Lebensborn, which means "source of life", was a programme created by **Heinrich Himmler**, Adolf Hitler's right-hand man. It was designed to boost the German population by encouraging citizens, especially **SS members**, to have more children. SS officers came under pressure to have four children, inside or outside marriage. **Ten maternity homes** were set up across Germany where 8,000 to 12,000 Lebensborn Kinder were born. Some stayed with their mothers, but **many were adopted** by families of SS officers. About 60% were born to unmarried mothers, the rest to wives of SS men. As the Third Reich expanded, Lebensborn homes were set up across **Europe**. In **Norway** some 10,000 babies were born, most fathered by SS officers to Norwegian mothers. There were also cases of children with "Aryan" characteristics being **kidnapped** from their homes in occupied territories.

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