HITLER'S FURIES

GERMAN WOMEN IN THE NAZI KILLING FIELDS

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Perpetrators

THE FIRST NAZI MASS MURDERESS was not the concentration camp guard but the nurse. Of all the female professionals, she was the deadliest. Centrally planned mass killing operations began neither in the gas chambers at Auschwitz-Birkenau nor in the mass shooting sites of Ukraine; they began instead in the hospitals of the Reich. The first methods were the sleeping pill, the hypodermic needle, and starvation. The first victims were children. During the war, nurses gave thousands of deformed babies and disabled adolescents overdoses of barbiturates, lethal injections of morphine, and denied them food and water.

All of this was done in the name of progress and the health of the nation. In the late nineteenth century, the modern science of genetics spawned the international field of eugenics, a term defined in the subtitle of a 1910 book by an American leader in the field, Harvard-educated Charles Davenport — *Eugenics: The Science of Human Improvement by Better Breeding.* In German circles eugenics was also known as racial hygiene, and it was aimed more specifically at policies to increase the Aryan population. Inherited "genetic" defects and traits were understood as racial or group manifestations that defined humanity's different civilizations, some deemed more advanced than others, all of them competing for survival. Racism, like nationalism, was viewed positively. Progress, imagined in German ideals of beauty and conduct, could be achieved only by removing humanity's blights. In the hands of revolutionary zealots, Nazi men and women of action, this science of human inequality had to be taken as far as it could go. Biological manipulations and sterilizations were insufficient to achieve the goal of Aryan perfection through social engineering, and segregation was not enough either. The only total, "final" solution to the problem of racial degeneration was to destroy the contaminant, starting with "defective" Germans. Misleadingly termed "euthanasia" or "mercy killing," the top-secret program was personally authorized by Adolf Hitler and carried out under the cover of war.

From its beginnings in the Reich before the Nazi invasion of Poland, the "euthanasia" program involved the recruitment of female midwives and of medical personnel, both doctors and nurses. These professionals would eventually murder more than two hundred thousand people in Germany, Austria and the annexed Reich borderlands of Poland, and the Czech lands. Close to four hundred medical institutions would become stationary murder operations of racial screening and selection, cruel experimentation, mass sterilization, starvation, and poisoning. In the weeks before the Nazi invasion of Poland, the Reich Ministry of the Interior demanded reports from physicians and midwives identifying newborn infants and children under the age of three with severe physical and mental disabilities. Mothers were pressured to hand over their "diseased" children to so-called pediatric clinics, which became processing and killing centers. As many as eight thousand children were killed in Germany and Austria before the program was expanded to target adults. The categories of "incurable" illnesses and disabilities — including "feeble-mindedness," "criminal insanity," and "dementia" — became ever more blurred.

Mass shootings of Polish psychiatric patients began in Kocborowo (in German, Conradstein) in September 1939. In October 1939 came the unprecedented mass gassing of patients from the asylum in Owińska

(Treskau) who were brought to Fort VII in Poznań, where a rudimentary stationary chamber had been sealed with clay — an experiment that Himmler himself would observe in December 1939. SS and police mobile killing units swept through Poland, and later through the Baltics, Ukraine, and Belarus, shooting thousands of patients in asylums and hospitals and gassing others in mobile vans. Back in the Reich, in the asylums at Grafeneck and Hadamar, hospital clerical staff typed up death notices and, as we've seen, processed shipments of common ashes to the victims' families. With Hitler's backing, medical health professionals and their technical experts developed a new genocidal expertise, which they applied to ever-larger operations of mass murder in the more remote eastern territories. In late 1941 and early 1942, scientists, engineers, "crematorium stokers," drivers, and medical staff were transferred to Belarus and Poland to implement stationary gassing methods first tested on Soviet POWs and later used against Jews in Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka, the Operation Reinhard killing centers. Human beings became cargo, guinea pigs, and ashes.

Granting "mercy" deaths to German soldiers on the eastern front may also have been part of these mass-murder operations. According to postwar testimony of a member of a top-secret mission, selected agents of the "euthanasia" program who had taken an oath of secrecy to the Führer were mobilized for eastern service and brought to field hospitals near Minsk, where they "relieved the suffering" of German soldiers. In December 1941 and January 1942, Viktor Brack, an SS officer who made his mark in the Nazi system as a gassing and sterilization expert, led a team of doctors, nurses, and technicians on this eastern mission. It was suspected by informed Germans at the time, and has been suggested by historians since then, that medical teams killed critically wounded and mentally and physically disabled German soldiers who were casualties of the failed Moscow offensive. One of the first to mention this deployment was the nurse and career killer Pauline Kneissler, whom we met in chapter 2.

In a postwar court, Kneissler disclosed that she was sent to Minsk to care for the wounded, though in the same testimony she bemoaned the fact that she was not permitted to serve as a "regular" nurse with

the German Red Cross in a field hospital. This contradiction in her testimony lends credence to a statement that she is alleged to have made to a friend, not in the courtroom. While she was in the East she gave lethal injections to brain-damaged, blinded, and mutilated troops. Those killed were "our own," she told her friend, referring to Germans. Apparently when Kneissler shared this information, she justified the action by asserting, as she had about the gassings at Grafeneck Castle, that the patients died painlessly.

The possibility that German medical teams killed the Reich's own soldiers was — and still is — a taboo topic, and we do not know for certain that it happened. But if the regime was already killing adult German men who were disabled or diagnosed as insane, why would officials bother to transport severely disabled or shell-shocked German men from the eastern front back to the Reich? Under the cover of war in the East, these injured soldiers could be reported as combat casualties, granting them a hero's death that would be mourned but not questioned by the family. Perhaps it was the ideological hard core of the nurses' corps, the Nazi Party's "brown" nurses, who carried out such actions. With their aprons filled with morphine vials and needles, they were certainly equipped to give gravely injured and shell-shocked soldiers a "mercy" death. In 1942, Hitler's physician Dr. Karl Brandt, who co-led the euthanasia program in the Reich, was promoted to the position of Commissioner General for Health and Sanitary Matters. In this capacity he oversaw an expansion of the killing of patients (known as Operation Brandt), targeting hospitals and similar nursing facilities that were needed for military purposes. By war's end the German victims of euthanasia who were transferred from hospitals and nursing homes to gassing centers included geriatric patients, people who had nervous disorders and other injuries from aerial bombings, and traumatized soldiers.

After patients in asylums and hospitals in Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltics, and Poland were killed by mobile units or medical personnel, the facilities were usually taken over by regional authorities and converted into Hitler Youth clubs, barracks for German soldiers, clubs for SS officers, and dormitories for female staff. But a few of these emp-

tied facilities in Poland were used as killing centers for new groups of victims. In 1942 Hitler's euthanasia staff organized deportations of patients from the Reich to an asylum in Meseritz-Obrawalde, a German-Polish border town. Transports from twenty-six German cities arrived there between 1942 and 1944, usually under cover of night. Those sent from Hamburg in late 1943 and early 1944 contained 407 handicapped patients — 213 men, 189 women, and five children. Few survived. Meseritz was supposed to accommodate about nine hundred patients, but during the war "the transports just kept coming," the female head doctor later said. Two thousand were crammed into the building, subjected to daily sufferings similar to those in a concentration camp — a roll call, forced-labor assignments, and regular selections. Doctors and nurses killed patients who, according to postwar prosecutors, "caused extra work for the nurses, those who were deaf-mute, ill, obstructive, or undisciplined, and anyone else who was simply annoying," as well as those "who had fled and were recaptured, and those engaging in undesirable sexual liaisons." Estimates of the number killed at this one site range from six thousand to eighteen thousand.

The female nurses who later confessed to killing patients at Meseritz had not signed an oath of secrecy concerning the euthanasia program, as Pauline Kneissler had. One explained that it took at least two nurses to kill a patient, since the victims resisted taking the large doses of medicine and shots. Meseritz-Obrawalde was one of several "wild" euthanasia sites deliberately located on the Reich's eastern frontier, where larger transports could be received and the victims killed indiscriminately and disposed of out of view.

The Holocaust, including the euthanasia campaign, was a state-sponsored policy. The killing was organized and carried out by employees and contractors of the state and Nazi Party organizations, and it took place in state-run institutions — specially constructed killing centers, concentration camps, asylums, and hospitals. Within these public institutions one finds many women working as clerks, detectives, overseers, and guards, and one finds female nurses and doctors who did the murdering themselves. The examples of female killers to

follow, however, move the crime scenes outside of these official sites of terror and incarceration, to the perimeter of camps, to the rural ghettos of the East, to the households of SS policemen, to the gardens of private homes and estates, and to the open marketplaces and fields of small towns in eastern Europe.

The frontier, a European stage where Hitler and his supporters fulfilled their imperial fantasies, was also a space for them to carry out criminal policies with impunity. Several of the female perpetrators in this chapter did just this as well. They slipped into another role — a hybrid character that embodied the stiff Nazi patriot, brazen cowgirl, and cold-blooded anti-Semite. They carried whips, they brandished pistols and rifles, they wore riding pants, and they rode horses. The transformation was extreme.

Johanna Altvater, the ambitious business secretary from stifling Minden, was twenty-two years old when she arrived in the Ukrainian-Polish border town of Volodymyr-Volynsky. A county seat, with thirty thousand inhabitants, the town was surrounded by wheat fields and forests delineated by the marshy banks of two rivers, the Bug and the Luga, where Germans liked to go boating and picnicking. The town was also an important military-industrial juncture with soldiers' barracks, a radio station, an airport, fuel depots, a brick factory, a textile mill, and a clothing factory. For the Jews in town, these installations were critical to their survival as laborers.

A few months before Altvater's September 1941 arrival, members of an SS and police special commando unit had already initiated the first anti-Jewish measures in Volodymyr-Volynsky. With the help of the local German military commander, they formed a Jewish council, then publicly humiliated its members and buried them alive. The Jewish council chief committed suicide with his family. On September 30, Yom Kippur, a larger massacre occurred. Altvater's boss, a "gimlet-eyed runt" named Wilhelm Westerheide, arrived to take over as regional commissar. It was immediately clear to the Jews who had survived the first wave of massacres that life would not improve under Commissar Westerheide. He started "target shooting" of individual Jews who were loading fuel barrels at the railway station.

In April 1942 the ghetto was sealed off with barbed wire. Until then Jews had been required to wear badges and live in a designated quarter but could move in and out of that area. Jews, Ukrainians, and Poles interacted in the local "black market" economy. Once the ghetto was closed, a Jewish police force was formed. Along with the Jewish council, the Jewish police were expected to fulfill all German demands. Westerheide and his staff forced Jews to give up their money, jewelry, furniture, and other valuables in return for bogus promises of protection. Wood and coal, necessary for surviving the harsh winter, were confiscated as well. In June 1942 the ghetto was divided into two communities, as one survivor saw it: the "dead" one of non-laboring Jews, mostly women, children, and the elderly, and the much smaller "living" one of skilled workers. Ukrainian police auxiliaries guarded the perimeter of the ghetto.

In the summer of 1942 and fall of 1943, waves of German-led mass shooting actions reduced the Jewish population in the entire region from about twenty thousand to four or five hundred. These massacres began at the end of August 1942, when Westerheide returned from the commissars' conference in Lutsk. There, he and the other district governors in Nazi-occupied Ukraine had learned that their bosses expected them to carry out the Final Solution "one hundred percent."

Though the order was of course not issued directly to "Fräulein Hanna," Johanna Altvater decided to do her part. She often accompanied her boss on routine trips to the ghetto; she was seen hitching their horses to the gate at the ghetto entrance. On September 16, 1942, Altvater entered the ghetto and approached two Jewish children, a six-year-old and a toddler who lived near the ghetto wall. She beckoned to them, gesturing as if she were going to give them a treat. The toddler came over to her. She lifted the child into her arms and held it so tightly that the child screamed and wriggled. Altvater grabbed the child by the legs, held it upside down, and slammed its head against the ghetto wall as if she were banging the dust out of a small carpet. She threw the lifeless child at the feet of its father, who later testified, "Such sadism from a woman I have never seen, I will never forget this."

There were no other German officials present, the father recalled. Altvater murdered this child on her own.

During the liquidation of the ghetto, the German commander of the nearby POW camp saw Fräulein Hanna, in her riding pants, prodding Jewish men, women, and children into a truck. She circulated through the ghetto cracking her whip, trying to bring order to the chaos "like a cattle herder," as this German observer put it. Altvater entered the building that served as a makeshift hospital. She burst into the children's ward and walked from bed to bed, eyeing each child. She stopped, picked one up, took it to the balcony, and threw the child to the pavement below. She pushed the older children to the balcony of the ward — which was on the third floor — and shoved them over the rail. Not all of the children died on impact, but those who survived were seriously injured.

Altvater did not act alone in the infirmary: she was there with one of her friends, the German gendarme chief named Keller. Keller had the authority to order the Jewish nurse, Michal Geist, to go down to the pavement to verify that the children who lay motionless were actually dead. The wounded and other children in the infirmary were placed in a truck. Their work nearly completed, Altvater and Keller drove off, presumably to the death pits at the edge of town.

Altvater's specialty — or, as one survivor put it, her "nasty habit" — was killing children. One observer noted that Altvater often lured children with candy. When they came to her and opened their mouths, she shot them in the mouth with the small silver pistol that she kept at her side. Some suggested that Altvater and Westerheide were lovers, but most derided her as Westerheide's "she-man" companion (*Mannweib*). Altvater did not get along well with the other women stationed in town, including a German Red Cross nurse and another secretary in her office. She visited the soldiers' home to socialize, but the other women "did not think highly of her since she was always strutting around in her brown Nazi Party uniform and behaved like a typical butch." She had a large frame and a close-cropped "man's haircut." Jewish survivors and German character witnesses recalled her masculine

features, which they linked to her aggressive behavior. In these depictions of Nazi violence, Johanna Altvater is portrayed in an ambiguous, indeed repulsive, male-female form. Her exceptionally male appearance became a way to explain her horrifically violent acts, just as — via a different mechanism — Vera Wohlauf's ultra-feminine state of pregnancy made her violence especially repugnant. But in neither case does gender alone explain the extent of the violence committed.

From the Volodymyr-Volynsky ghetto, Jews were driven to the fields of Piatydny. There they discovered wide trenches shaped like crosses; Jewish laborers had been forced to dig their own mass graves. In the two weeks that followed, as many as fifteen thousand Jews were shot here. Westerheide, who later bragged about "bumping off" so many Jews, was seen there on horseback, as was Altvater's colleague Keller, later identified as "one of the worst." Near the mass shooting site, Westerheide and his deputies caroused at a banquet table with a few German women. Altvater was among the revelers, drinking and eating amid the bloodshed. Music playing in the background mixed with the sound of gunfire. From time to time, one of the German executioners would get up from the table, walk to the shooting site, kill a few people, and then return to the party. Polish farmers who were working in the fields near the site, some picking pears, heard the screaming and shooting and warned Jews hiding in the forest not to return to the ghetto.

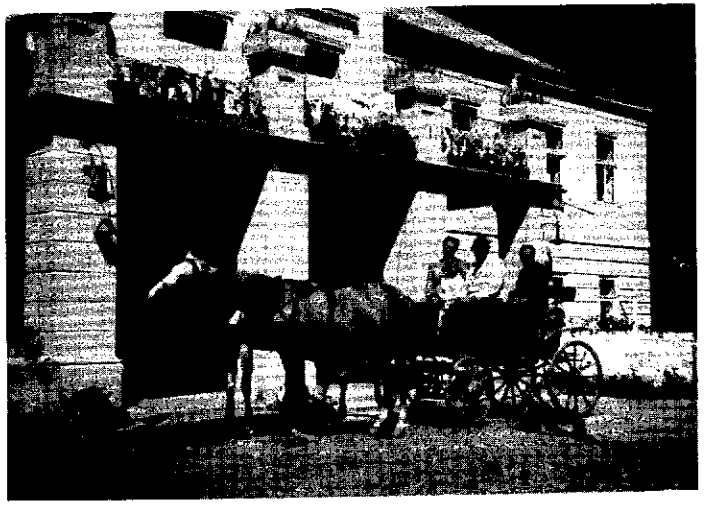
The three thousand Jews who survived were crammed into small huts behind rows of barbed-wire fencing. Sleeping several to a bed and on floors, without any heat, they received a daily ration of no more than 390 calories, or less than 100 grams of bread (about three slices); it was not enough to fend off illnesses, and a typhoid epidemic raced through the ghetto. One of the children who entered the ruins was ten-year-old Leon Ginsburg. He searched for his family but learned that the Germans and their collaborators had killed most of them. Jews in the ghetto explained to Leon what had happened. Perhaps referring to Johanna Altvater, they described a "Polish woman, the lover of the Commandant," named Anna, who had "the first pick of women's shoes and clothing." In the ravaged ghetto, black-and-white photographs lay scattered on the unpaved streets, smiling faces of Jews enjoying prewar weddings, holidays, schools, and birthdays. Now they were all dead and stared at him like ghosts. Realizing that he had to leave, he planned his escape to the woods.

Had Leon stayed, he probably would not have survived in the ghetto. Westerheide, Keller, Fräulein Hanna, and their colleagues in the SS were relentless. In the first half of 1943, they organized another mass shooting, in which twelve hundred Jews from the ghetto and surrounding area were murdered. One thousand craftsmen and their families were retained until the last days of the German occupation, when Westerheide's office evacuated in December 1943. In fact, the last known massacre of Jews in Nazi-occupied Ukraine occurred here on December 13–14, 1943.

Nazi leaders understood that they might lose the military campaign but were determined to win the war against the Jews. Completing its final sweep westward from Russia back to Germany with orders to kill all remaining Jewish populations, a special commando unit brought the last Jews to a "wooded area after a motorized platoon of Gendarmerie and Ukrainian auxiliaries had cordoned off the area. The rails for a pyre to cremate the bodies had been prepared there in advance."

At the end of 1943, before the Volodymyr-Volynsky office was shut down, Johanna Altvater was already back in the Reich. After serving as the personal secretary for the highest authority in the district, she was transferred to the regional capital of Lutsk. According to her record, she was reassigned for disciplinary reasons. Altvater explained after the war that the reason for her transfer to Lutsk was an incident; after a night of partying she and her carousers drove a "cow" into the ghetto. It is not clear what sort of game they were playing. She went home for Christmas leave and did not return to Volodymyr-Volynsky. The Soviets reoccupied the region in January and February 1944. Still hopeful that she would have a future in the East, Altvater applied to enter a civil service program for training the colonial elite.

When Johanna Altvater postured as a Nazi official, and when she



Erna Petri at her Grzenda estate, with her son in the fields *(top)* and riding in a carriage in front of the villa *(bottom)*

became violent, she took on a male appearance. Vera Wohlauf wore a military coat and cap to go to the Miedzyrzec-Podlaski massacres and deportations. Such mutations were not total and irreversible, but they are illustrative of the malleable roles that women in the East slipped into and out of. As individual women navigated the multiple war zones of the East, and as some became conditioned to do what was considered man's work, traditional presentations and roles be-

came confused. Nowhere was this mutability more chillingly apparent than in the cases of the SS wives who became perpetrators. These women displayed a capacity to kill while also acting out a combination of roles: plantation mistress; prairie Madonna in apron-covered dress lording over slave laborers; infant-carrying, gun-wielding *Hausfrau*.

Himmler's SS officers and their wives stationed in Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltics enjoyed the freedom of the East, the sense of adventure, the riches of the fertile land, the plunder of items confiscated from the "natives," and the power of the whip. By the end of 1942, the SS controlled nearly one and a half million acres of farmland between the Black Sea and the Baltic. Within the constellation of plantations requisitioned by the SS was Grzenda (Hriada), once the grand manor house, or *dwór,* of a Polish noble, outside today's Lviv.

In June 1942, Erna Petri, who had memorably sat astride her motorbike back home in Thuringia, arrived at Grzenda with her three-year-old son. Set amid rolling hills and meadows, the white-pillared manor overlooked the surrounding villages. Visitors passed through an ornamental wrought-iron gate onto a road leading to a circular drive and an array of stables, chicken coops, and servants' quarters. A century before, craftsmen had carefully laid small black, white, and terracotta tiles on the floor of the north portico and vestibule. Ornate balustrades decorated the staircase and the veranda. One can imagine the excitement and pride Erna Petri must have felt upon arriving in this impressive home, such a stark contrast to the oppressive family farm in Thuringia.

Within two days she saw her husband, Horst, beating his laborers. He sexually assaulted the female household servants. Local farmers called him a sadist who enjoyed violence; he laughed as he flogged Ukrainians, Poles, and Jews. Horst did not see himself as such. Rather, he was establishing his authority. Even as the war dragged on and victory became unlikely, Horst and Erna became only more brutal as they sought to maintain their grip on the estate. In summer 1943 they hunted down Jews who had fled from ghetto liquidations and railway cars headed to the gassing centers. Horst initiated raids in neighboring villages. Erna — who lived at Grzenda from June 1942 until early

1944 — also started to beat the workers, including the blacksmith, whom she slapped in the face. Violence was woven into the everyday domestic setting of bucolic life on the plantation.

The Petris' new estate comprised lovely gardens and other places to stroll on Sunday afternoons. Many high-ranking officials from the nearby capital, Lviv, known in German as Lemberg, liked to visit. One Sunday, the wife of the most senior SS officer in the region arrived with two aides, a chauffeur and an assistant. While the Petris led their visitors through the garden, one of the aides suddenly appeared and reported that four Jews who had escaped from a train headed to a gassing center near Lublin had been caught on the estate. The chauffeur and Horst discussed what to do with them. Horst told his wife and her female guest that this was men's work, nothing the women should be concerned about. As the women walked away from the garden back toward the house, they heard four pistol shots.

Several months later, in the summer of 1943, Erna Petri was returning home from Lviv. She had gone into town to pick up some supplies. It was a sunny day. She reclined in the horse-drawn carriage while her coachman handled the reins. She saw something in the distance. When the carriage drew closer, she saw that it was children crouching along the side of the road, dressed only in shreds of clothing. It occurred to her that "these were the children who broke out of the boxcar at the train station Saschkow." As she would go on to explain:

> At this time all remaining Jews who were in several camps were being transported to the extermination camp. In these transports often and especially at the train station at Saschkow Jews would break out and try to save themselves. These Jews were all naked, so that the Ukrainians and Poles living in the area could be distinguished from them; the Jews were easy to recognize.

The children were terrified and hungry. Petri beckoned to them and brought them home. She calmed them and gained their trust by bringing them food from her kitchen. All Jews who were roaming the countryside were supposed to be captured and shot; she understood

that. Horst was not at home at the time. She waited, but Horst did not return, so she decided to shoot the six children herself. She led them to the same pit in the woods where other Jews had been shot and buried. She brought a pistol with her, one that her father had kept from World War I and given to her as a parting gift as she left for the "wild east" of Ukraine.

Erna Petri told the children to line up facing away from her, in front of the ditch. She held up the pistol about ten centimeters from the first child's neck and shot the child, then moved on and did the same to the second. After she shot the first two, "the others were at first shocked and began to cry. They did not cry loudly, they whimpered." Erna would not allow herself "to be swayed"; she shot "until all of them lay in the gully. None of the children tried to run away since it appeared that they already had been in transit for several days and were totally exhausted."

Erna was alone when she committed this crime, but she was far from alone at the estate. Besides her husband, her two small children lived at Grzenda — the son whom she brought with her to the estate in 1942, and a daughter born there in January 1943. Her mother-in-law and an uncle were visiting, trying to escape the bombing raids and rationing back in the Reich, and in addition she was surrounded by peasants working the fields. The best view of the area was from the hilltop villa's second-floor balcony, where Erna, the quintessential German Hausfrau-hostess, served *Kaffee und Kuchen* to Horst's colleagues in the military and the SS and police. While pouring coffee Erna had overheard the men speaking about the mass shootings of Jews. She had learned that the most effective way to kill was a single shot to the back of the neck. When she led those children to the mass grave on the estate, she knew exactly what to do.

Domestic violence took on another, expanded meaning in the Third Reich. Female killers carried out heinous acts in or near their homes. Most common was shooting from the balcony, and in the presence of family members and lovers.

In the spring of 1942, Liesel Willhaus, the Catholic steelworker's

daughter from the Saarland, arrived with her daughter in Lviv. They went to the Janowska camp, where her husband, SS *Untersturmführer* Gustav Willhaus, was appointed commandant. Liesel and Gustav were still working their way up the Nazi system, still eager to shed their working-class heritage for a new life of riches and power in the East. Gustav's promotion was their big break. Liesel inspected their new home. The villa stood at the edge of the slave labor and transit camp. A machine factory housed some selected Jewish laborers in the camp, while the railway lines brought most of the Jewish population of Lviv to the gassing facility of Belzec, which began receiving Jews from Lviv in March 1942, about the time that Gustav Willhaus arrived at Janowska. Some three hundred thousand Polish and Ukrainian Jews died in Janowska or passed through it, making Janowska the biggest Jewish labor and transit camp in Ukraine.

Not long after arriving at his post, Gustav Willhaus became known as the "bloodthirsty camp commandant." Holocaust survivors called him a "natural-born killer" who murdered people without hesitation but also without much enthusiasm. He slayed his victims like a "chaff cutter." His wife developed her own reputation. First Liesel insisted that their villa required renovations and demanded the construction of a second-floor balcony where the family could enjoy afternoon refreshments. She found ample Jewish slaves to do whatever she needed at home, including the gardening work. Liesel kept a close eye on them from the balcony. She used this vantage point to shoot prisoners — for "the sport of it," one Jewish eyewitness stated. "Willhaus's wife . . . also had a pistol. When guests came to visit the Willhaus family, and sat on the spacious porch of their luxurious house, [she] would show off her marksmanship by shooting down camp inmates, to the delight of her guests. The little daughter of the family, Heike, would vigorously applaud the sight."

Liesel Willhaus's preferred weapon was a Flobert gun, a French parlor rifle that looked fancy but was cheap to produce. Flobert rifles were in wide circulation at the time and typically used for target practice. It was the classic example of a "domesticated" weapon, displayed in stuffy Victorian sitting rooms and used in the garden to kill pests.

Its range was limited (about a hundred feet), but the impact was powerful enough to result in lethal injuries. In Ukraine, the parlor rifle was fitting for the self-styled female pioneer.

Death was often not instant for those who fell victim to one of Willhaus's shooting sprees. One time she fired a single shot at a Jewish laborer who was walking by the house. Her husband was standing next to her on the balcony. On another occasion, a morning in September 1942, she appeared on the balcony with her husband and a few guests and shot into a group of Jewish prisoners who were about sixty feet away, picking up garbage around the house. One of the prisoners killed was a thirty-year-old from the village of Sambor.

In April 1943, on a Sunday, Willhaus appeared again on the balcony. With her child at her side, she shot into a group of Jewish laborers in the garden. At least four Jews fell down on the spot, including Jakob Helfer from the village of Bobrka. One day that summer, she aimed at a group of laborers farther away in the camp. They were huddled together, trying to trade. About five were killed. Not long after this incident, Willhaus shot Jews during roll call, aiming more precisely at their heads. According to postwar investigators, Willhaus also aimed at the hearts of Jews sick with typhus. She shot them at close range.

The entire atmosphere in and around the Willhaus villa was one of bizarre contradictions. The juxtaposition of a repressively well-appointed bourgeois German home contrasted with the gunfire and suffering of the Jewish inmates. The balcony "shooting gallery" was actually one of the "cleaner" methods practiced by the Willhauses and their colleagues. Sadistic spectacles were more their specialty: public beatings, hangings, sexual organs severed, children's limbs torn off.

Wives of SS men, including the wife of a commandant of Auschwitz, claimed after the war that they did not know what was going on behind the walls and barbed wire of the camps. They insisted that their homes were completely separate sanctuaries of normality where their husbands could find refuge from their stressful work. But the camp and the home were not separate worlds; they overlapped. Wives visited their husbands at the office — Liesel Willhaus, for instance,

was often seen entering the Janowska camp — and husbands brought callousness and techniques for killing Jews home with them. It is not possible to believe that SS wives saw nothing, and it is not possible to believe that some, like Erna Petri and Liesel Willhaus, did not choose to participate in the killing.

We have seen that in the madness of the East, sadistic violence, domestic routines, and intimate relations intermingled. Both Liesel Willhaus and Erna Petri came to the East as married women, but for unmarried women, the incestuous, tight-knit community served to make the German-only outposts into "marriage markets" for ideologically attuned and often morally corrupt mates. Office romances were common, and marriage was not the only result. Many children were born out of wedlock. Such promiscuous behavior was not frowned upon; on the contrary, propagation of the Aryan race was a patriotic duty. The children of the new elite in the East were not sheltered from the violence. There are a few documented cases of fathers involving their sons in the killing, and of mothers like Liesel Willhaus involving their daughters. The story of the growth of female violence during the Reich is intertwined with a sexual revolution that tested boundaries and definitions of matrimony, procreation, childrearing, femininity, and pleasure.

The stories of two additional women killers, onetime Viennese secretaries Gertrude Segel and Josefine Krepp, are further illustration of how violent partnerships were forged in formal office settings but acted out in intimate ones. In these cases the women met their SS husbands as secretaries in the Gestapo offices that contained an Austrian Nazi network. Many had come to know one another in the aftermath of the *Anschluss,* when the Nazi Party and its supporters fully infiltrated and took over the Austrian state. As the Reich expanded eastward, many of these Austrians ultimately felt at home occupying offices in the former Habsburg lands of Galicia and Yugoslavia.

About forty miles south of Lviv, in the small city of Drohobych, the Gestapo secretary Gertrude Segel also shot Jewish laborers in her

garden. When Gertrude met Felix Landau, commander of the Sipo and SD in Radom, Poland, in February 1941, he was married with two small children. Within a few months they became lovers, and Gertrude called off her engagement to an Austrian soldier, away at the front, who was not an SS man. Felix Landau, too, was sent into combat — in the Nazi "war against the Jews," in occupied western Ukraine.

While committing mass murder in Ukraine, Landau kept a diary revealing his swings from forlorn lover to cold-blooded killer. He composed his text in the form of letters to his "Trude." Addressing "his lovely bunny" on July 5, 1941, Landau described his victims in gruesome detail, perhaps rationalizing his actions by explaining that one Pole who was covered in blood motioned to the Germans to fire faster to end his suffering. Landau wanted to impress Gertrude; he stressed that this human slaughter was hard work. He also worried that she would leave him. In his entries of July 12 and 13, 1941, Landau referred again to the incessant demands of the mass shootings: "I hardly got any sleep . . . Finally I managed to read all my post . . . Trude wrote that she doesn't know whether she can keep her vow to me [to be faithful]. Why does this have to happen to me with a person I love so much? I have to see her and talk to her, and then my little Trude will be strong again. She must come here [to Drohobych]."

Drohobych — populated in 1939 by roughly ten thousand Poles, the same number of Ukrainians, and fifteen thousand Jews — was once a boomtown in the late nineteenth century, its sudden wealth spurred by the discovery of nearby oil fields. Landau had set himself up in style, in a comfortable home, and he desperately wanted Gertrude to join him. He made arrangements for her transfer from Radom while he initiated a divorce against his wife, who was also a former secretary in his Gestapo office. His wife returned to the Reich, leaving Landau and their two toddlers in Drohobych. Segel took up a new secretarial job in his office in Drohobych and moved into his home, where they hoarded piles of valuables confiscated from the Jews, such as furs, paintings, and china. They forced the talented Jewish artist Bruno Schulz to paint murals in the children's nursery. These were

beautiful, fanciful paintings, the fairy-tale characters bearing the faces of members of the Jewish community in Drohobych, including Schulz himself, who was later shot by a rival of Landau's in the Gestapo office.

Like the Willhaus and Petri families, Gertrude Segel and Felix Landau had a balcony on their villa. According to the testimony of a Jewish witness, on the Sunday afternoon of June 14, 1942, Gertrude and Felix were playing cards on their balcony. The radio was turned up and the sun was shining. They reclined on upholstered chairs. Gertrude wore a bathing suit; Felix was dressed in a white suit. A small group of Jewish men and women were working in the garden below, spreading soil. Suddenly Felix stood up and grabbed the Flobert long gun. He started to shoot pigeons. Gertrude also gave it a try. At this point either Gertrude or Felix turned the rifle down onto the Jewish gardeners, and shot a worker named Fliegner. They laughed as they left the balcony and reentered the house.

On the streets in town, Felix Landau was also known for his open shooting sprees. One of the largest was in November 1942, when he and his men killed more than two hundred Jews, among them leading intellectuals and professionals, such as a Jewish professor named Szulc and a Dr. Loew, the personal dentist of another sergeant in the Gestapo office. In town Landau was the notorious "Jew-General" who presided over massacres from the very first days of the occupation through 1942 and 1943, reducing the local Jewish population from more than fifteen thousand to a few hundred by war's end.

The hedonism of Felix and Gertrude also became well-known, especially as it was expressed in raucous parties. The Jewish survivor Jacob Goldsztein testified that Landau and Segel hosted drunken fests with other German occupation officials at the local riding hall. One of these was probably their wedding party on May 5, 1943. Gertrude danced on the tables and slapped the hands of the SS men seated at the table. After a night of carousing, Landau returned to the hall because Segel's gold necklace was missing. Landau found Goldsztein and another Jewish man who were cleaning up, and accused them of theft. Landau ordered Goldsztein to report to him the next day, and pressed Goldsztein again about the necklace, telling him calmly that he should

give it over. Goldsztein pleaded that he did not have the necklace and that he would never do such a thing as stealing a necklace.

Segel was present during the interrogation, reclining on the office couch. "Don't be such an idiot, you pig of a Jew, you took the necklace!" she yelled at Goldsztein. Now Landau became angrier. His "Trude" was upset and expected him to act. He started to punch Goldsztein, then kicked him and trod on him. He ordered Goldsztein to get up. He preferred to beat him standing, which he explained was more convenient than bending down to the floor. Later Goldsztein learned that an SS man who was flirting with Gertrude had stolen the necklace. (The man would eventually return it.) The necklace had originally belonged to a Jewish woman; Landau had confiscated it during a massacre and presented it to Gertrude as a gift.

Jewish survivors also testified that Gertrude ordered the deaths of her household help — three maids — and that she trampled a Jewish child to death. But in the late 1950s West German and Austrian investigators did not bother to pursue these incriminating eyewitness statements against her.

Segel's Austrian friend Josefine Krepp, now Josefine Block, joined her husband in Ukraine in 1942. In Drohobych, Josefine Block was not officially an employee of the Gestapo, but she hung around the office. Her husband was happy to give his little "Fini" her own projects, like overseeing the community garden and expanding the workshops with Jewish laborers. She became pregnant in the summer of 1942, but she wanted to do more than mother the small child the couple already had and the baby to come.

When two hundred "gypsies" were gathered in town, Block was seen with her whip ordering the Ukrainian militiamen to hurry up and kill them. Night was falling and the "prisoners" had to be shot before dark, she said. Another time Block appeared at the local garden market, summoned four Jewish girls who appeared too weak to work, and told one of her husband's employees to shoot them in her presence. Block often came to the market to pick up vegetables, and her arrival always struck fear in the Jewish workers. When the ghetto was liquidated in June 1943, she appeared again, this time at the col-

lection point where Jews were gathered for deportation. She had on a gray ladies' suit and wore her hair loose; she held her camera and a riding crop. Occasionally she lashed out at a Jewish prisoner with her riding crop; the terrified deportees were subjected to further humiliation when she photographed them. A seven-year-old Jewish girl approached her, crying and begging for her life. "I will help you!" Block declared. At which point she grabbed the girl by the hair and beat her with her fists, then pushed her to the ground and stomped on her head. After Block walked away, the girl's mother lifted the lifeless child into her arms, trying unsuccessfully to revive her.

Desperate Jewish laborers often approached Block to ask for help. They assumed that as a young woman and mother she would be sympathetic. But Block kept a weapon within reach, and in an instant could change roles — from a calm, attractive mother to a Nazi brute. She was seen using her baby carriage to ram Jews whom she encountered on the streets of Drohobych; two witnesses would later state that she had actually killed a small Jewish child with the carriage. Locals complained about her, but her husband, the Gestapo chief, deferred to his wife, explaining that he could not make any decisions without her.

The wartime and postwar documentation placing wives in these Nazi outposts is scattered across archives and private papers. It is mostly through the testimonies of German, Ukrainian, Polish, and Jewish witnesses that we have learned about the presence and violent behavior of these women. Accustomed as we are to thinking of killing, war, and the perpetration of genocide as male activities, in the absence of accessible evidence to the contrary we remain blind to the extent of women's participation. We know that Holocaust victims experienced humiliation, deprivation, pain, and even death at the hands of German women, yet many minimize this fact by insisting on various conceptions of genocide that are historically inaccurate and biased.

Historically, most mass murder occurs in the open and is therefore not confined to particular state institutions. This was true for Germans in the Nazi killing fields, who were caught up in the killing themselves while also drawing others into it. Many individuals whose

regular, everyday work had little to do with Nazi anti-Jewish policy, let alone the killing of Jews, were recruited and persuaded to kill. Commissar Westerheide, for example — Johanna Altvater's boss — approached fellow Germans as they walked down the street and simply asked whether they might be interested in assisting in an *Aktion*. An official invited a German colleague for some recreational shooting, expressing his pleasure at the prospect of using live Jews as targets. It was not only the men who were recruited; women and girls were approached to fulfill a variety of ad hoc tasks connected with killing. Ukrainian girls were routinely used at mass shootings to assist in the collection and mending of victims' clothes. As "packers" in the pits, girls pressed down on corpses with their bare feet; as "hemp collectors," they gathered hay and sunflower stalks to be used for hastening the burning of the corpses.

In the Nazi war against the Jews in eastern Europe, the spatial divide between the battlefront and the home front was nonexistent. Crime scenes included the balconies of villas, the grounds of rural estates such as Grzenda, and banquet tables near the killing fields. For women such as Erna Petri, Liesel Willhaus, Gertrude Segel, Johanna Altvater, and Josefine Block, contributing to the war effort went beyond consoling, protecting, and supporting a male mate or a fanatical boss. These female perpetrators were incredibly, indeed shockingly, adept at slipping in and out of roles, from the unbridled revolutionary to the meek, subservient wife. Many female murderers held positions in the professional world — secretaries and nurses, for example. Trained and socialized at a particular moment in time, in Hitler's Germany, they exploited their power as imperial overseers and careerists.

Will we ever know more precisely how many German women behaved so violently, even murdering with poison-filled needles, guns, attack dogs, and other lethal weapons? Numbers alone cannot explain events, but they can be revealing. For example, scholars and laypersons have long assumed that the Nazi camp system amounted to a few hundred, perhaps a few thousand, internment sites. But researchers at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum have determined recently that there were more than forty thousand sites of detention in Nazi-dom-

inated Europe. The camp and ghetto system, usually seen as a universe separate from the rest of society, can now be understood as merging into local communities. The concept of camp walls as a distancing barrier is eroding. Although the higher number of camps does not imply a significantly greater number of victims, since individual victims typically experienced several types of camps and ghettos, it does tell us that there was a significantly higher number of perpetrators, accomplices, and witnesses who created, operated, and visited these sites. More people participated than we thought; more people knew about the systematic persecution and killing of others. And "more" applies across the board: more men, more women, and more children were involved than we knew. The large number of camps, and their integration into local communities, underscores the social dimension of the history of the Holocaust.

Can we approximate how many German women became killers in the East? We might start by following methods applied to estimating male perpetrators. But the estimates we have for male German perpetrators are rough, and based mainly on records from institutions charged with implementing the Holocaust. Combining personnel lists that place men in criminal organizations with investigative records on particular individuals in separate units of those organizations, such as Order Police Battalion 101, historians have estimated that some two hundred thousand German (and Austrian) men were direct agents of the Nazi genocide in the open-air shootings, ghetto liquidations, and gassing centers.

For women we do not have comparable sources. There exist incomplete lists of female camp guards in 1944 and 1945, but these records offer only snapshots of female involvement and provide information only on camps administered by one arm of Himmler's agencies (the Economic and Administrative Office of the RSHA). In any event, these records reveal that about thirty-five hundred women (most of them trained at Ravensbrück) worked as camp guards during these years. Until now this figure was the one usually attached to estimates of female Holocaust perpetrators. But of course not all female camp guards were killers and, conversely, not all female killers were camp

guards: a huge number of victims in the East were killed outside camp walls. The personnel list of female guards trained at Ravensbrück, or stationed at about a dozen main camps mostly in the Reich in 1944 and early 1945, is — like the list I found in Zhytomyr — the tip of the iceberg. Could a history of male perpetrators confine itself to guard records from Dachau? Over the past few decades the lens focused on male perpetrators has widened to include ordinary Germans and non-Germans, in police units, regular army units, and civilian garb. My examination of women killers and of the situations in which they killed should similarly expand our view of female perpetration.

The documentation I surveyed on the deployment of female professionals and family members in the East accounts for several hundred thousand women. In a peaceful society, women commit on average about fourteen percent of all violent crime and about one percent of murders. In peacetime, women killers act alone, and they act against individual victims (usually relatives and mates), not against entire groups. In a warring, genocidal society, the number of men as well as women engaged in violent acts is much higher, and each individual act may lead to a larger number of deaths. After rounding up Jewish children in the ghetto infirmary, for example, Johanna Altvater killed some herself on the spot; others she forced onto a vehicle that took them to a mass murder site where they were shot by male police units. Statistically, if we took the percentage of homicides committed by women in peaceful society and applied it to the genocidal East, where women made up roughly ten percent of the population of Germans, then the estimate of female killers there would be about three thousand. In other words, we could multiply Erna Petri by three thousand. But if we assume, as is likely, that women in genocidal societies — women who are empowered by the state, with "enemy" groups as their targets — are responsible for a greater percentage of murders than women in peacetime societies, then three thousand begins to look unrealistically small.

When it comes to killers like the secretaries, wives, and lovers of SS men in this chapter, we will never have a precise number. But the evidence here does give us new insights about the Holocaust specifi-

cally and genocide more broadly. We have always known, of course, that women have the capacity to be violent, and even to kill, but we knew little about the circumstances and ideas that transform women into genocidaires, the varied roles they occupy inside and outside the system, and the forms of behavior they adopt. Now it is possible to imagine that the patterns of violent and murderous behaviors uncovered here occurred across wartime Ukraine, Poland, Belarus, Lithuania, and other parts of Nazi-dominated Europe. German women who went east embodied what the expanding Nazi empire was becoming: ever more violent. Ordinary young women with typical prewar biographies, not just a small group of Nazi fanatics, went east and became involved in the crimes of the Holocaust, including killing.

Fortunately, with the military defeat of Germany, the heyday of the perpetrators would come to an end; the Nazi machinery of destruction would stop. The lives of these German women did not end, however. They returned home to the rubble of the Reich and tried to bury their criminal pasts.

6

Why Did They Kill?

Their Postwar Explanations and Ours

GERMAN MYTHS OF FEMALE innocence and martyrdom were born in the Reich's collapse and surrender to the Allies. The horrors of the regime had been experienced by Poles and other majority populations in the occupied East since 1939, and by Jews and other targeted political and racial victims in Nazi Germany since 1933, but for ordinary German women the bad times arrived with the unraveling of the Reich. In the immediate aftermath came the physical ordeals and moral dilemmas of evacuations from the East, the violence of the Soviet Army, and the struggle to survive in what remained of their German homeland and war-torn families under Allied occupation.

One young schoolteacher in Ukraine who faced the advancing Red Army as it pushed toward the Dnieper River in the summer of 1943 recalled her evacuation. There were so many children in the school, all of them orphans. She and her colleagues assumed that the children would be killed by the Soviets, but they decided to abandon them nevertheless. The children cried; fearing for their lives, they clung to