

Preface

I visited Auschwitz for the first time in 2000 as part of a group of students on a week-long trip to learn about the former concentration camp. Five Auschwitz survivors accompanied us, acting as guides and recounting personal experiences of their time there. As we stood at the gate with the notorious wrought-iron sign *Arbeit Macht Frei*, the former Polish prisoner Stanisław Hantz explained that a camp brothel was located on the second floor of Block 24, directly behind the entrance. My immediate thought was that this must be where the Nazis housed one of their “joy divisions,” the units of Jewish women forced to have sex with SS guards described in Yehiel De-Nur’s novella *House of Dolls*. But, as Hantz then made clear to us, the brothel in Auschwitz was for *prisoners*. SS men were strictly forbidden entry. Why would the Nazis have a brothel for prisoners in a concentration camp? I wondered. Was this the only one? Who were the women who worked there? Who were the men who visited them? Those questions started me on an investigation that would occupy the next ten years of my life.

Sexual violence has been a weapon of war since time immemorial. World War II was no different. Many Jewish women were raped in Eastern Europe during the campaigns of mass murder perpetrated by the Nazis and their allies. There is also evidence that the Nazis used rape as form of sexual violence in ghettos and extermination camps. Forced sexual labor in concentration camps was a special case yet also an integral part of the history of the Holocaust. What made it unique, I would learn, is that forced sex in the camps was the most strictly controlled form of sexual violence during the war. The prisoner brothels were off-limits not only to the SS but also to Jews in general. This was another of the myths propagated by Yehiel De-Nur’s *House of Dolls* that I would have to do away with. Ironically, it was Nazi ideology that kept Jewish women safe from this form of sexual violence, as race laws outlawed sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews. Nevertheless, the prisoner brothels were part of the concentration camp system, one of the main tools for the genocide of the Jews. Moreover, as I would later find out, several camp brothels with Polish sex workers existed specifically

for Ukrainian SS men who had been deployed in the Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka extermination camps. The history of the camp brothels was, therefore, another chapter in what Dagmar Herzog calls the “invasion and control and destruction of human beings” that made up “sexuality in the Third Reich.”

Why wasn’t this common knowledge in 2000, when I first visited Auschwitz? Through my research, I learned that discussion of the camp brothels had been taboo for many years. At first, it seems many had a hard time believing in the existence of the brothels. Why would the Nazis be concerned about the sexual needs of people whom they were letting starve to death? Later, the subject did not fit into the postwar politics of memory endorsed by either of the two Germanys. A third factor was the status of the women forced to work in the brothels. In 1945, the governments of the Allies required that those persecuted by the Nazis on “racial, political, and religious” grounds receive compensation. This policy would fundamentally shape who was seen as a victim in the postwar Germanys. But its definition of victim neglected other persecuted groups, in particular Sinti and Roma, homosexuals, “criminals,” and “antisocials.” It was into this last category that many forced sex workers had been unjustly thrown. This meant that after the war they had no right to compensation and often faced stigmatization. Not only did postwar societies not want to hear their stories; they did not allow the victims to tell them.

This book is the result of research comprising more than seventy archives. Many documents—completed with proverbial German meticulousness—survived the war, including prisoner cards, transfer lists, and reports from various medical facilities, including the Hygiene Institute of the Waffen SS in Rajsko near Auschwitz. I also drew on interviews from concentration camp memorials and Holocaust research institutes and personally interviewed thirty concentration camp survivors, some of whom had visited the brothels themselves. Unfortunately, it was not possible for me to interview any of the former forced sex workers, though I did rely on several first-person interviews conducted by researchers in the 1990s. On the basis of the extensive material I collected, I was able to identify the origins and prison records of 88 percent of the women in the brothels for prisoners. This makes the group of forced sex workers one of the best-researched groups of victims of sexual violence in World War II.

I examine the subject matter from multiple perspectives: the perpetrators who created the brothel system, the women who were sexually enslaved in it, and the men it benefited. In addition, I consider the sexuality of prisoners and the strategies that forced sex workers adopted to cope and survive. I

also inquire into the motives of the men who visited the camp brothels and how other prisoners regarded the practice.

This study closes one of the last major gaps in Holocaust research. One of the aims in closing that gap has been to tell the story of the women in the camp brothels. For decades they have been excluded from the histories of the camps. The book serves to remember the victims of the camp brothels in order that they posthumously receive the recognition they deserve. For it is only when we stop talking about the dead that we consign them to oblivion.

The Concentration Camp Brothel

