

Anja Katharina PETERS

Caught Between Dialogue and Diktat – The International Midwives Union 1933–1945

Abstract: In 1919 the International Midwives Union (IMU) was founded in Belgium. For two decades it was dominated by Professor Frans Daels from Belgium (1881-1974), a gynaecologist from Gent. Its main assembly was the bi-annual international congress, e.g. 1934 in London and 1936 in Berlin. In Berlin, the congress passed a resolution by which the chairing congress president would automatically become the IMU's president for the following two years. Thus, Nanna Conti (1881-1951), the chairwoman of the German Midwives Association, became the first president of the IMU. After the congress in Paris in 1938 Clémence Mosse (d. 1949) became the next president. However, during the Second World War Mosse was unable to influence the IMU significantly. In 1942 Conti succeeded Daels as secretary general of the IMU and moved IMU headquarters to Berlin. At least from 1942-1945 the IMU was led by a Nazi functionary.

This paper shows how the IMU reacted to the sometimes benevolent, sometimes dictatorial leadership of Nanna Conti and the spreading of Nazi propaganda among the European midwives. The situation between Czech and German midwives serves as a case example. The paper is based on the author's biography of Nanna Conti.¹

Key words: history of midwifery – national-socialism – women's history – Sudetenland – Czechoslovakia

This paper is about the International Midwives Union in general and especially about its president and later secretary general, Nanna Conti. As it was first presented in Kutná Hora, both Czechia and Slovakia will serve as case examples.

The International Midwives Union or IMU was the predecessor organisation of today's International Confederation of Midwives² as was the German Reichshebammenschaft

1 Anja Katharina PETERS, *Nanna Conti (1881-1951). Eine Biographie der Reichshebammenführerin*, Berlin 2018, pp. 31-172. The PhD thesis of the same name was published in full electronically in 2014, URL: <https://epub.ub.uni-greifswald.de/frontdoor/index/index/start/0/rows/10/sortfield/score/sortorder/desc/searchtype/simple/query/nanna+conti/docId/134527/10/2018>. The author would like to thank Dr. Claire Uytman, Chris Holmes and Lele Schirmeister (all UK) for proofreading this paper.

2 Anne THOMPSON, *Organizing European midwifery in the inter-war years 1919-1938*, in: Hilary Marland et al (eds), *Midwives, Society and Childbirth. Debates and controversies in the modern period*, London - New York 1997, pp. 14-15.

(Reich Midwives Association) to today's Deutscher Hebammenverband (German Midwifery Association)³. Nanna Conti was president of both the national and international organisation. She strongly supported the German Midwives Law, which was passed in 1938. By this law, assistance at a complication-free birth became an entitlement of German and later Austrian midwives.⁴ This specific paragraph in the law was unique within Europe, a cause for admiration throughout all midwives associations. It still remains legal in Austria and Germany.⁵ This ingrained Nanna Conti as a heroine of midwifery into the collective memory of German and Austrian midwives until the 1990s.⁶

Fortunately, Nanna Conti was a busy author and publisher. So, even though her estate was destroyed by her family, it was possible to reconstruct a lot of her work for the two midwives associations through the German midwives journal and letters written by Conti.

Nanna Conti was born in 1881 in Uelzen, a small town in Lower Saxony. She grew up in a nationalist Protestant educated middle-class Prussian family. Due to a low family income and her own divorce, she trained as a midwife in Magdeburg in 1903 and then worked as a free-lance midwife in Charlottenburg and Berlin from 1904 onwards, supporting her mother and her three children. After World War I, she and her sons became politically radicalised. They passed through several right-wing parties and organisations until they all ended up in the NSDAP. Nanna Conti became a member of the Nazi party in 1930. She appeared in the midwife's journals of the Weimar Republic from 1918 onwards, soon becoming infamous for her right-wing extremism. She had her international debut at the congress of the International Midwives Union in London in 1934.⁷

The congress was presided by Edith Pye (1876-1965), president of the British Midwives' Institute (today's Royal College of Midwives/RCM).⁸ She and Conti would collaborate in the IMU until at least 1939. Pye was a devoted member of the Society of Friends ("Quakers") and as such a staunch pacifist. A systematic research into the files about and by her at

3 Nora SZÁSZ, „Den zukünftigen Hebammen die Wege ebnen“ - die Gründung der Hebammenverbände (1885-1933), in: Bund Deutscher Hebammen e.V. (eds), *Zwischen Bevormundung und beruflicher Autonomie. Die Geschichte des Bundes Deutscher Hebammen*, Karlsruhe 2006, pp. 9-42.

4 Nanna CONTI, *Das neue Hebammen-Gesetz*, Zeitschrift der Reichsfachschaft Deutscher Hebammen, 1939, 54. Jg., p. 66.

5 A. K. PETERS, *Nanna Conti*, pp. 342-346.

6 SCHRIFTLÉITUNG UND VERLAG, *Nanna Conti †*, Deutsche Hebammen-Zeitschrift, 1952, p. 7; Lina HAAG, *Verbandsarbeit einst und heute*, Deutsche Hebammen-Zeitschrift, 1954, p. 183; E. APFEL, *Der Londoner Kongreß im Überblick*, Deutsche Hebammen-Zeitschrift, 1955, p. 10; Helga HAHNEMANN, *Einhundert Jahre Berufsorganisation der Hebammen*, Deutsche Hebammen-Zeitschrift, 185, p. 134; Wolfgang GUBALKE, *Die Hebamme im Wandel der Zeiten. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Hebammenwesens, 2. Auflage bearbeitet von Ruth Kölle*, Hannover 1985, p. 9.

7 A. K. PETERS, *Nanna Conti*, pp. 31-172.

8 Nanna CONTI, *Die Tagung des Internationalen Hebammen-Verbandes in London*, Zeitschrift der Reichsfachschaft Deutscher Hebammen, 1934, 2. Jg. (alte Folge 49. Jg.), p. 266.

the RCM has not yet been possible. An analysis of the influence of these two antagonistic world views onto the IMU would certainly be interesting.⁹

The IMU was founded in Belgium in 1919. For two decades, it was dominated by Professor Frans Daels (1882-1974), a gynaecologist from Gent. For this paper he is of interest insofar as he was not only a leading Belgian gynaecologist, which leads to questions about self-concept, autonomy, and paternalism in medicine and midwifery, but was also known to be a Flemish nationalist. He later supported the German occupational administration and after the war was sentenced to death. However, he was able to hide in Switzerland until 1959 when he was permitted to work again in his native Belgium as a physician.¹⁰ He was the person who handed the keys to IMU's headquarters to Nanna Conti in 1943.¹¹

IMU's main assembly was the bi-annual international congress. In 1936, during the assembly in Berlin, the congress passed a resolution by which the chairing congress president would automatically become the IMU's president for the next two years. Under this ruling, Nanna Conti, the chairwoman of the German Midwives Association, became the first president of the IMU from 1936 to 1938.¹²

There have always been regions in Europe with mixed populations. Czechia used to be one of these regions. After World War I and the fall of the Habsburg Empire, ethnic tensions rose. The point of view of a German midwife who was also a trusted functionary during the Nazi regime allows an insight into the way of thinking of a German-nationalist midwife from the mentioned region: In 1938,

“Mrs Reiter, Sudeten Germany, pointed out that the midwives had been requested by the Czechs, that they should seek work with Czechs if they didn't have enough work. Völkisch Midwives refused this imposition vigorously.”¹³

In 1938, the region known as Sudety or Sudetenland was assigned to the German Reich. In 1939, Germany invaded Czechoslovakia, annexed Czechia – mostly by the name of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren) – and supported the satellite state of the Slovak Republic. Nanna Conti was thrilled to welcome the Sudeten German midwives to the German Midwives Association:

9 A. K. PETERS, *Nanna Conti*, p. 173.

10 Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv, E 932013, Akzession 1991/243, Bd. 130. Dossier Daels Frans, Aktenzeichen C. 13. 2314, Zeitraum 1947-59.

11 Nanna CONTI, *Besuch in Belgien und Frankreich*, Die Deutsche Hebamme, 1941, 56. Jg., pp. 301-302.

12 Mitteilungen des Internationalen Hebammenverbandes. Communications of the International Midwives Union. Annales de l'Association Internationale d'Accoucheuses. Mededeelingen van het Internationaal Vroudevrouwenverbond, No 8, Gent – 1 – 1936, p. 57.

13 „Frau Reiter, Sudetendeutschland, führte an, daß die Hebammen von den Tschechen aufgefordert worden seien, wenn sie zu wenig Arbeit hätten, sie sich bei den Tschechen Arbeit suchen sollen. Völkische Hebammen lehnten diese Zumutung ernstlich ab.“ Lina HAAG, *Darmstadt 1938*, Zeitschrift der Reichsfachschaft Deutscher Hebammen, 1938, 53. Jg., p. 501. Translated by Anja K. Peters.

“We already send our most cordial greetings to the Sudeten German sisters in profession, who will be assigned to the German Midwives Association shortly.

Unchained from the oppression by foreign people, without war, through the statesmanship of our Fuehrer they return to Greater Germany. Especially the midwives of all countries, carers and guardians of a nation’s future generations, are eternally happy that war could be avoided.

If during years of destitution the number of children has decreased in Sudetenland, we will hope for the future, that the principle, that mother and child are the nation’s greatest asset, will also generate awareness in Sudeten Germany day by day, that henceforth Sudeten Germany will blossom and become a happy German children’s land.”¹⁴

Conti didn’t bother to mention the Czech midwives living in the area, which is remarkable insofar as she was a high-ranking functionary of the International Midwives Union, too.

The Sudeten German midwives participated in the main assembly of the German Midwives Association in Darmstadt already the same year.¹⁵ Nanna Conti soon announced a district leader for Sudetenland: Charlotte Kehle (1896-1990), a close and trusted assistant,¹⁶ who was later followed by the previously mentioned Emma Reiter¹⁷. Then in 1942, the midwife Ida Keßler¹⁸ from Dauba (Dubá) led the Sudeten German midwives. In Bohemia and Moravia, Hildegard Prinzing¹⁹ represented the German Midwives Association and its leader Nanna Conti at least from 1940 onwards.²⁰ Their main job was to provide midwives for resettled Dobrujan German families, for German women living in the region and for all those who had followed their husbands who were part of the occupation army and administration.²¹

15 A. K. PETERS, *Nanna Conti*, p. 279.

16 Charlotte Kehle had been working for the German Midwives Association for some time, probably years. She took an active part in the annual training courses at the prestigious „Führerschule der Deutschen Ärzteschaft“ (Leader School of the German Medical Profession) in Alt Rehse. In 1938 she became Conti’s commissioner for the „Ostmark“ (annexed Austria). In 1940 Kehle became midwives leader in the „Warthegau“ in occupied Poland. At the end of World War II Kehle fled to Schliersee (Bavaria) where she worked in a children’s home. The Conti family trusted her so much that they sent the youngest grandchild of Nanna Conti, Irmgard, to Kehle. However, Kehle and her employer thought it too risky to accommodate a Conti child after the war and abandoned the girl in Munich. Anja PETERS, *Der Geist von Alt-Rehse. Die Hebammenkurse an der Reichsärzteschule 1935-1941*, Frankfurt a. M. 2005, p. 60; Irmgard POWELL, *Don’t let them see you cry. Overcoming a Nazi childhood*, Wilmington 2008, p. 66; Kornelia REICHMANN, *Bericht über die am 28. September stattgefundene Hauptversammlung in Eisenstadt*, Zeitschrift der Reichsfachschaft Deutscher Hebammen, 1938, p. 466

17 Birth-and-death dates unknown. When Ida Keßler (see above) became district leader, Reiter stayed vice-leader. Nanna CONTI, *Neue Leiterin der Hebammenschaft im Gau Sudetenland*, Die Deutsche Hebamme, 1942, 57. Jg., p. 51.

18 Birth- and-death dates unknown.

19 Birth-and-death dates unknown.

20 Nanna CONTI, *Achtung! Gebietsneuteilung im Reich*, Die Deutsche Hebamme, 1939, 54. Jg., p. 434. Also: Nanna CONTI, *Neue Leiterin der Hebammenschaft im Gau Sudetenland*, Die Deutsche Hebamme, 1942, 57., p. 51.

21 A. K. PETERS, *Nanna Conti*, p. 282.

German midwives were sent to the occupied countries in Middle and Eastern Europe to support German women and Germanity in general. For example, the Ministry of the Interior of the state of Württemberg was asked whether they, in cooperation with the Reich Midwives Association, would be able to send German midwives to the so-called “partner districts”, which were the occupied districts of Brünn (Brno), Hohensalza / Inowrocław and Hermannsbad / Ciechocinek.²²

Already in 1939, Kehle and the German midwives living in Sudetenland were honoured by a visit from the new Reich Health Fuehrer: Leonardo Conti (1900-1945), a staunch Nazi and the son of the Reich Midwives Fuehrer.²³ He visited a hospital and a maternity home as well as the midwives school in Reichenberg (Liberec) where in a speech to the students, he emphasised the importance of midwives and the high demands on the profession.²⁴

In November 1939, the Reich Midwives Law became law in Sudetenland, meaning that woman in labour or an obstetrician had to call for a midwife.²⁵ Charlotte Kehle explicitly thanked Nanna Conti for her support.²⁶ However, it remains unclear yet, whether the law became legally valid for Czech midwives and families, too, as for a membership in the midwives association and a working permit “German Blood” was required. It remains a research question what the German authorities had planned for the obstetrical care for the Czech population.

Also, in 1939, on December 15, the “Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring” became law in Sudetenland.²⁷ Midwives were obliged to report all new-borns with disabilities to the health authorities. In Germany, this led to sterilisation of the parents and to so-called “mercy killings.” We don’t have numbers on how many midwives reported babies and parents, but we estimate that 5.000 children were killed in the German Reich.²⁸

22 Staatsarchiv Ludwigsburg, FL30/I II Bü28, Blatt 55. Also: Martina FAHNEMANN, *Die Entwicklung des Hebammenberufs zwischen 1870 und 1945. Ein Vergleich zwischen Bayern und Württemberg*, PhD diss., Medizinische Fakultät der Bayerischen Julius-Maximilian-Universität Würzburg 2006, p. 255.

23 For a short biography of Leonardo Conti see the relevant chapter in A. K. PETERS, *Nanna Conti*, pp. 86-102.

24 Ch. K., *Großkundgebung für die Volksgesundheit in Aussig*, Zeitschrift der Reichsfachschaft Deutscher Hebammen, 1939, 54. Jg., p. 382.

25 *Verordnung über die Einführung des Hebammengesetzes im Reichsgau Sudetenland am 9. November 1939*, Die Deutsche Hebamme, 1939, 54. Jg., p. 439.

26 Ch. KEHLE, *Das Hebammengesetz im Sudetenland eingeführt*, Die Deutsche Hebamme, 1939, 54. Jg., p. 458.

27 ANONYM: *Einführung des Gesetzes zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses im Sudetenland*, Die Deutsche Hebamme, 1940, 55. Jg., p. 9.

28 <https://www.t4-denkmal.de/Kindereuthanasie>, accessed 27th October 2018. Also: Wiebke LISNER et al., *German Midwifery in the “Third Reich”*, in: Susan Benedict et al. (eds), *The “Euthanasia” Programs*, New York - London 2014, pp. 164–97.

To teach the new laws and increase group dynamics, the German Midwives Association organised a professional training course for ethnic German midwives in Mährisch-Schöneberg (Šumperk) in 1939. Nanna Conti herself took an active part in this training measure.²⁹

It is not clear yet whether the law was binding for Czech midwives, too. Given the racist and utilitarian character of the German Reich 1933-1945, I would suggest that laws applied to Czech midwives in instances where they benefited the Germans. For example, in occupied Poland, Nanna Conti advised German midwives to take care of Polish women – not to support Polish patients but to make sure that German midwives earned a sufficient income and to reduce the influence of Polish midwives on their fellow Poles.³⁰

Nanna Conti was well aware that it was morally questionable to cut out colleagues. In 1934, she had argued that it was justifiable that German midwives to book discounted health cures in Piešťany because not many German guests were going there anyway, so this didn't constitute rival business to German health spas. Moreover, according to her, the population in Piešťany was mostly Hungarian, which for racist reason she preferred to Czechs.³¹ So, seeking an opportunity was okay, as long as it didn't have negative consequences for Germans working in the health business.

The seizure of the Czech midwives community took place in 1938/39, while Nanna Conti was succeeded as president of the International Midwives Union by the chairwoman of one of the French midwives associations. The position at the top of an international organisation hadn't transformed her into an internationalist leader; for her, the IMU always served as a means to an end: to spread national-socialist propaganda. As stated in 1936:

“Mrs Conti emphasised that it caused special satisfaction to her to see the understanding for the new idea of national-socialism grow among the foreign delegates and being shown to them how deep the love for the Fuehrer roots in the nation. She ended with the words: In everything I am moved by the thought: ‘my nation, my Fuehrer, how may I serve you!’”³²

Even after the successful IMU congress in 1936 in Berlin hosting a 1.000 participants from Germany and Europe – with Swastika flags flying everywhere and accompanied by an

29 Juliane PROCHASKA, *Der Hebammenlehrgang in Mähr.-Schönberg vom 2. bis 6. Oktober 1939*, *Die Deutsche Hebamme*, 1939, 54. Jg., p. 437.

30 Nanna CONTI, *Rückblick und Ausblick*, *Deutscher Hebammen-Kalender für das Jahr 1944*. Fünfundvierzigster Jahrgang, Osterwieck am Harz - Berlin 1943, p. 241.

31 Nanna CONTI, *Pauschalkuren in Bad Pistyan*, *Zeitschrift der Reichsfachschaft Deutscher Hebammen*, 1934, 2. Jg. (alte Folge 49. Jg.), p. 192.

32 „Frau Conti betonte, daß es ihr besondere Genugtuung bereite, das Verständnis für die neue Idee des Nationalsozialismus bei den ausländischen Teilnehmerinnen wachsen zu sehen und ihnen gezeigt zu haben, wie tief die Liebe zum Führer im Volke wurzelt. Sie schloß mit den Worten: Bei allem bewegt mich der Gedanke: ‚mein Volk, mein Führer, wie dien`ich Dir!‘“ J.K., *Eine, die dabei sein durfte!*, *Zeitschrift der Reichsfachschaft Deutscher Hebammen*, 1936, 4. Jg. (alte Folge 51. Jg.), p. 456.

openly eugenic, racist and anti-Semitic program – when the IMU was fully aware of what was going on in Germany and who was leading the German Midwives Association, there was still no sign of resistance or opposition within the IMU. Swiss and Swedish midwives published enthusiastic reports of their stay in Berlin.³³ Only being published once after every congress and not containing much more than the minutes the journal of the IMU didn't publish any critical voices – even if there had been any. Midwives like nurses tend to regard their profession as “unpolitical”. Also those who articulated themselves publicly mostly belonged to the middle class with their traditional and mostly conservative world view. Furthermore, the Nazis revered motherhood. This flattered midwives all over Europe who mostly worked long hours and lived from hand to mouth.

During her opening speech for the congress Nanna Conti presented herself as a motherly leader:

“The conscious fostering of relationships with our foreign sisters in the profession since 1933 is very pleasing to me. We have become acquainted with the midwives of the other countries and subsequently with the circumstances of those countries. The mutual trust has grown, new friendships were formed. I am feeling like a happy mother of a large family whose heart and house is growing bigger. During quiet nights, I think of the unknown heroines of everyday-life, and the midwives are very much these heroines, I salute not only these faithful helpers in Germany, who, often lowly paid and under the most difficult circumstances, fulfil their duties to the highest standards, but I also remember those who work diligently in the Alpine villages of Switzerland, Austria, France, Italy, in the Argonne or the mountains of the Nordic countries regardless of weather, those who give support and carry responsibilities on the remote islands of England and in other countries, those who, in the slums of the big cities of many different countries, lay the new life into the arms of the poorest.”³⁴

33 J. GLETTIG, *Internationaler Hebammenkongreß in Berlin (Schluß)*, Die Schweizer Hebamme, 1937, Nr. 1, pp. 4-5; Elsa LEANDER, *Några intryck från den 7:e Internationella Barnmorskekongressen i Berlin den 5-9 juni 1936*, Jordemodern, 1936, Nr. 7, pp. 186-192; Sara TOLL, *“Frauenmilchsammelstelle” i Berlin*, Jordemodern, 1936, Nr. 8, pp. 220-222. Regrettably Czech journals couldn't be analysed for this paper.

34 „Die bewußte Pflege der Beziehungen zu unsern Berufsschwesteren des Auslandes seit 1933 erscheint mir überaus beglückend. Wir haben die Hebammen der anderen Länder kennengelernt, dann die Verhältnisse der anderen Länder. Das gegenseitige Vertrauen ist gewachsen, es sind neue Freundschaften geschlossen worden. Ich komme mir vor wie eine glückliche, kinderreiche Mutter, deren Herz und Haus immer größer wird. In den stillen Nächten, wenn die unbekanntnen Heldinnen des Alltags, wie es ja die Hebammen ganz besonders sind, an mir vorüberziehen, grüße ich nicht nur die treuen Helferinnen in Deutschland, die, oft unter schwierigsten Verhältnissen, gering entlohnt, ihres Amtes in höchster Pflichterfüllung walten, sondern ich gedenke auch derer, die in den Alpendörfern der Schweiz, Österreichs, Frankreichs, Italiens, in den Argonnen oder den Bergen der nordischen Länder bei Wind und Wetter ebenso treu arbeiten, derer, die auf den entlegenen Inseln Englands und anderer Staaten Hilfe leisten und höchste Verantwortung tragen, derer, die den Ärmsten in den Elendsvierteln der Großstädte in den verschiedensten Ländern das neue Leben in den Arm legen.“ E. K., *Der VII. Internationale Hebammenkongreß in Berlin*, Zeitschrift der Reichsfachschaft Deutscher Hebammen, 1936, 4. Jg. (alte Folge 51. Jg.), p. 301. Translated by Anja K. Peters.

Midwives who didn't speak German were invited to visit a Reich Labour Camp for women³⁵ and a training course for mothers on 10th June 1936 while the midwives who spoke German attended the conference of the German Midwives Association. Usually these conferences covered mainly professional topics. This time, however, the audience heard solely ideological lectures: "This year's German midwives' conference didn't generally cover midwives matters, but the priority was to arouse an understanding in the guests for the goals and the deeds of the new Germany."³⁶

In a lecture about the "Nuremberg Laws" by Leonardo Conti the ideological foundation of the German Reich became obvious even to the most innocent observer:

*"It will only be unobjectionable in few cases to allow such **mixed marriages**"³⁷. I have dealt with these in Berlin where the majority of cases of this kind are to be dealt with, and I can confirm this: My perception that these half-breeds are unpleasant characters has been again corroborated and emphasised. Above all, this can also be recognised in the personal fate, which is everything but nice. This manifests itself through higher numbers of multiple divorces, criminal records, war shirking. All this is to be found among these people. **These half-breed Jews are generally not better than the Jews themselves.** I even have the distinct impression that they are generally worse than the Jews."³⁸*

Nanna Conti made contact with many leading midwives' functionaries. She was particularly close friends with Maria Vittoria Luzzi (died 1960), chairwoman of the Italian Sindacato Nazionale Fascista.³⁹ There were also close bonds to the Belgian-Walloon midwives association and their chairwoman Madame Henrard⁴⁰. Henrard invited Nanna Conti to the Walloon Midwives Congress in Brussels in 1935 from where Conti reported:

"The journey to Belgium provided me with a wealth of information and the affectionate reception gave me great joy. Besides, it was possible to answer many questions and make the truth about our

35 Young German adults had to do duty for six months for the Reich Labour Service. Until 1939 this was voluntary for women. Wolfgang BENZ et al. (eds), *Enzyklopädie des Nationalsozialismus*, München 2007, p. 726-727.

36 „Die diesjährige deutsche Hebammentagung behandelte nicht zur Hauptsache Hebammenangelegenheiten, sondern im Vordergrund stand die große Aufgabe, Verständnis für das Wollen und die Taten des neuen Deutschlands bei den ausländischen Gästen zu wecken.“ E. K., *Der VII. Internationale Hebammenkongreß in Berlin (Schluß)*, Zeitschrift der Reichsfachschaft Deutscher Hebammen, 1936, 4. Jg. (alte Folge 51. Jg.), p. 325.

37 Bold print by the translator. The original quote was printed in double character spacing for emphasis.

38 „Es wird nur in wenigen Fällen unbedenklich sein, solche Mischlingsehen zu genehmigen. Ich habe sie in Berlin, wo die meisten Fälle dieser Art zu bearbeiten sind, bearbeitet, und ich kann versichern: Meine Erkenntnis, daß diese Mischlinge unerfreuliche Typen sind, hat sich nur von neuem gefestigt und gestärkt. Meistens ist dies auch vom Lebensschicksal aus erkennbar, das alles andere als schön ist. Das äußert sich in mehrfachen Ehescheidungen in größerer Zahl, Vorbestrafungen, Kriegsdrückebergerei. Alles findet sich darunter. Diese Mischjuden sind in der Regel nicht besser als die Juden. Ich habe sogar den deutlichen Eindruck sie sind in der Regel schlechter als die Juden.“ J. GLETTIG, *Hebammenkongreß*, p. 5. Translated by Anja K. Peters.

39 Secretary general of the Italian midwives association 1934-1944 and again 1950-1960. M. SCHW., *Maria Vittoria Luzzi †*, *Deutsche Hebammen-Zeitschrift*, 1961, 13. Jg., p. 100.

40 Birth-and-death dates unknown.

*home country be known abroad as this truth often does not get through on the grounds that the press is in Jewish hands.*⁴¹

After the IMU congress in Paris in 1938, Clémence Mosse (died 1949 in Paris)⁴² became president of the IMU. As we know, the IMU's secretary general at this time was Frans Daels, who supported the Nazis, so it is not surprising that Mosse couldn't exert any influence on the organisation. Furthermore, Paris was under German occupation from 1940-1944; opposition to the mighty German Midwives Fuehrer was dangerous.

Nanna Conti despised Mosse, who – according to Conti – was of Jewish descent. In 1942, Conti succeeded Daels as secretary general and moved IMU headquarters to Berlin without even asking permission of Mosse, the acting president.⁴³ As a result, the archive of the International Midwives Union was nearly fully destroyed during an air raid in 1943 during which the headquarters of the German Midwives Association was hit.⁴⁴ From 1942-1945 the IMU was thus led by a Nazi functionary. Consequently, the Jewish midwives who were persecuted all over Europe received no support from the International Midwives Union.⁴⁵

In 1942, Nanna Conti attended the annual meeting of the Midwives Association of Sudetenland in Aussig (Ústí nad Labem).⁴⁶ In 1943, a "Deutsche Hebammenschaft in der Slowakei" (German Midwives Association in Slovakia) was founded in Käsmark (Kežmarok). Conti was present and gave several lectures at the subsequent congress in Preßburg (Bratislava).⁴⁷ It is unknown yet whether this ethnic German professional

41 „Die belgische Reise hat für mich eine Fülle von Belehrung gebracht und war mir durch den herzlichen Empfang, den ich dort fand, eine große Freude. Außerdem war es möglich, auf viele Fragen Antwort zu geben und der Wahrheit über unser Vaterland im Auslande, die vielfach nicht durchdringen kann, weil die Presse in jüdischen Händen ist, im Ausland Gehör zu verschaffen.“ Nanna CONTI, *Als Gast der belgischen Hebammen und die Tagung der belgischen Hebammen*, Zeitschrift der Reichsfachschaft Deutscher Hebammen, 1935, 3. Jg. (alte Folge 50. Jg.), p. 540. Translated by Anja K. Peters.

42 Clémence Mosse (or maybe Mossé) was president of the French Union Nationale des Syndicats des Sages-Femmes. According to Nanna Conti Mosse was a Catholic of Jewish background. N. C., *Die Dachorganisation der Hebammen in Frankreich*, Zeitschrift der Reichsfachschaft Deutscher Hebammen, 1937, 5. Jg. (alte Folge 52. Jg.), p. 21. Also: Archives Nationales, Paris, cote AJ/40/60 dossier «Personnel sanitaire et maison de santé (1940-1943)», letter by Nanna Conti to Herrn Oberstabsarzt Dr. Holm, 1st May 1942.

43 See the letter quoted in the footnote above. The file was first discovered and brought to my notice by Dr. Yves Louis, Belgium.

44 A. K. PETERS, *Nanna Conti*, p. 310.

45 A. K. PETERS, *Nanna Conti*, p. 257-265. Also: Wiebke LISNER, *Geburtshilfe im Kontext von Gemeinschafts- und Rassenpolitik – Hebammen als weibliche Expertinnen im "Reichsgau Wartheland" 1939–1945*, in: Detlef Schmiechen-Ackermann et al. (eds), *Der Ort der "Volksgemeinschaft" in der deutschen Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, Paderborn 2018, pp. 311-326. By the same author: *Midwifery and the Process of Racial Segregation in occupied Western Poland 1939-1945*, *German History*, 2017, vol. 35, pp. 229-246.

46 I. KEßLER, *Einladung zur Haupttagung*, *Die Deutsche Hebamme*, 1942, 57. Jg., p. 95.

47 ANONYM, *Hebammenwesen in der Slowakei*, *Die Deutsche Hebamme*, 1943, 58. Jg., pp. 136-138.

sisterhood was incorporated into the German Midwives Association or whether they could act independently. We might be right in assuming that any independence was only on paper.

In 1944 Nanna Conti reported that midwives from the Reich were sent to East-Upper Silesia and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia where schools for midwives were founded to train ethnic German midwives.⁴⁸

All Nazi dreams of a Greater German Reich with a population of healthy, “Aryan” Germans served by those who were considered racially inferior ended with the capitulation of the Wehrmacht in 1945. Nanna Conti had already fled from Berlin to a small village in northern Germany. She was never brought before a court of law and died in Bielefeld in 1951.⁴⁹ Czechia and Slovakia were unified again, and the German population of Sudetenland was mostly deported to Germany due to the Beneš decrees. The International Midwives Union was re-founded in 1949, and the German delegate was told that no Nazis would be allowed to join.⁵⁰ However, while Clémence Mosse, who bequeathed her apartment to the IMU to support the re-establishment, is mostly forgotten,⁵¹ Nanna Conti was honourably remembered during the congress in London in 1955:

*“Germany, who in their presentation specifically described the value of the organisation (...), can be particularly proud of their contribution to all groundbreaking work. This was shown distinctively clearly to the German delegation, as in the commemorative publication of the congress beside the pioneers of the organisations of England und France, our former midwives leader Mrs Nanna Conti could also be seen.”*⁵²

Nanna Conti was also honoured posthumously when her name was engraved on a link on the chain of office of the president of the International Confederation of Midwives.⁵³ As far as I know, the ICM has not yet remembered any of their Jewish colleagues who were killed in the Shoah. We also don’t know yet how many babies in the occupied countries fell victim to euthanasia killings after midwives reported them to the German authorities.

From 1936 to 1945, the IMU was led by a Nazi and was turned into a mouthpiece for Nazi propaganda.

48 Nanna CONTI, *Rückblick und Ausblick*, Die Deutsche Hebamme 1944, p. 5.

49 A. K. PETERS, *Nanna Conti*, p. 319.

50 Frieda RIEDE, *Tagung der Internationalen Hebammen-Union in London*, Deutsche Hebammen-Zeitschrift, 1949/1950, 1. Jg., p. 131.

51 Wellcome Collection London, SA/ICM/R/3.

52 „Deutschland, das in seinem Vortrag ganz besonders über den Wert der Organisation berichtete (...), kann stolz darauf sein, bahnbrechend hier mitgearbeitet zu haben. Das wurde der deutschen Delegation so recht vor Augen geführt, denn in der Fest-Zeitschrift anlässlich des Kongresses war außer den Vorkämpfern der Organisationen von England und Frankreich auch unsere frühere Hebammenleiterin Frau Nanna Conti zu sehen.“ E. APFEL, *Der Londoner Kongreß im Überblick*, Deutsche Hebammen-Zeitschrift, 1955, p. 10. Translated by Anja K. Peters.

53 GM., *Vorbericht über den 13. Internationalen Hebammen-Kongreß vom 1. bis 6. Juli 1963 in Madrid*, Deutsche Hebammen-Zeitschrift, 1963, 15.Jg., p. 362-367.

November 9, 2018 was the 80th anniversary of the day when all over Germany, Austria and Sudetenland synagogues were burned to the ground, and shops owned by Jews were demolished and plundered, when Jewish hospitals and schools were attacked. During the following days thousands of Jewish men were deported to concentration camps. These pogroms – or as the Nazis called it: “Kristallnacht” – were the beginning of the persecution of the European Jews which led to mass murder. In 2019 we will remember the beginning of World War II and the beginning of the “euthanasia” program. German and Austrian midwives were involved in all three of these atrocities. So far only the German Midwives Association accepted responsibility in 2006, but without taking any action, for example by donating Stolpersteine in remembrance of the colleagues killed in the Shoah.

Conclusion

The years of 1938/1939 mark the climax in the career of Nanna Conti. As the German Reich expanded, so did the sphere of influence of the German Midwives Association: geographically when new districts and midwives association were founded in Sudetenland, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and Slovakia; professionally they reached a new level of emancipation after the Reich Midwives Law guaranteed them the whole field of child birth and delivery. The law was an enormous political success, and even if over decades the groundwork had been done by others, it was attributed to Nanna Conti and gained her national and international recognition. Even though the IMU/ICM denied any collaboration or membership to former Nazi party members immediately after the war, they soon honoured Nanna Conti once more by acknowledging her at congresses and immortalising her name on the chain of office of their president. The ICM has never asked in what way the ideology that was spread among and lectured to midwives and co-workers by Nanna Conti, influenced German and European midwives beyond 1945. Nobody prevented district leaders who had served under the Nazis to represent the West German midwives until the 1980s. To this day the ICM has still not discussed to what extent functionaries of the European Midwives Association were in collaboration with and support of a midwives’ association and its leader that were part of a fascist, anti-Semitic, eugenic and racist political system. Neither the ICM nor today’s German Midwives Association have donated Stolpersteine for persecuted Jewish midwives or have engaged in researching any of their names.

Norwegian resistance fighter Sylvia Salvesen (1890 – 1973) named her memoirs of her experiences in the KZ Ravensbrück – where she also describes the horrific circumstances

in the delivery room and the actions of prisoner-midwife Josephine Pöllinger (born 1902)⁵⁴ – „Forgive, but do not forget“⁵⁵. This book title should be suggested as the appropriate and desired approach to the ICM’s history.

54 Dr. Anja K. PETERS, *Josefine Pöllinger: The Midwife of Ravensbrueck*, UKAHN BULLETIN 2019, Vol 7, accessed 16th March 2019, pp. 74-77, URL: <http://ukahn.org/wp/the-ukahn-bulletin/>

55 Sylvia SALVESEN, *Forgive, but do not forget*, London 1958.



Portrait of Nanna Conti. Source: *Die Deutsche Hebamme*, 56. Jg., 1941, p. 103.

Summary

Caught Between Dialogue and Diktat – The International Midwives Union 1933–1945

The International Midwives Union or IMU was the predecessor organisation of today's International Confederation of Midwives as was the German Reichshebammenschaft (Reich Midwives Association) to today's Deutscher Hebammenverband (German Midwifery Association). Nanna Conti was president of both the national and international organisation. She strongly supported the German Midwives Law, which was passed in 1938. By this law, assistance at a complication-free birth became an entitlement of German and later Austrian midwives. This specific paragraph in the law was unique within Europe, a cause for admiration throughout all midwives associations. It still remains legal in Austria and Germany. This ingrained Nanna Conti as a heroine of midwifery into the collective memory of German and Austrian midwives until the 1990s.

The years of 1938/1939 mark the climax in the career of Nanna Conti. As the German Reich expanded, so did the sphere of influence of the

German Midwives Association: geographically when new districts and midwives association were founded in Sudetenland, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and Slovakia; professionally they reached a new level of emancipation after the Reich Midwives Law guaranteed them the whole field of child birth and delivery. The law was an enormous political success, and even if over decades the groundwork had been done by others, it was attributed to Nanna Conti and gained her national and international recognition.

To this day the ICM has still not discussed to what extent functionaries of the European Midwives Association were in collaboration with and support of a midwives' association and its leader that were part of a fascist, anti-Semitic, eugenic and racist political system. Neither the ICM nor today's German Midwives Association have donated Stolpersteine for persecuted Jewish midwives or have engaged in researching any of their names.