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WOMEN AND VIOLENCE:

“LA BÊTE HUMAINE” KLARA PFÖRTSCH

The term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* refers to specific ethical tasks in historical memory that are different from objective historiography. It endows cultural memory work with ethical and redemptive meaning. The term is peculiarly German and has been imported into the English language because there is no equivalent translation. As the literature on transitional justice has exploded, the German term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has become paradigmatic for the management and mastery of legacies of perpetration. John Borneman has proposed a stage model of four “modes of accountability” to map the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in his recent book on *Political Crimes and the Memory of Loss*.¹ He identifies as the first mode of accountability *retribution*, which occurred in the form of international and national war crimes trials and the punishment of individual perpetrators, as well as military occupation, loss of national sovereignty, and expulsions and loss of German territories. The second mode of accountability began in 1952, when the West German government agreed to pay *restitution* in the form of *Wiedergutmachung* payments to the state of Israel and Jewish agencies; the third mode, *performative redress*, got under way during the 1960s in the form of apologies, the creation of historical commissions to investigate particular places, institutions, and persons, and dialogue with former victim groups. Borneman maintains that there is a sequential logic to these modes, although they occur concurrently and interact with each other. For instance the phase of *performative redress* occurred in West Germany among a younger generation dissatisfied with their parents’ “inability to mourn,” but only after the first two steps of retribution

¹ John Borneman, *Political Crime and the Memory of Loss*, Bloomington 2011.

restitution had taken place. At the same time, however, the mode of retribution continued with the West German trials program during the 1960s and with the Eichmann trial, which took place in 1961. The fourth mode of accountability began in the 1980s, with what Borneman calls *rites of commemoration*, a term which refers to the construction of memorials, museums and the observance of anniversaries. He notes that this last mode shows no signs of letting up. Certainly, the scholarship of this group responsible for this edited volume is part of proliferating commemorative culture.²

Somewhat facetiously, Borneman asks whether Germany's present enchantment with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has reached a tipping point and become a "form of pleasure in guilt," which he likens to "wearing a hair shirt in the Middle Ages to atone for sin."³ In other words, at what point does *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* lose its critical edge and political obligation and instead becomes an exercise in self-serving reassurance of one's own moral and political correctness? There is a certain pleasure in unveiling the secrets of people who were desperate to hide their pasts. Several decades ago, the revelation of these secrets caused scandal and carried risks, both for the researcher as well as for the target of such "outings." German archives were hard to get into, and protected by strict privacy laws that shielded the names and identities of perpetrators of Nazi crimes. All of that has changed, as the protections have become lighter and/or easier to circumvent. A wave of recent publications discloses and examines the private and public lives of Nazi perpetrators, at all ranks of the hierarchy. As their secrets are spilt and their lives dissected, we should become cognizant of our motivations. At what

² Lucia Scherzberg, *Theologie und Vergangenheitsbewältigung. Eine kritische Bestandsaufnahme im interdisziplinären Vergleich*, Paderborn 2005; *ibid.*, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung im französischen Katholizismus und deutschen Protestantismus*, Paderborn 2007, *ibid.*, *Doppelte Vergangenheitsbewältigung und die Singularität des Holocaust*, Saarbrücken 2012.

³ Borneman, *Political Crime*, 24

point do such commemorations become “cheap”⁴ rituals of moral edification and political purification. How do we make sure that memorial work retains its political edge and serves a politics of justice and respect for human rights? *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* must cost something to be transformative. Unless commemorations carry a price because they require reparation for past injustice and a commitment to justice in the future, they turn into mere edification and historiography.

Women's Lives

Women's history is already an act of reparative justice, as women's existence is routinely rendered invisible by mainstream historiography. This is true even more so for working class women, who leave few written traces. The life of a woman like Klara Pförsch must be reconstructed from the margins of documents written by others.⁵ She deposited no letters, diaries, or memoirs in the archive. Even the documents of her law suit were shredded.⁶ Her story must be pieced together on evidence left by others: the prison chaplain who felt morally conflicted about her,⁷ the military judges who condemned her,⁸ camp survivors who mentioned her in their memoirs of survival and others who wrote in her defense.⁹ Hence, in some

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Nachfolge*, München³, 1950

⁵ Archival documents for this essay have previously been used in chapter 4 of *The Mark of Cain: Guilt and Denial in the Lives of Nazi Perpetrators*, New York, 2013.

⁶ There is a reference to a lawsuit against the state of Bavaria for recognition as a victim of Nazism in a letter between Pastor Sachsse to Dr. Gawlik of the Zentrale Rechtsschutzstelle, January 6, 1962, AEKiR [Archiv der Evangelischen Kirche im Rheinland], Düsseldorf, 1OB 004-47. The outcome is unknown because the files have been shredded. Information, Peter Gohle, Bundesarchiv Außenstelle Ludwigsburg, June 13, 2012;

⁷ 1OB 004-47, AEKiR, Düsseldorf, Carl Sachsse Nachlass.

⁸ Ministère des Affaires Etrangère, Bureau des Archives de l'Occupation Française en Allemagne et en Autriche, Colmar, CD-ROM Jugements du Tribunal Supérieur de Rastatt, Verdict No. 6/578, CD-No. 19.

⁹ Margarete Buber-Neumann: *Als Gefangene bei Stalin und Hitler: Eine Welt im Dunkel*, Stuttgart, 1985, 279.

respects, the reconstruction of her life is an act of repair that resists the structural forces which tend to erase the historical memory of poor, young, marginal, uneducated women.

Klara Pförsch was charged with war crimes and sentenced to death for her role in brutalizing prisoners in Ravensbrück, Auschwitz, and Dachau, where she acted as *Lagerälteste*. After the war, she was denounced twice by Ravensbrück survivors: once in December 1945, when she attended a gathering of Ravensbrück survivors, which resulted in her arrest and internment in American custody, including Ludwigsburg and Dachau. The American military eventually released her and she moved to Leipzig.¹⁰ But she was again recognized by survivors and extradited to the French zone in 1949. The Rastatt French military court indicted her for war crimes and charged her with “extreme cruelty.”¹¹ The judges considered her a “*femme terrible*” who displayed a “criminal character” and “zeal to do evil” (*zèle malfaisant*). They found no “extenuating circumstances in her favor” and sentenced her to death. The post-war judges, prison chaplains and government officials were visibly repulsed by her moral depravity and declined to extend the support that was customary for higher ranking, better educated, and more socially connected Nazi defendants. The French court eventually commuted her death sentences to life imprisonment. But not, as Pastor Sachsse pointed out in a letter in 1952, “because her crimes were deemed any less grave but solely because she is a woman

¹⁰ The literature has so far stated that she was sentenced by an American military court and sentenced to three years, which ended with her release on December 21, 1945. However, there is absolutely no documentary evidence for such an American military trial. It is more likely that she was detained in the women’s internment Camp 77 without trial and eventually released. Cf. Annette Neumann, Funktionshäftlinge im Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück, in: Werner Röhr/Brigitte Berlekamp (Hg.), *Tod oder Überleben: Neue Forschungen zur Geschichte des Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück, Band 1: Faschismus und Weltkriegsforschung Beiheft*, Berlin 2001, 45.

¹¹ Jugements du Tribunal Supérieur de Rastatt, S. 3.

and one does not like to execute women.”¹² She remained in French custody until January 1957, shortly before all of the high ranking convicts of the Nuremberg IMT and NMT were released and the American War Crimes Prisons #1 in Landsberg/Lech was shut down.

Her sentence exceeded that of those who made up the political, economic and military elite of National Socialism. She received less pastoral, legal, and political support. The prison chaplain hesitated to submit amnesty appeals on her behalf because he thought there was no chance of success. The newly created *Zentrale Rechtsschutzstelle* (Central Legal Protection Office), established in 1950 in Bonn to provide financial and legal assistance to German convicts of Nazi crimes, “considered the case of Klara Pförsch particularly severe (*sehr schwerwiegend*)” and declined to provide assistance. She was stigmatized and became an outcast. Her gender, class, lack of education, and prior conviction for “high treason” by Nazi judges made her monstrous and irredeemable.

Women and Violence

Most of the violence committed by Nazi Germany was committed by men. In fact, globally, the vast majority of violence is perpetrated by men. By virtue of role expectation, men are expected to use physical force to assert their will and to defend their rights both professionally and privately. Men use violence legally as soldiers, police men, prison guards, or executioners, in professional positions that are outfitted with weapons. Men also use violence illegally to pursue power, property, and personal satisfaction. Women, on the other hand, are exceptional when they use violent means, either legally or illegally. As the WHO *World Report on Violence and Health* of 2002 documents, most violence is committed by men, whether in the domestic realm, as a part of criminal activity,

¹² AEKiR, Düsseldorf, 1OB 004-47, Brief, Sachsse to Landesverband Pfalz der Inneren Mission, June 4, 1952.

or in state violence. While women have made great strides in gaining professional and political equality, the gap in the rates for violence has remained the same. In her 2011 analysis of *The Gender of Crime*, criminologist Dana Britton concluded that “on the basis of these data ... we can conclusively say that at the present moment men and women are not the same in terms of violent offending or even criminal behavior more generally.”¹³ Rising equality has not resulted in equalizing the rates at which men and women use force to harm or kill.

I am stating the obvious here. But it bears repeating that women who use violence constitute a minority. In fact, they constituted 1% of the personnel in camp operations and killing programs. Konrad Kwiet calculates:

Some 500,000 males were recruited for mass shootings, gasings and other forms of killing. Fewer than 5,000 women might have been called on to act as guards, torturers and, occasionally, as killers. Some 3,500 women, largely recruited from the ranks of the BDM (League of German Girls) served as so-called SS-Aufseherinnen, female SS-supervisors, in concentration camps during the Second World War.¹⁴

The archives of the women’s camp in Ravensbrück, where all female SS-guards (*SS-Aufseherin*) were trained, confirms Kwiet’s estimate of 3500 female guards.¹⁵ Women could not join the SS as full members and remained subject to male control at all times. They were never in positions of authority over the administration of a concentration camp, and they held no power to shape the policies of degradation, dehumanization, and extermination in the camp system. But they were outfitted with uniforms and boots, equipped with whips and dogs, and encouraged to use physical force. Some used their positions to abuse, beat, and kill the female prisoners in their power. Their

¹³ Dana Britton, *The Gender of Crime*, New York 2011, 31.

¹⁴ Konrad Kwiet, ‘Hitler’s Willing Executioners’ and ‘Ordinary Germans:’ Some Comments on Goldhagen’s Ideas, www.ceu.hu/jewishstudies/pdf/01_kwiet.pdf [Zugriff May 21, 2012].

¹⁵ Simone Erpel, Einführung, in: Simone Erpel (Hg.), *Im Gefolge der SS-Aufseherinnen des Frauen KZ-Ravensbrück*, Berlin 2007, 22.

actions were considered especially scandalous. As historian Kathrin Meyer argued, “again and again judges showed surprise that women could commit such crimes...The behavior of women was seen as especially brutal because it violated gender norms.”¹⁶ The existence of female SS-associates was shocking and outrageous. When these women were criminally prosecuted, they received disproportionately higher sentences, precisely because their brutality violated the basic rules of civilization.

These gender dynamics became particularly evident in the Majdanek trial (1975-1981). Majdanek was one of six extermination camps, where more than 300,000 people were killed between October 1941 and July 1944. The trial involved six women and eleven men. The Regional Court of Düsseldorf imposed the longest sentences on the female co-defendants: Hermine Ryan-Braunsteiner was convicted to life in prison and Hildegard Lächert to twelve years, while the men received short prison sentences ranging between three and ten years. Elisa Mailaender-Koslov examined the proceedings and concluded that gender expectations shaped not only the judges and the media but the witnesses themselves. In their testimony, the witnesses “remembered violence committed by women more often and more clearly. The shock elicited by female acts of violence among survivors and trial participants was notable.”¹⁷ The witnesses remembered the women clearly and could identify them accurately even decades after the events. Their recollections were less sharp and precise when it came to the men. Several of the male defendants were also acquitted for reasons of ill health or old age. These convictions reflect the scandal of female violence rather than actual levels of responsibility.

¹⁶ Kathrin Meyer, *Entnazifizierung von Frauen: Die Internierungslager der US-Zone Deutschlands 1945-1952*, Berlin 2004, 238ff.

¹⁷ Elissa Mailaender Koslov, Täterinnenbilder im Düsseldorfer Majdanek Prozess 1975-1981, in: Simone Erpel (Hg), *Im Gefolge der SS-Aufseherinnen des Frauen KZ-Ravensbrück*, Berlin 2007, 211-230, 219.

Such women were often likened to animals, *bête humaine*, “beasts”¹⁸ or “witches.”¹⁹ Salacious reports about the “SS beast” Ilse Koch, wife of the camp commander of Buchenwald,²⁰ or about Irma Grese²¹ sexualized their life

¹⁸ Daniel Patrick Brown, *The Beautiful Beast: The Life and Crimes of SS-Aufseherin Irma Grese*, Ventura, CA 1996; Ulrike Weckel/Edgar Wolfrum (Hg.), *Bestien und Befehlsempfänger: Frauen und Männer in NS-Prozessen nach 1945*, Göttingen 2003; Constance Jaiser, Irma Greese: Zur Rezeption einer KZ-Aufseherin, in: Simone Erpel (Hg.), *Im Gefolge der SS-Aufseherinnen des Frauen KZ-Ravensbrück*, Berlin, 2007, 338-346; Julia Duesterberg, Von der Umkehr aller Weiblichkeit: Charakterbilder einer KZ-Aufseherin, in: Insa Eschenbach/Sigrid Jacobeit/Silke Wenk (Hg.), *Gedächtnis und Geschlecht: Deutungsmuster in Darstellungen des Nationalsozialistischen Genozids*, Frankfurt 2002, 237-243, 241.

¹⁹ Arthur L. Smith Jr., *Die Hexe von Buchenwald: Der Fall Ilse Koch*, Köln 1983.

²⁰ Alexandra Pryzrembel, Der Bann eines Bildes: Ilse Koch, die ‘Kommandeuse von Buchenwald,’ in: Insa Eschenbach/Sigrid Jacobeit/Silke Wenk (Hg.), *Gedächtnis und Geschlecht: Deutungsmuster in Darstellungen des nationalsozialistischen Genozids*, Frankfurt 2002, 245-268. She was sentenced to life in prison by regional court Augsburg in 1951, where the judges explained their choice to impose the maximum penalty for all charges: “Strafschärfend waren folgende Umstände zu werten: Die Koch hat sich jeglicher besseren Einsicht und jeglicher Ausrichtung ihres Verhaltens nach dieser eigenwillig verschlossen, obwohl hier Regungen des Mitleids und des Mitgefühls für jede Frau besonders nahe lagen. Sie war in Buchenwald als Ehefrau des Lagerführers und als Mutter ihrer Kinder und hatte dort keinerlei dienstliche Funktionen. Während das Aufsichtspersonal beruflich in die Führung des KL eingegliedert war und bei seinem Zusammensein mit den Häftlingen auch mit dienstlichen Belagen auseinandersetzen musste, wäre es für die Koch Pflicht und für sie als Frau auch ein leichtes gewesen, sich aus dem KL Geschehen völlig fernzuhalten und gleich den anderen Frauen nur ihrer Familie zu leben. Die Koch aber fühlte sich nicht nur als Frau und Mutter, sondern als Kommandeuse. Sie machte es sich zur Aufgabe, in das eigentliche KL-Geschehen einzugreifen. Sie empfand es als innere Befriedigung, wenn sie einen fühlbaren Beitrag zu der möglichst linientreuen Verwirklichung des im Lager herrschenden Systems leisten konnte.” Ks 22/50, *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen*, Vol VIII, 127.

²¹ Brown, *The Beautiful Beast*; Jaiser, *Irma Greese*.

stories and inflamed the pornographic imagination.²² The bestial character of female violence also shaped the memory of witnesses, who were particularly impacted by cruelty received at the hands of women. It was not uncommon for survivors to testify that the sadism of women surpassed the brutality of men.²³ Their guilt exceeded the guilt of men, because they were exceptional and broke gender conventions. When “women deviate from this mold [of femininity, they] are likely to be punished even more harshly,” notes criminologist Dana Britton.²⁴ Women who use lethal violence face stiffer sentences and harsher condemnation. The judicial system is shaped by cultural expectations and moral assumptions that correlate violence with male gender behavior.

Function Prisoner

But Pförsch was not an SS-Associate but a political prisoner. She was caught up in what Claudia Card has called “diabolical evil.” In *The Atrocity Paradigm* Card develops the concept of “diabolical evil” to analyze the intentional and systematic

²² Alexandra Przyrembel, Transfixed by an Image: Ilse Koch, the ‘Kommandeuse of Buchenwald,’ in: *German History* 19, no 3 (2001): 369–400; Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, 404 ff; Insa Eschenbach, NS-Prozesse in der sowjetischen Besatzungszone und der DDR: Einige Überlegungen zu den Strafverfahrensakten ehemaliger SS-Aufseherinnen des Frauenkonzentrationslagers Ravensbrück, in: Kurt Buck (Hg.), *Die frühen Nachkriegsprozesse: Beiträge zur Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung in Norddeutschland*, 3, Bremen 1997, 65–74; Sybil Milton, Women and the Holocaust: The Case of German and German-Jewish Women, in: Carol Rittner/John K. Roth (Hg.), *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, New York 1993, 225.

²³ Survivor testimony that women were “more malicious and mean, more hateful and petty than men,” is cited by Gisela Bock: Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany: Perpetrators, Victims, Followers, and Bystanders, in: Dalia Ofer/Lenore J. Weitzman (Hg), *Women in the Holocaust*, New Haven, CT, 1998, 90; Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, 404–5. Daniel Patrick Brown, *The Camp Women: The Female Auxiliaries who Assisted the SS in Running the Nazi Concentration Camp*, Atglen, PA, 2002.

²⁴ Britton, *The Gender of Crime*, 78

corruption of a victim's moral integrity by deliberate recruitment into the commission of violence. Concluding her discussion of Primo Levi's "gray zone," Card writes:

Diabolical evil, on my view, consists in placing others under the extreme stress, even severe duress, of having to choose between grave risks of horrible physical suffering or death (not necessarily their own) and equally grave risks of severe moral compromise, the loss of moral integrity, even moral death. This is stress geared to break the will of decent people, to destroy what is best in us on any plausible conception of human excellence. For that reason it deserves to be regarded as diabolical. The devil wants company and is a willing corrupter, plotting others' downfall. This is how evil extends its power.²⁵

Card elaborates this notion of diabolical evil in her feminist analysis of women who use violence to guard male supremacy and to enforce the submission of children and women to male rule. Traditionally, it is primarily in the privacy of the home that women use violence against children. Women often do not benefit directly from enforcing the rules of patriarchy, but they are far more than its powerless victims. Patriarchal systems of power in church, state, and the home function because women consent and actively sustain its functioning. Concentration camps, as well, worked because a few administrators were able to control thousands of prisoners by forcibly compelling their compliance and complicity. By creating the so-called "prison self-administration," the creation and maintenance of terror, submission, and degradation could be delegated to the inmates.

These functions prisoners fulfilled many roles. Each assignment came with certain risks and benefits, which were not apparent to those who were given a choice (and many were not): should they volunteer for a certain assignment or not? Some functions exposed and implicated prisoners in violence. Others did not. If one was fortunate, one could be assigned to

²⁵ Caludia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil*, New York 2002, 212.

process paperwork, sort belongings of new arrivals, work in the kitchen or the hospital. But Pförsch was not so fortunate. She lacked education and was known for fierce strength in street fights between communists and Nazi street thugs. She was recruited to “keep order.” This implicated her in rampant violence as she imposed “order” on her prisoner blocks, “fairness” during the distribution of meager food rations, “calm” during roll calls, and “justice” when punishments were called for. *Kapos*, *Blockälteste* and *Lagerälteste* were placed in a dubious intermediary position of power and were often despised by fellow prisoners. The shift to force prisoners into collaboration and to implicate them in physical violence was a deliberate step to demoralize and dehumanize prisoners. For instance, in August 1942, Reichsführer of the SS, Heinrich Himmler decreed that all beatings in concentration camps were to be administered by prisoners.²⁶ But for the SS-camp administration, the benefits of this forced collaboration in the power structure of the camp were obvious. It demoralized people, undermined their sense of human dignity, and damaged moral integrity. The strategy of “divide and conquer” weakened solidarity and undercut prospects for resistance.

Diabolical evil, in Card’s definition, has three components, which all apply to Pförsch’s predicament. First, Card points out, people who are implicated in diabolical evil are themselves victims. Second, they make choices and perpetrate “some or similar evils on others who are already victims like themselves. And third, inhabitants of the gray zone act under extraordinary stress.”²⁷

Although Pförsch was officially denied recognition as a victim of National Socialism, we would certainly see her as a victim of its system. She was arrested in October 1936 on suspicion of “high treason,” tried in Munich and released in 1937. She was rearrested in 1938. This time, she was convicted of the charge of “high treason” by the notorious *Volksgerichtshof* in

²⁶ Cf. Neumann, *Funktionshäftlinge*, 36.

²⁷ Card, *Atrocity Paradigm*, 224

Berlin on November 19, 1940 and was sentenced to two years imprisonment. Two months before she was to be released, she was transferred to the women's concentration camp of Ravensbrück in the spring of 1940. She was tagged with a red triangle as a political prisoner. In May 1941, she was appointed "camp elder" of Ravensbrück, the highest function for a prisoner. She was moved to Auschwitz-Birkenau in October of 1942 together with 500 Jewish Ravensbrück inmates, who were killed upon arrival. She was registered into Auschwitz and by March 1943 she had been made *Lagerälteste* by SS-Associate Mandel. In Auschwitz she contracted typhus and spent three months in the *Strafblock* (prison block) for breaking camp rules. In the fall of 1944, she was transported to the concentration camp in Geislingen, where she was once again made *Lagerälteste*. When she was liberated by the U.S. Army, she was in Dachau, again as *Lagerälteste*.²⁸ She entered the Nazi camp universe as a thirty year old, working class woman, with political convictions and a social network. When she left the prison system in January 1957, she was 51 years old and physically and psychologically broken. She remained single and on welfare in a senior citizen home for the rest of her life.

Second, Card stipulates that diabolical evil implicates a victim in the perpetration of evil. Despite her powerlessness, Pförsch was not stripped of moral agency. She made choices and she used her agency to negotiate for privileges, along with food, security and survival. Although she acted within a severely diminished realm, she cannot be relieved of moral (and legal) accountability. She was not at the very bottom of the hierarchy, as a Jewish inmate in the death camp of Auschwitz. For them, Lawrence Langer argued, the conditions were so extreme that the very foundation of human moral agency was undermined and they were routinely forced into making "choiceless choices."²⁹ Pförsch could not avoid degradation,

²⁸ Neumann, *Funktionshäftlinge*, 45.

²⁹ Lawrence Langer, *The Dilemma of Choice in the Deathcamps*, in: John K. Roth/Michael Berenbaum, *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications*, New York 1989, 222-232.

no matter what she chose to do. But she retained some discretion, as we will see, and chose the circumstances and the targets of violence.

But she did so, and this is Card's third stipulation, under severe duress. Primo Levi has most eloquently described the crushing force of dehumanization that awaited newly arrived prisoners in Auschwitz and choked ordinary human feelings and ethical considerations. The desperate fight for survival could lead to, what Levi called, the "death of the soul." He warned that "nobody can know for how long and under what tasks his soul can resist before yielding or breaking."³⁰ Ordinary moral sensitivities were no longer applicable amidst the extreme stress of death and depravity. Pressure at that level is traumatic and crushes the very foundation, the physical, mental, and emotional prerequisites of making choices.

It is rather startling how completely the French judges ignored the extraordinary vulnerability of Pförsch. They focused on her privileged status and pointed out that she had enjoyed "the confidence of the SS"³¹ and had embraced the status and power that had accrued to her. In contrast to the French judges, other former function prisoners did try to comprehend the hybrid position of prisoners who served in the camp hierarchy. In her letter to François-Poncet in April 1951, prison functionary Orli Wald who survived Ravensbrück and Auschwitz, tried to convey the duress under which inmates had to make moral choices:

Many prominent representatives of National Socialism have recently been granted reprieve... They belonged exclusively to those who stood in light and glory during Nazi times. But Klara Pförsch sank into the darkness that was spread by these men across the entire world... I beg your Excellency to consider in your assessment of the person of Klara Pförsch that she never profited from the Third Reich, that she was never a camp guard but only a beaten political prisoner, whose only guilt consisted of not being able to resist the pressures of the hell of Auschwitz as

³⁰ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 60

³¹ Jugements du Tribunal Supérieur de Rastatt, Verdict No. 6/578, p. 7.

a simple and primitive woman, who has now spent 15 years in prison, enough to atone.³²

Long before Primo Levi's "gray zone" and Lawrence Langer's "choiceless choice,"³³ Orli Wald tried to articulate the peculiar nature of Pförsch's guilt. She not only lobbied for Pförsch but also for Fela Dreksler,³⁴ a Polish Jewish survivor of Auschwitz, who served ten years in a French prison for her actions as prisoner functionary.³⁵ Meanwhile, Orli Wald wrote, people like "Ilse Koch ... were let go," while Pförsch remained imprisoned.³⁶ Wald tried to articulate the hybrid position of function prisoners who were caught between powerlessness and complicity. Herta Gotthelf, a Ravensbrück survivor and board member of the Social Democratic Party, also came to the defense of Pförsch and argued that Pförsch had become "the tool of others" someone who "could not choose one's function, or the specific task one was commanded to perform, or the means by which one carried them out." On the face of it, that sounded suspiciously like the excuses made by members of the Einsatzgruppen and SS-men who were tried in various courts. None other than Adolf Eichmann had used the same defense strategy and argued that he was only following orders and had turned himself into the tool of his superiors. But Card's criteria for stress is a helpful criteria for gauging the degree of vulnerability along the chain of command in

³² AEKiR, Düsseldorf, IOB 004-47, letter, Orli Wald to High Commissioner François-Poncet, April 2, 1951.

³³ Lawrence Langer, *The Dilemma of Choice*, 222-232.

³⁴ Her name is spelled differently as Fela Drexler in the Yad Vashem photo archive, which identifies her as a former inmate of Auschwitz who was tried as a Kapo and died in German prison. <http://collections.yadvashem.org/photosarchive/en-us/52712.html> [Zugriff: August 8, 2013] Cf. Bernd Steger and Peter Wald, her stepson, have collected her published writings and letters in: Bernd Steger/Peter Wald, *Hinter der grünen Pappe. Orli Wald im Schatten von Auschwitz - Leben und Erinnerungen*, Hamburg 2008, 226-230.

³⁵ Steger/Wald, *Hinter der grünen Pappe*, 226-230.

³⁶ AEKiR, Düsseldorf, IOB 004-47, letter, Rosl Jochmann to Dr. Jur Albert Göhrig, November 30, 1949.

which inmates enjoyed the fewest benefits and bargained for mere survival.

Other function prisoner tried to impress upon the French authorities that Pförtsch had succumbed to violence in the midst of extreme hunger, grime, and fear of death. In November 1949, Herta Gotthelf pleaded with the French High Commissioner François-Poncet that the death sentence be commuted: "I am convinced that you will come to the conclusion after careful consideration of the case that a human being who has herself endured years of most dreadful torture in Nazi prisons and concentration camps, does not deserve ... to be condemned like a regular war criminal."³⁷ Rosl Jochmann, a member of the Austrian parliament and Ravensbrück survivor,³⁸ similarly argued in a letter to Pförtsch's defense lawyer in November 1949:

I want to emphasize that I have always condemned the beatings and I don't want to conceal that I was often mad at Klara Pförtsch because of them, but she did not kill anyone in Ravensbrück and it is also true that she helped many there. She succumbed to the horrible maelstrom (Fluidum) of this camp, this hell, and one must say that anyone put into her position, with her psychic pre-conditions, would not have acted much differently.³⁹

Rosl Jochmann pointed out that Pförtsch had initially refused the camp commander's request to take over the administration of punishment, which consisted of twenty five strikes on the buttocks, although he had offered her a single cell, the same food as the SS, reprieve from forced labor and daily walks. Another woman, she noted, had paid with her life for

³⁷ AEKiR, Düsseldorf, 1OB 004-47, letter, Herta Gotthelf to High Commissioner François-Poncet, November 21, 1949.

³⁸ Andrea Steffek, *Rosa Jochmann. Nie Zusehen, wenn Unrecht geschieht: Ihr Leben und Wirken 1901-1945 als Grundlage für ihre stetige Mahnung gegen Faschismus, Nationalsozialismus und das Vergessen*, Wien 1999.

³⁹ AEKiR, Düsseldorf, 1OB 004-47, letter, Rosl Jochmann to Dr. jur. Göhrig, November 30, 1949.

the refusal to accept this assignment.⁴⁰ Eventually Pförsch succumbed to the recruitment efforts. Both survivors insisted, in Gotthelf's words, that Pförsch was not "a typical concentration camp sadist but a woman who after years of prison and concentration camp detainment, after disease and psychological and physical abuse was broken and finally beat prisoners during the few months that she served as camp elder."⁴¹ Their objections did not sway the judges.

Guilt, Memory and Truth

What shaped Pförsch's moral dilemma was her hybrid position as victim and perpetrator, a position perched precariously between powerlessness and power. When faced with a choice, she chose the side of domination. Her complicity compromised her moral integrity and her collaboration undermined her ability to speak truthfully about her experiences. When she was questioned, years after her release from prison, to testify against particular SS-personnel, she could not remember their names or speak to their actions. She exhibited classic symptoms of Stockholm Syndrome and could not disassociate from her former prison guards. She protected them from prosecution. When she was asked, "Do you know any of the following SS-associates in Ravensbrück?" and was handed lists of names, she answered: "Of these person, I recall nobody. These names are completely unknown to me." Whenever she did remember a name, she defended the individual and testified to her kind and considerate behavior: "Of the named persons, I can only recall Maria Merkle. She was in charge of the kitchen in Geislingen. I cannot say anything negative about Merkle."⁴² Or: "Among the group of the accused, I only know

⁴⁰ Rosl Jochmann cited the fate of Else Krug; Cf. Neumann, *Funktionshäftlinge*, 45.

⁴¹ AEKiR, Düsseldorf, IOB 004-47, letter, Herta Gotthelf to High Commissioner François-Poncet, November 21, 1949.

⁴² BAL, B162/4346, deposition Pförsch, Stadtpolizeiamt Hof, October 1, 1968.

the SS-associate Rupert...She did not strike me as unpleasant (*ist mir nicht unangenehm aufgefallen*). I never observed her abusing prisoners."⁴³ When she described the *Abendappell* in Auschwitz, where the number of prisoners who left for work in the morning had to match the number of returnees in the evening, which included the corpses of those who had been beaten or shot to death during the day, she said: "Who was responsible for these murders could never be investigated. In any case, it could have only been the SS. I never heard that female Kapos beat inmates to death."⁴⁴ When asked about the SS-guards in the concentration camp Geislingen, she said: "I cannot remember names after so many years. I was in Geislingen between fall 1944 and March 1945. I cannot say anything negative (*Nachteiliges*) about campführer Romann. I had no contact with SS-men and cannot make any statements about these persons."⁴⁵ In each of these assertions, she simultaneously denied specific knowledge of individual wrongdoing and supplied benign information designed to protect the person. Her testimony reveals her close association and solidarity with her jailors. This combination of vague and protective memory is a clear indication of complicity and guilt. Even twenty five years after the end of the war, Pförtsch could not side unambiguously with the victims and survivors of the camps.

The precision and clarity of her recollection provides a good criteria for gaging her culpability. Instances in which she became the victim of abuse are crystal clear in her mind. But instances in which she used violence on others became vague and self-serving. Her accounts vary depending on her subject status as either victim or perpetrator of mistreatment. For instance, in one account, Pförtsch named her assailant that "piece of shit" (*Miststück*) SS-associate Margot Drexel who "beat me so savagely that she busted my eardrum. I was

⁴³ BAL B162, deposition Pförtsch, Frankfurt/Main, August 18, 1963.

⁴⁴ BAL B162/2831, deposition Pförtsch, Frankfurt/Main, August 18, 1963.

⁴⁵ BAL, B162/4346, deposition Pförtsch, Hof, October 1, 1968.

beaten by her in Birkenau. She *always beat without cause*, whenever she was upset over something or needed to let off steam. (emph added)⁴⁶ She also remembers the name of the woman, a “professional criminal”[i.e. green triangle] and “block elder”, who administered to Pförsch the 25 baton strikes to the buttocks “because I was caught smoking without permission.”⁴⁷ But the only time, in which Pförsch admitted to having used force, she attributed moral cause and good reasons to her use of violence:

It also happened that I had to beat inmates. I have done this, when I caught a prisoner, who was known to steal recurrently. I recall in this context a strong Polish female prisoner, who brutally robbed bread off of Jewish inmates. This inmate I slapped. But I refrained from making a report.⁴⁸

Pförsch shaped her narrative to defend herself: only the others beat “for no reason,” while she herself, who sometimes “had to beat inmates,” did so only for morally defensible reasons. Her testimony acknowledged that she had the power to make choices. She admitted that she could choose the circumstances in which to apply force. In this narrative, she picked an incident that involved a true villain who was caught brutally stealing from the most vulnerable inmates. Pförsch made sure to emphasize that she had merely “slapped” the inmate and had not reported the infraction to the camp administration, a report which might have led to further punishment, physical harm, and eventual selection of the injured for the gas chamber. She packaged her own commission of violence as an act of defense of the weak and vulnerable and of the maintenance of order. Her awareness of wrongdoing was intact. Even as she conceded physical violence, she showcased her empathy and commitment to the protection of fellow inmates.

Guilt impairs the ability to remember accurately and to recall the past truthfully. While memories of one’s own

⁴⁶ BAL B 162/9809 deposition Pförsch, Frankfurt/Main, May 9, 1974.

⁴⁷ BAL B162/2831, deposition Pförsch, Frankfurt/Main, August 18, 1963.

⁴⁸ BAL, B162/2831, deposition Pförsch, Frankfurt/Main, August 18, 1963.

victimization are seared into one's consciousness, the truths about complicity and culpability become vague and concealed behind layers of personal self-deception and collective misinformation. In her subject position as a victim, Pförsch could provide truthful testimony, but in her subject position as an agent of violence, she hedged and fudged the truth. Recognition of culpable wrongdoing is a slow and painful process. Certainly, the fact that Pförsch must have feared more criminal charges did little to encourage her to tell the truth. But I suspect that even apart from her fears of further prosecution, she had convinced herself of her innocence and powerlessness. Some truths are too awful to admit to oneself.

Borneman warns that Germany's forth "mode of accountability" may turn into escapist exercises of commemoration that serve to deflect contemporary questions of responsibility. It is certainly easier to recognize and denounce the structures of diabolical evil to which Klara Pförsch succumbed than to discern and resist contemporary structures of economic and political dehumanization. While *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is ostensibly concerned with "mastering the past," its ethical task consists of attending to the repercussions of past atrocities into the present and to the disruption of their bequest for the future. Correctly, Borneman points out that "the major question is whether these practices and sites create *contemporary* narratives of responsibility, ones that make the old narratives about present and past speak to new and emergent events."⁴⁹ Klara Pförsch is dead and she can no longer be redeemed. But the memory of her hybrid life as victim/perpetrator whose degradation at the hands of the Nazi state destroyed her moral integrity and human dignity raises important issues for any contemporary politics and ethics.

From a feminist perspective, Pförsch's case is important because her situation requires the tools of third-wave feminist ethical theories, which conceptualize women's moral agency within complex grids of power relationships. Kyriarchy is the

⁴⁹ Borneman, *Political Crime*, 25.

term that Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza developed as a substitute for patriarchy, because it more accurately expresses the multilayered system of domination and submission⁵⁰. The early use of the term “patriarchy” had suggested a social system in which men exert power over women, but this is inadequate to understand oppressive relationships among women. National Socialism was certainly patriarchal and asserted male dominance in all areas of life, restricting women’s agency to the private sphere of *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*. But this analysis cannot explain the dynamics inside the world of a women’s concentration camp, where women did not bond in universal sisterhood but stratified along national, religio-racial, class, education, religious and sexual lines. Third wave feminist theories of “intersectionality” are much better able to grasp these conditions, where gender (which everybody had in common) intersected with national status, racial/religious definition, color of triangle (conviction), class, sexuality. It is no accident that the women who came to her defense in the post-war world were themselves German and Austrian political prisoners, wearing the red triangle, members of Social Democratic and communist networks within the camps. They occupied the same rung in the finely graded hierarchy of racial, national, and political stratification.

It has always been overly simplistic to speak of victims and perpetrators, as if these were essential aspects of identity. Klara Pförsch is not exceptional in inhabiting both camps. In fact, taking the concept of intersectionality seriously, it becomes obvious that everybody is simultaneously powerless with respect to those “above” and in a position to inflict harm on those lower in the pecking order. Like Pförsch, we are capable of abusing those with less power, often without much consideration or awareness. Pförsch knew exactly, when and where and by whom she had been abused. She remembered clearly and could speak openly about it. But apart from her

⁵⁰ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, Maryknoll 2001

self-legitimation during police depositions, she would probably have had a hard time recalling the details, the particular circumstances and names of those whom she had beaten. Doing harm is remarkably forgettable, it barely leaves a trace. It is remarkably and maddeningly easy to erase knowledge of culpability from human consciousness.

We remember victimization but we forget perpetration. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* tries to reverse this proclivity. It demands accountability and memory of those histories of deliberate and unintentional cruelty inflicted on those who matter little because their voices have no weight or authority. After 1945, the United States and later the state of Israel added weight to the voices of Jewish survivors. The Holocaust began to matter. But other victim groups, such as Roma and Sinti or homosexuals received less international political support and it took much longer before they received formal recognition in the form of retribution, restitution, performative redress or commemoration. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* requires recognition of unjust power arrangements that assign less value and dignity to some people by virtue of their membership in despised minorities or majorities. None of this is news. We know that antisemitism, racism, sexism, and homophobia exist and that they are wrong. And yet, their effect shapes political reality across virtually all societies.

In commemorating Klara Pförsch, we are confronted with the awesome power of ideologies and structures of dehumanization to crush individuals. Pförsch started as a communist resister and succumbed to savage degradation. As a rural, poor, uneducated woman she could not resist the power of evil. It is probably no accident that Claudia Card, who is a secular feminist analytic philosopher, speaks of diabolic evil and of the devil. While it is dangerous to invoke demonic powers, which would conceptually turn individuals into victims of supernatural might, it is also true that genocidal dehumanization is an awesome force that cannot be adequately explained as the sum of individually-arrived moral choices and political actions. The power of nationalism, racism, fascism,

and antisemitism that swept across Europe and unleashed the force of National Socialism sucked in hundreds of thousands of well-meaning, hard-working, law-abiding citizens and implicated them in the commission of genocidal atrocities. Such fevered bloodlust did not end in 1945 either, but swept up other communities, where people likewise seem surprised to find themselves committing acts of cruelty, which appear unthinkable before they are committed and are hard to believe afterward.

The memory of Klara Pförsch teaches humility and the recognition of the diabolic power of ideologies to conceal the worth of human beings who are dehumanized by virtue of their nationality, gender, religion, class, or sexuality that prevent and undermine empathy, compassion and respect for human dignity. Rites of commemoration may not make us into better people but they do create opportunities to reverse the “natural” inclination of seeing only our own victimization to the detriment of our neighbor’s. In that respect, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is not only an exercise in cultural memory but a political, moral, and spiritual practice.