

# ON THE ROLE OF THE PROFESSIONAL MIDWIFERY ASSOCIATION DURING NATIONAL SOCIALISM

## Statement from the Deutsche Hebammenverband e.V. (German Midwifery Association)

As the legal successor to the “Reichsfachschaft Deutscher Hebammen” (Reich Collective of German Midwives), the Deutsche Hebammenverband e.V. owes victims a clear acknowledgement and acceptance of responsibility. After a long period of silence and taboo, critical analysis and assessment of the events of 1933–1945 is urgently needed. The history of our profession and its association must not be left incomplete. We owe victims a sober look at the scope and consequences of the association’s ideologically influenced policies. The new professional body known as the “Reichsfachschaft Deutscher Hebammen” (RDH) emerged in 1933 within the context of the forced dissolution and conformity of professional associations. Its organisation was strictly hierarchical, following the “Führerprinzip” (so-called leader principle). The RDH remained in existence until 1945 and was affiliated with the Reichsministerium des Inneren (Reich Ministry of the Interior); from 1939, it was under the Reichminister’s direct control. Through this subordination, midwives fell under the control of the Nazi regime. As a result, the association had no autonomy whatsoever in professional issues. The only rights it retained were the right to assembly and to state its views.

Nanna Conti (1881–1951) was appointed head of the RDH by the Nazi Party. Since 1928, Nanna Conti had been actively engaged in the reorganisation of the previous Midwifery Association as both a midwife and a member of the Nazi Party and therefore welcomed this forced conformity. Nanna Conti combined strong professional dedication with her National Socialist beliefs. The intention was to professionalise midwifery with an ideological orientation through expansion and improvement of apprenticeships and professional education. The association’s newsletter, “Zeitschrift der Reichsfachschaft Deutscher Hebammen” (Journal of the Reich Collective German Midwives), was published by the Elwin Staude Verlag. It served to disseminate the Nazis’ eugenic policies. A professionally competent midwife was expected to act as a disseminator and propagandist of “hereditary health and racial cultivation”.

Under the Nazi Regime, the trade of midwifery received a new appreciation as a result of the high regard for motherhood in Nazi ideology. The Nazi policymakers’ interest in raising the birth rate was rooted in their population-related politics; the midwives’, in gaining better social conditions and societal recognition of the profession.

The 1938 Reichshebammengesetz (Law of Reich Midwives) created the basis of control of, and access to, women and families. The obligation to consult with both the doctor and the pregnant woman provided the prerequisite for midwives to take on the role of police informer at any time. In addition, the midwife’s key function as a trusted figure for the family “predestined” her for this task.

The legal obligation to register sick and disabled children required the collaboration of all midwives in order to realise eugenic, racist ideologies.

Midwives who were Jewish or otherwise “politically undesirable” were excluded from compulsory membership in the Reich Collective as a result of antisemitic National Socialist laws; this amounted to a prohibition on practicing their profession.

The leading administrators of the RDH were perpetrators and accomplices. They were in complete agreement with Nazi goals and supported their implementation. The question of to what extent individual midwives allowed themselves to be misused or willingly followed along with the aims of those in power cannot be answered without further research. According to the findings to date, however, we must assume that there were midwives who were complicit in this through their actions regarding the women and children entrusted to their care. This applies to both the aforementioned obligation to register “peculiar” new-borns – who were then severely abused or murdered at children’s clinics in the name of so-called experimental purposes – and the participation in caring for patients after forced sterilisation. It has been proven that there was little resistance within the organisation under Nanna Conti’s leadership. Nanna Conti and other former administrators were even posthumously honoured by the newly founded post-war Midwifery Association.

Grappling with the history of our professional association provokes reflection and vigilance in the face of the reality of right-wing extremism and xenophobia as well as the development of reproductive medicine and genetic engineering. When we do so, we become aware of the significance of safeguarding the democratic, politically unaffiliated structure of our association. Engaging with the past strengthens our alertness to the current societal climate and puts us at a critical distance to proponents of a world without disability, without variation from the norm. From today’s perspective, we are all – but particularly the administrators of our association – called upon to promote not exclusive interest groups, but critical points of view regarding the overall development of society.

*Adopted by the delegates to the Bundesdelegiertentagung (Congress of Federal Delegates), November 2001*

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