

Nanna Conti (1881-1951): Eine Biographie der Reichshebammenführerin
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This is a slightly different venture for De Partu, a book review by the author. In September 2019, I had the pleasure of hearing Anja Peters speak about her biography of Nanna Conti at the *Born Yesterday* Conference in Nottingham. I already knew about her book, felt sure it would make a very important contribution to the history of midwifery, and had previously looked for, and failed to find, a De Partu member who felt able to review a book in German. Hearing Anja speak confirmed my view about the significance of Nanna Conti's story, so I asked her if she would supply a summary in English which could appear among our book reviews.

Alison Nuttall, Book Review Editor

Nanna Conti was born in Uelzen near Hanover in 1881. Her father was the etruscologist Carl Eugen Pauli from Barth. Conti's childhood and youth were influenced by financial hardship. Her father, whom she adored, influenced her through his tendency towards esoterism, anti-Semitism and nationalism. She moved in the circles of the Pan-German League (Alldeutscher Verband) and became radicalised politically after World War 1. Nanna Conti was joined in this venture by her sons Silvio, district administrator in Prenzlau 1933-1938, and Leonardo, *Reich physician fuehrer* (Reichsärztführer) and *Reich health fuehrer* (Reichsgesundheitsführer) from 1939.

Nanna Conti trained as a midwife in Magdeburg before becoming a freelance (independent) midwife in Berlin in 1905. She lived there and in Mellensee before fleeing to the district of Segeberg in 1945. From 1918, she committed herself to midwifery policies. After the NSDAP came to power Nanna Conti was announced Head of the *German Midwives Association* (Reichsfachschaft Deutscher Hebammen/Reichshebammenschaft).

Following her death in 1951, a remarkable glorification of this former Nazi functionary started among West German midwives. In obituaries and later texts her influence was reduced to achieving the biggest political success since the founding of the German midwives' organisations in the late 19th century: the passing in 1938 of the *Reich Midwives Law* (Reichshebammengesetz), which has secured the midwives' monopoly within complication-free deliveries in Austria and Germany until today. In the process, it has been overlooked that the preparatory work for this law had already started in 1885. It has also been neglected that by this law Jewish midwives were excluded from the profession. Following this omission and through the lack of institutional and financial support of freelance midwives, Jewish midwives' position in the health system became so weak that they were almost entirely absent from it until the 1980s. Similarly ignored was the exclusion of oppositional midwives, the participation of German and Austrian midwives in the annexation of Eastern Europe, the Shoah, the exploitation of forced labourers and the sterilisation and killing of disabled persons. Overall, this amounted to the ideological manipulation of a whole profession by the German Midwives Association. Being the *Reich midwives fuehrer*, Nanna Conti was

politically responsible for all this. However, she was never prosecuted.

On the contrary, the International Confederation of Midwives (ICM), which had renounced their former Nazi colleagues in 1949, remembered its first president Nanna Conti honourably in the 1950s. In 1963, her name was engraved into one link of the ICM's presidential chain without additional comment.

Meanwhile, the West German Midwives Association successfully repressed the memory of the material estate of Nanna Conti and by that secured the access to the "contaminated fortune" which the Reich Midwives Association had acquired through the good contacts of their leader with the NSDAP. To this date, the German Midwives Association (Deutscher Hebammenverband) has yet to question the origins of this money.

Whatever Nanna Conti achieved, her actions between 1933-1945 stood under the sign of the Swastika. Her biography can only be read as one of a Nazi functionary.