

NURSING BIOGRAPHY

Josefine Pöllinger: The Midwife of Ravensbrueck

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In 2011 I was given a tour around the memorial site at the former Ravensbrueck concentration camp. A midwife was presented to us as one of the heroines of Ravensbrueck. In fact, that midwife who was known by the pet name 'Fini' seemed to be a central person in the narrative of the memorial site. However, nobody knew who Fini was or what her story was before and after Ravensbrueck.

Between May 1938 and April 1939, the SS erected a concentration camp for women in the village of Ravensbrueck close to the town of Fürstenberg about 80 km from Berlin. The women who were detained included political opponents to the Nazis, Jehovah's Witnesses, so-called "antisocial elements", Romnija, women from the occupied states, Jews or those labelled as "professional criminals." To provide forced labourers to extend the buildings, a men's camp was built close by in 1941. In 1942 the "Uckermark juvenile protective custody camp" for girls and young women was opened in the immediate neighbourhood of the women's camp. Until 1945 more than 150,000 women, men and girls from more than 40 nations were detained in Ravensbrueck. Tens of thousands died of hunger or disease, in medical experiments, in the "euthanasia" facility in Bernburg in Saxony-Anhalt or, from 1944 on, in the gas chamber of Ravensbrueck.

This was the place where the midwife 'Fini' from Austria was deported to, in 1943. Josefine Pöllinger was born on March 15 1902 in the village of Wolfsberg in Carinthia, Austria. She was divorced, had two daughters and had worked as a freelance midwife since 1926. In January 1936, Josefine Pöllinger was given three-month's probation by the regional court of Carinthia for performing an abortion on a 15-years old girl. Another suspected case in 1937 didn't lead to an arraignment. In March 1939 she was again sentenced to seven months in prison, because she had performed an abortion in the course of which a young woman had died. Because of a further abortion, Pöllinger was sentenced to three years in jail in 1941. Up to this point her sentences cannot be regarded as the excesses of an arbitrary justice. Her deeds would have been punishable in every European state and under every political system.

Pöllinger became a Nazi victim when she was deported to Ravensbrueck concentration camp after she had already served her prison sentence. This happened probably, because she counted as a persistent offender. Sylvia Salvesen (1890-1973), a Norwegian resistance pioneer, met Josefine Pöllinger who became known as Fini in the sick-bay:

'Thanks to Fini I was able to run in now and again, smuggle in a little food or a cup of warm gruel when I managed to evade Matron's vigilant eye. Fini herself was ill, but she was untiring in her efforts to help everyone in Room 3. There were thirty-eight patients herded together in one room, often two in a bed, the beds in two rows one above the other. Stench, dust, dirt, vermin abounded, the dead and the dying were all together. Fini begged wood to keep the tiny stove going. She rushed from bed to bed with the one and only bedpan. She cleaned up patients as well as she could, for most of them were so weak they were incontinent. (...) I saw Fini in so many situations, always helpful, always with a friendly word or a smile'. (Salvesen 1958, p98-99)

When more and more pregnant women were deported to Ravensbrueck Josefine Pöllinger was forced to work as a midwife again.

Reporting this Sylvia Salvesen also mentioned Pöllinger's background:

What irony of fate it was that sent Fini to Ravensbrueck. She had been given a green square [A green square marked detainees as "criminals".] because, in the pity of her heart, she had helped an exhausted mother of six children, who had not the strength to bear another, to have an abortion in order to save her life. In Germany abortion is one of the crimes that is punished by four years in a house of correction. She had these four years behind her when she came to Ravensbrueck. As a result her lovely tired eyes were stiff with fright. (Salvesen 1958, p100)

Salvesen's narrative of Pöllinger's background, however, was incomplete. She didn't know or didn't want to tell that Fini had been sentenced several times for abortion. It is impossible to judge Pöllinger's motive for the abortion, but we have to take into consideration that Pöllinger took

money for the abortions³, which made her a commercial abortionist.

In Ravensbrueck Josefina Pöllinger showed outstanding engagement and devotion:

'Fini worked day and night. She was almost dropping from fatigue, but she stuck to it manfully. (...)

Fini, how endlessly patient, how good, you were! You are enthroned in the hearts of thousands of Ravensbrueck's unhappy slaves'. (Salvesen, 1958 p101).

We don't know yet whether Josephine Pöllinger experienced the liberation of the camp on site or whether she was sent on a death march like thousands of other concentration camp inmates. However, she survived Ravensbrueck. In August 1945 she returned to Wolfsberg for a short period before she moved away. The entry in the residence register is illegible. Her further biography remains unknown to this day.

Until now Josefina Pöllinger was more of a legend than a role model. Taking her life as a real person into consideration – including the breaks, the questionable decisions and the heroic deeds – makes her palpable, a midwife who seems to have surpassed herself. Maybe now Josefina Pöllinger, the midwife of Ravensbrueck, will find her place not only within the context of the memorial site, but also in the Who's Who of Austrian and German midwifery history.

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³ See KLAArch, AT KLA 72 Klagenfurt, Landgericht: Strafsachen, Sig. 72-49 Su, Zl. 9 Vr E 2407/35 and T KLA 72 Klagenfurt, Landgericht: Strafsachen, Sig. 72-69 Su, Zl. 8 Vr 8/39.

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Molly Murphy (né Morris) Nurse, Socialist and Suffragette.

Dr Janet Hargreaves

In 1913 a young woman walked through the centre of Sheffield, approached the post box outside the town hall and planted a number of letter bombs. During the ensuing mayhem, she mingled with the crowd, watching the fire brigade and police whilst carrying several more of the 'little trouble makers' in her handbag. She was Molly Morris, 23 years old, suffragette and manager of the Sheffield Branch of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). This was the first, but not the last period in her life when socialism and politics disrupted her childhood aspiration to be a nurse.

Born in 1890 in Lancashire, Molly was the oldest of seven children. Her father's radical views lead to unemployment and the slums of Salford but her mother found new work and a new life for them in Eccles. Her mother's greater independence lead to social and political awakening, just as the WSPU was formed in 1903. Volunteering in Manchester, Molly and her mother supported the founding members of the WSPU, by chalking pavements, selling 'Votes for Women' and heckling at meetings. Her mother saw nursing as unsuitable, and was pleased when at 22 Molly