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Sophie Hodorowicz Knab's mother and father were forced laborers, her oldest brother was born during the war in a camp of forced laborers, and she and two other brothers were born shortly after the war in displaced persons (DP) camps. Her book, *Wearing the Letter P*, is not an academic monograph but a collective memory of Polish women who had been forced laborers in Nazi Germany. The collected histories are in some way also the story of Knab's mother, Józefa Hodorowicz, seen through the eyes of many women who had experienced similar suffering. The book is dedicated to Józefa and other women forced laborers.

Written for a broad American public, the book brings together Polish history and literature, as well as primary sources, including personal recollections and oral histories. Centered on forced Polish laborers in industry and agriculture, the book is not an attribution to the historiography of the Holocaust, concentration camps, or prisoner life, the most commonly studied topics from this period. It contributes, therefore, to a history of World War II that seems to have been largely forgotten or at least overshadowed by other topics and media representations.

For historians researching forced labor, the structure and content of the book will be familiar from other publications on the topic. Following forced laborers from deportation to work sites until liberation, Knab centers her work on the experiences of forced laborers in wartime Germany. Life, work, food, health, erupting violence, and DP camps after liberation are the way most publications deal with the topic. To all of these thematic chapters Knab adds short overviews taken from widely known historiography. What makes the book especially attractive is that the history is related to people's experiences; Knab organizes her talking points around recollections of women forced laborers. People familiar with oral history interviews with former forced laborers will not be surprised by most of these memories. Many women talk about their lives and suffering, pointing sometimes to more usual, sometimes to more unusual circumstances. Many underline violence, fear, starvation, poor living and working conditions, hostile behavior of Germans, and homesickness. All of these recollections are presented in a quite enumerative way. The book, however, does not offer deep analysis grounded in analytical questions and theories.

Although methodically the book is not a contribution to gender studies, it does deliver an inside view into how women understand and tell their histories. Crucial moments appear when female bodies, sexuality, pregnancy, and childbirth are at the center of the sources. Knab delved into
these matters especially through her mother’s recollections, which probably influenced the family’s emotional bonds ever since (see Knab's web page, www.sophieknab.com). Consequently Knab understands female perspectives on the body and sex as intertwined with and dominated by sexual violence, aspects she explores with revealing empathy.

The first time that sexual violence appears in the book is when women describe being forced to undress in front of German guards or even future employers. Women also were reduced to an object in markets where forced laborers were offered for purchase. The intersection of these two situations of being (nakedly) exposed and (sexually) examined becomes obvious in the women’s recollections and the author’s evaluation. These detailed descriptions are followed by short comments on sexual violence and rape. Knab mentions that pregnant women and those who had been raped were excluded from transports to Germany. The author states rightly that talking about sexual harassment and assault was complicated for the women. Yet instead of delving deeper into these complicated matters (for example, asking why women appear as witnesses of sexual violence and not as firsthand victims), once again she resigns from further interpretation. The same can be said about general violence of Germans against Polish women, described in many recollections and for different times and places. Knab does not ask what followed for victims (or even perpetrators).

The book’s chapters on abortion of unborn Polish children and the treatment of Polish children and families is a key contribution of Knab, which is well documented by sources and once again part of her mother’s story. Polish children were considered racially inferior according to German ideology and practice; therefore, even German law was changed to legalize these abortions for which numbers are impossible to estimate. The chapters describing the German Institutions for the Care of Foreign Children give an inside look into the hardships of Polish motherhood. Knab’s parents avoided giving away their older son to such an institution, which would have lowered his likelihood for survival. While they worked, they had to leave him under poor care. Reading the chapters about children and maternity homes in Velpke, Wolfsburg-Rithen, or Braunschweig one can imagine the horror Knab’s mother felt when leaving her child in horrible hygienic conditions, not being able to feed him adequately, and fleeing from Allied bombings, which killed many children and their mothers. Over and over, her mother repeated the scene that she discovered with “babies and mothers lay[ing] dead, burnt, mangled and twisted” (p. 223). The book presents the terror of war by including the very personal and tragic stories of desperate mothers watching their children dying or starving to death, or giving them to the enemies. Knab makes clear that this treatment of Poles and Polish infants was a result of racist practices in the German Reich.

She mentions that Poles and people from the Soviet Union were affected similarly. Nevertheless, she does not care too much about Soviet women’s fate, which becomes especially clear when she states that in many sources one cannot find out if Polish or Soviet women were victims of forced abortions. Polish women were “often grouped under the general term ‘eastern female worker’” (p. 185). She seems satisfied if a document clarifies if an abortion affected a Polish or a Soviet citizen. Knab completely ignores that a document she cites from in order to demonstrate that German sources distinguished between Polish and Soviet women develops in an interesting direction. In a quote she selected, for example, an SS officer claimed that abortion of a Soviet woman was not justified. Regrettably Knab is not especially intrigued by this intervention even if this possibly meant that the father of the child was German—if not the SS officer himself. This disregard of a source’s quality as well as of the fate of
non-Polish victims leaves the reader with a bitter aftertaste.

Scrupulous readers also will find that many German terms and names are not written properly. It is these inaccuracies—maybe to be explained by the solely Polish focus—that will disturb the reader’s perception of the book. After all as a collection of experiences and impressions, the book will fit into the library of anyone who likes to be touched by history and also is interested in topics that do not belong to the mainstream. For professionals the book will not deliver new information but can be interesting as an example of how to come to terms with cruel history.

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