A Topic for Life
Women and Men Born or Accommodated in a German Lebensborn Home

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It took almost 50 years for the men and women born or accommodated in a German home of the SS organisation Lebensborn to make their story public. They needed this length of time to develop enough self-confidence and courage to speak about their lives and the consequences that being a Lebensborn child had and still has for them.

It took almost as long for the German public to be able to deal with this topic in a thoughtful manner. Meanwhile the false image of Lebensborn homes as “stud-farms”, in which selected men and women were brought together solely for the purpose of procreating, has increasingly been corrected. Today there are frequent newspaper and magazine articles, radio and television broadcasts about the Lebensborn children. In addition exhibitions, congresses and a first autobiography are reaching a wider audience.[1] However, the topic is still neglected by social science, psychology and historical research.[2] Apart from its immediate significance, the results of such research could contribute input to ongoing debates in Germany, for example discussions about anonymous birth (“Babyklappe”), prenatal diagnosis and the desire for a perfect child.

Lebensborn e.V.

The SS-organisation “Lebensborn” was founded in 1935 and ran nine homes in Germany between 1936 and 1944.[3] These homes offered married but mainly unmarried pregnant women the chance to give birth in a quiet place and to accommodate the baby there for a while.[4] Above all the mothers could keep the birth and the name of the father secret. To this end the Lebensborn administration registered the birth only in a separate register of births and did not pass the data on to the authorities. If so desired, the name of the father could be omitted, even though it was known to Lebensborn.

As an initial impression this program could be seen as a social welfare programme aiming to protect single mothers, above all, against social discrimination. But the

real background was the racial policy of the Nazis. Lebensborn and its leading patron, “Reichsführer SS” Heinrich Himmler, wanted to increase the number of children who were “Aryan”, healthy and free of hereditary diseases - a pool from which the future elite would be recruited. For this reason only women who could prove that they were “Aryan”, healthy and free of hereditary diseases were taken into one of the homes. In addition they had to declare the name of the father, who had to fulfil the same criteria. And Lebensborn went a step further in its racial selection. It also examined the children who were born in the homes. Seriously ill or handicapped babies had to leave the homes. In the worst case Lebensborn sent them to a euthanasia clinic, in which the handicapped or seriously ill were killed.

The image of Lebensborn as a “stud-farm” does not correspond to reality. There are no documents which prove this, as Georg Lilienthal’s researches show. My own research and the interviews I conducted with Lebensborn mothers and employees also contradict this assumption.

Children in German Lebensborn Homes

About 6000 boys and girls were born in one of the German Lebensborn homes. The exact number cannot be ascertained because the documents of some homes are incomplete or completely missing.[5] Besides the children who were born in the homes, children of the employees also lived there. In addition babies and small children who fulfilled the selection criteria and whose parents had left them for adoption were sometimes brought to the homes too. Lebensborn was their guardian and tried to find foster or adoptive families for them.

At the beginning of World War II two new groups of children were added. Between 1939 and 1945 about 250 children kidnapped from Eastern European countries were brought to German Lebensborn homes. Because their appearance promised “Aryan blood”, which Himmler had ordered to be collected in the conquered and occupied countries of Eastern Europe,[6] they were snatched from their surroundings and had to undergo a racial examination. Those who were considered worthy to become Germans (“eindeutschungsfähig”) were taken to homes of the “Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt” (“National Socialist People’s Welfare”) or camps of the “Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle” (“Ethnic German Exchange

Centre”). There they were forcibly re-educated and then taken over by Lebensborn, which tried to find foster or adoptive families for them.[7]
The second group came from Norway. Between 1943 and 1945 about 200 to 250 children of Norwegian mothers and German fathers were brought to German Lebensborn homes. Most of the girls and boys were born in a Norwegian Lebensborn home[8] and given away for adoption by their mothers, who did not know that they would be transferred to Germany. This measure was also based on the racial ideas of the Nazis who idealized the “Nordic type”, and on Himmler’ s policy of collecting “Aryan blood” with the aim of improving German racial potential.

My Intention

During my research on the Lebensborn home “Heim Friesland”, its mothers and employees, I made the acquaintance of some Lebensborn children. Most of them contacted me directly, told me their stories, asked questions and looked for support in their research. Others, after visiting their place of birth and the local registry office, had left their name and address to make contact possible. Finally I met some at the meetings of the Lebensborn children in Germany.
The women and men whose acquaintance I have made so far constitute a very small minority of the 6000 Lebensborn children. To this day the majority of them are not known. No doubt many of them have informed their husbands, wives and children, perhaps even friends and colleagues too, about the circumstances under which they were born. However, we have to assume some have kept it a secret all these years, and that some may not even know they were born in a Lebensborn home.
For a further project about the SS organization I interviewed 47 Lebensborn children about the circumstances of their birth and its effects on their later life. These interviews dealt with the family background in which they were conceived, with the conditions in which they grew up, with the social situation in which they are living today and finally with the way they handle the topic Lebensborn. The interviews are the basis for the following considerations.

Starting Life

The majority of my interviewees were born into difficult social circumstances. Their mothers were unmarried when they became pregnant[9] - and the German society did not accept illegitimate birth at that time. “My parents would have thrown me out if they had got to know about my pregnancy,” an old Lebensborn mother told me. Another mentioned that her fiancé left her when she told him that he was going to become a father. Very often the fathers were married men who did not want to tell their wives and walked out on their lovers. Unmarried civil servants were dismissed when they became pregnant. Even Nazi organisations such as “BDM” (“League of German Girls”), “NS-Frauenschaft” (“National Socialist Women’s League”) and the general welfare organisation “NSV” dismissed unmarried officials in the event of pregnancy. This was despite the fact that the Nazis tried to change the Christian middle-class morality in which parenthood and marriage were inextricably linked. Heinrich Himmler and Rudolf Hess, Hitler’s deputy, even made propaganda in favour of illegitimate birth. At the same time, the law against abortion was tightened up, but public opinion could not be changed as fast as Himmler and Hess wanted.

Some of the later Lebensborn mothers wanted an abortion but found no-one to help them. Others welcomed the child, but did not know how to handle the situation. They therefore hid the pregnancy for as long as possible or hoped in spite of everything for the support of their parents, but were disappointed when the good name of the family was seen as more important than the problems of the daughters.

In cases like this admission to a Lebensborn home was a way out. However, all the support offered there - a quiet place to stay far away from home, concealment, the possibility of guardianship, support vis-à-vis the authorities, the child’s father and employers – could not answer the fundamental question: what should happen after the birth of the child?

As a precaution most unmarried mothers decided to keep the birth secret from their parents, their relatives and also from the authorities – to protect themselves and the (married) fathers.[10] The authorities of the women’s home towns therefore received no information about the birth, as required by law. Furthermore the name of the father was not mentioned on the birth certificate. Only Lebensborn had

knowledge of the father, his racial suitability and family status. The organisation insisted on notarial acknowledgement of the paternity and payment of alimony on the part of the father. In return for this the organisation took care that his name did not appear in any official document or file.

Despite this secrecy, most of the (unmarried) mothers wanted to bring up the child themselves rather than have them adopted.[11] This involved first of all establishing the right conditions, for example finishing their education or apprenticeship, moving to a place where they were unknown, finding a job compatible with child care. For the children this generally meant staying in Lebensborn homes, while the mothers left a few weeks or months after the birth. And this had negative effects. Although the homes were well- equipped by the standards of the time, the children often fell ill, sometimes even seriously ill. Some cases show evidence of setbacks in the children's development, resulting from lack of social contacts and emotional care. "Anne is less developed in her mental and physiological abilities than her peers … The child is now able to sit upright but cannot walk yet." This is an extract from the Lebensborn doctor's note which the foster parents received with Anne M.. She was aged 14 months and had spent her entire life alone in various Lebensborn homes.

The Lebensborn organisation believed that life in a home had no detrimental effects on babies, but considered an inadequate solution for older children. After one year at the latest the organisation insisted that the children left the homes to be taken either by the mother or into foster homes. Very often neither was possible. Some children therefore had to spend more time in the Lebensborn homes, while others were passed from one foster family to another.
But finally most of my interviewees were brought up by their mothers. One had finished her education, another had found a job in which she could arrange work and childcare, others achieved reconciliation with their parents and lived there with the child. In the meantime some women had married the child's father or another man who was willing to take in the child. In this case the secrecy was often ended. But the experience of being left alone, not having a place where they belonged, and not being wanted by anyone had left traces in the children's psyche. Some of my interviewees mentioned that to this day they cannot be alone, while others

suffer from strong fear of loss or a lack of self-confidence. They attribute these problems to their early childhood experiences. Also their exaggerated desire for reliable relationships and trustworthy partners they see rooted in this time.

Mothers' Attitudes

The cohabitation of mother and child could not compensate for these mental injuries. On the contrary, many of my interviewees experienced new disappointments and insults. Most of the Lebensborn mothers I have met or heard about remained distant mothers - regardless of whether they were married or not when the baby was born. They kept their children at an emotional and physical distance and favoured authoritarian methods of upbringing. Some still believed in the idea of their children belonging to the elite and made high demands on them. But it was not only the educational philosophy and ideological blindness which made many mothers so cool and severe.[12] Sometimes unmarried mothers continued their early rejection of the child. Gisela H.´s mother denied the existence of her daughter in public even when Gisela had grown to be a teenager. She acted as if she had no child. The mother of Siegfried S. maltreated her son continually. "My mother tried to abort me retrospectively", Siegfried S. explains her actions. Others passed on to their child their frustration and bitterness at being rejected by their family or lover, and blamed the child for the situation. Such attitudes were emphasized by the difficult economic, social and moral status of single mothers in the post-war period, regardless of the fact that many families were incomplete because men were killed in the war.

Finally the fact of having given birth in a Lebensborn home proved to be another difficulty. During the National Socialist regime this meant that the mother was special, and had proved to be racially superior and healthy, but after the war this became a stigma. Thus most of the mothers - with only a few exceptions - did not talk about Lebensborn, even to their children. Evasive answers were given to the questions which inevitably arose when children realised that their birthplace was not their place of residence. Instead of the children were told the Lebensborn home had been a maternity hospital in the countryside, quieter and safer than German towns during the bombing raids. When asked who the father was, most mothers lied that he had been killed in action.

With these answers the women doubtless wanted to protect their children from teasing. Another motivation was to protect themselves, whether they were married or not. A minority feared prosecution, especially those who were employees of the organisation.[13] Most mothers were afraid that the image of Lebensborn, that of a stud-farm, would damage their reputation. For decades everybody “knew” that women in the Lebensborn homes had been made pregnant by unknown SS men. Books and films persistently spread this image although it was not based on facts. The only protection against this seemed to be to preserve secrecy.
During my research I have only met very few mothers who had talked to their children about their origin from the beginning. It is surely no coincidence that one of them was still a believing Nazi who regretted the lost opportunities her son would have had in the NS-regime.

Most mothers broke their silence once the child reached maturity, left home or got married. Yet even then they provided little information. Paul D. received a letter from his mother, telling him the name of his biological father and a few basic facts about the Lebensborn project. He had known that he was not the natural child of his stepfather but had never heard of the Lebensborn homes before. Iris D. received only fragmentary information which did not help her at all: the first name of her father, his birthplace and the fact that he was an SS-officer. Only when Hedda W. became seriously ill her mother broke her silence and provide the name of the father. Herta K. never succeeded in persuading her mother to talk, and the old lady died without revealing the father´s name.
This obstinate silence had worse consequences. Due to the complete secrecy of Lebensborn and the disappearance at the end of the war of the files containing the names of the fathers and their acknowledgement of paternity, the children had and have no chance of ever finding out their fathers’ names.

However, it should be borne in mind that not every Lebensborn mother acted in this way. Married women normally took their children home once they left the Lebensborn home after giving birth. Some single women did the same. Some mothers, whose children had a long stay in the Lebensborn home, tried to overcome the neglect and establish a close relationship. There were mothers who told their children very early about their origin. Some illegitimate children were in

contact with their fathers from the very beginning. The important role of fathers behind the wall of silence was proved by those who openly accepted their paternity and partially lived the role. This attitude made it easier for the mothers to speak freely to the child. But such fathers were rare.

Children's Responses

All interviewees remember a vague feeling of something being wrong in their early childhood. They didn't understand what happened; they only understood that they were different. They asked again and again, but after a while they stopped asking because they received only evasive answers. Instead of continuous questioning they started their own researches without even knowing exactly what they were looking for. They rummaged through drawers and closets, looked desperately into documents and photographs, eavesdropped on adults' discussions – without any result. The longer the situation lasted, the more insecure the children felt. They did not realise that the grown-ups behaviour was ignorant and intolerant. On the contrary, they started to feel guilty and responsible for the way they were treated. There was only one answer: The strange behaviour of the others must be based on their own character or behaviour, so it was their own fault they were treated like this. "I have always felt an outsider," Rita G. remembers. "I was not only different than the others, but also I wasn't worth as much as they were."

Most of my interviewees tried to compensate for being "different" by conformity. They were always obedient to their mother's wishes and hoped for attention, affection and love in return. It was impossible for most of them to express any contradiction or opposition, as this risked losing their mother's interest. Only a few dared to oppose. Ortwin S. for example argued and fought with his mother, disregarded her wishes and met his father against her will. But he had received enough attention, caring and love to be strong and take the risk.
Even as adults many of my interviewees never managed to tackle their mothers. Some preferred to leave home. Hans B. went to sea when he was 17, Paul D. joined the armed forces to escape from his mother's influence. Brigitte K. also chose the same strategy of a drastic good-bye: 30 years ago she cut off all contact to her mother, and they never have talked to each other again since. "It is

useless", Brigitte K. says. "I can do without all the pain which mother has caused me."
A break like this is very rare. Most of my interviewees, among them many females, struggled for years to be accepted and loved by their mothers. They did everything possible, taking care of them even if it meant great sacrifices. Some were successful. "When she became old, we got along well together", Helga G. says. "She visited me frequently and I enjoyed her stays. All of a sudden we were close to each other." In their later years some mothers were able to give up their distance and harshness and accept their "child" as it was. "Since my book turned out to be a success, my mother is proud of me," affirms Gisela H., the author of the first autobiography by a Lebensborn child. When her mother realised that other people were interested in the topic, her attitude towards her daughter changed. Suddenly the old woman was able to reflect on herself and her involvement with Lebensborn, in which she had held an important position. In most cases a late change like this does not take place. Most of the old women are not able to modify their attitude. On the other hand the "children" are not able to make good their right to be informed.

The Reaction of Society

It is not known whether the Federal Republic of Germany treated Lebensborn children differently than the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). My interviewees (with one exception) grew up in the old Federal Republic. And there are only very few reports in the media about Lebensborn children in the GDR.

It took decades for Western German society to accept illegitimate children and regard them morally and legally as the equals of legitimate children. The illegitimate Lebensborn children, too, had to suffer from this general disapproval, even in their own families. "My father did not shrink from calling my son a bastard and telling him again and again that he came from out of the gutter," an old Lebensborn mother told me. Helga G. as a young girl was warned by her concerned grandmother not to become like her mother – immoral and foolish in her attitude towards men.
Outside the families there were teachers who outed Lebensborn children by telling the class that their fathers were not dead, but that they had no fathers at all. Other

children teased the “fatherless children “ and told them the real facts. Adopted Lebensborn-children, which hadn’t been informed about the fact, report similar experiences.
All these humiliations, teasings and insults were mostly aimed at the illegitimate birth or adoption, not at Lebensborn. The “conspiracy of silence” created by the SS-organisation, the mothers, the foster parents and adoptive parents was effective. Lebensborn children who were in the know supported this strategy. Rita G., informed by her mother about her birth in “Heim Harz”, told only her best friend when she was twelve. At the same time she asked for total secrecy and has not been disappointed to this day. Only those children who had been raised in an orphanage where the Lebensborn birth was known, or in foster or adoptive families who did not care for them lovingly, experienced discrimination. Sometimes they were called “SS brats”, which suggested they belonged to the SS by genes or “blood” and laid a burden of crime and guilt on them.

Lebensborn was an issue for the authorities too. It was known to them that special Lebensborn registry offices had existed (numbered registry office II) and that births were documented in the “Geburtenhauptregister II”. But this knowledge was not passed on by the federal authorities to those concerned. Many of my interviewees only realized when they married that the authorities knew more than they did. It then became a problem that their birth certificates were missing or incomplete. Sometimes their mothers tried to conceal the Lebensborn birth from the child once again. At Kerstin K.’s wedding, her mother and the registrar were engaged in negotiations behind her back about how to deal with the missing certificate. Kerstin K. soon noticed something was wrong but was told nothing. Yet she felt ashamed and guilty. Other mothers realised that it was finally time to tell their children, and some registrars felt the urge to inform unsuspecting persons about their Lebensborn birth.
With other federal authorities Lebensborn children experienced clumsiness, lack of information and insensitivity, and in consequence an absurd, literal application of the law. Oskar D. was 49, when he found out that he was not a foundling (as he had been told by his foster parents and the authorities for years) but instead the child of a Norwegian mother and a German father. He learned that his mother had brought him to Lebensborn, which took him to Germany. With this information a

bureaucratic struggle began. Being the child of a Norwegian mother he was a Norwegian citizen himself. Immediately he lost his German citizenship and thus his status as a civil servant. Thanks to the vigorous intervention of a well-known politician he was re-naturalized and reinstated in his former position.[14]

In the GDR the national security authorities (“Stasi”) and the military intelligence service used the identity of Norwegian Lebensborn children who grew up in GDR. In particular they focussed on Norwegian citizenship with its right to a Norwegian passport. Three cases are known where members of the Stasi and the military intelligence service equipped with names and papers of Norwegian Lebensborn children were sent to Norway and later to Western Germany to perform espionage. At the same time the real Lebensborn children who attempted to look for their Norwegian mothers, to contact or visit them in Norway were prevented from doing so. [15]

The Stasi also observed German Lebensborn children who grew up in foster or adoptive families of the GDR. The story of Hans-Ullrich W. is well-known. For years the Stasi collected information about his behaviour in school, during his apprenticeship, in the army and at work. Hans-Ullrich W. was suspect simply because he was a Lebensborn child who was imputed to have a “selected SS member” as father. When he started to gather information about his mother, the “Stasi” summoned him. He was told that nothing was known about his mother and father and that it would be in his own interest to stop his investigations immediately. After the reunification of the two German states, Hans-Ullrich W. studied his Stasi files and discovered the name of his mother. The Stasi had always been informed.[16]

Lebensborn Children as Adults

Today most of my interviewees live an unexceptional middle-class life. Many of them, especially the women, work in social welfare as nurses, doctors’ assistants, teachers or therapists. Beyond this the whole range of profession is represented: technical assistants and management consultants, book-keepers and officers in the armed forces, wholesalers and journalists, artists and scientists. Some are very successful, others are satisfied with less or live as housewives. Though none

of them failed in life, only a very few achieved the positions of leadership Lebensborn had intended for them.

In their political opinions all my interviewees show a distinctly different orientation than that expected by the SS-organisation. Many of them believe in liberal, social democratic or socialist ideas, dissociate themselves from the so-called “brown”, Fascist, ideology of their parents and warn about the development a neo-Nazi movement. Some interviewees have reflect intensely on the guilt of their fathers as members of the SS. Others are concerned about the position of their mothers. Adele S. for example. For six years her mother worked as a midwife in various Lebensborn homes. During Nazi rule the midwives (and not only those connected with the Lebensborn homes) were the ones who had to report the health administration if a disabled child was born. This information was the first step to being sent to a euthanasia clinic. Even though she never loved her mother, Adele S. cannot bear the thought that her mother might have known about the planned killing and was probably involved in it.

The private life of most of my interviewees is distinctively different from that of their parents. “For me it was always important to have a real family”, Rita G. declared. As a child she always lived alone with her mother. Her (married) father only showed up from time to time. After this experience, Rita G. married and had children - like the majority of my interviewees. Many report that they need the safety of a relationship, the warmth and strength of their partners. Some even have difficulties to stay alone. “I always need someone near me,” Hans B. - married for years and father of two children – told me. Once his wife leaves the house, he is bound to leave some minutes later, just to stroll around to be among people.
Partners also have an important role in the subject of Lebensborn. Often it is they who give the impulse to begin investigations. And they not only participate in the researches but also support their partners in digesting the facts which come to light in this process. In the long run this works more often in relationships where the man was born in Lebensborn. Women more often suffer from a partnership which broke down, and are divorced and live single now. Many of them report

missing the support and affection they need as counterbalance to the wounds of their childhood.

Only a very few interviewees live by themselves, without partners, children and sometimes even without any relatives. “I do as my mother did, who always lived on her own,” Herta K. proudly explains, “forgetting” that her mother lived with her. The reason for her emphasized independence seems to be the protection she gains from living on her own. Someone who lives alone cannot be hurt.

Questions, Research, Results

In their childhood and youth they kept asking who their fathers were, why they were born far away from home and why they had lived in a home for some time. Their mothers’ constant refusal to answer silenced them. At the age of 25, 35, 45 other things – profession, marriage, children, travel and other things - became more important. Ten years later, with the “family phase” coming to an end, the old questions reappear. At this period every single Lebensborn child I interviewed started investigating his or her origin again, or even for the first time.
The reason might be age, when one has more time to deal with one’s own interests and needs. This might also be the effect of a more tolerant society in which illegitimate birth is accepted and the false image of Lebensborn is increasingly being corrected. Furthermore this is a current topic in the media, and it is becoming more difficult to deny one’s own origin. Yet another reason cannot be ignored: the generation of Lebensborn mothers and fathers is dying. “It is my last chance,” believes Irene S., whose mother had never talked about the Lebensborn. “If I don’t ask now, I will never get an answer. Maybe my mother feels the same way and will finally tell me the whole truth.”
For those who are still seeking for their father or mother, the chance of discovering that their parents are dead eases the search, reduces insecurity and fear of an encounter – as paradoxical as this may seem. “You never know who you will find”, Anne M. tries to explain the ambivalent feelings that kept her from searching for a long time. “You cannot be sure whether or not you will take a liking to the person you find, whether or not you want to give him or her the place of a father or mother.”

For many years Anne was not willing to think about her biological parents. She had known for a long time that she was a Lebensborn child and was adopted. After the death of her foster parents she found the names of her biological father and mother in the documents left behind. As stepfather and stepmother had always spoken disrespectfully about them, Anne was sure that she never wanted to meet them. Why should she look for people who had shown no interest in her? After watching a TV documentary about Lebensborn some years ago, Anne suddenly felt the urge to know everything – everything about Lebensborn, everything about her biological parents. Some information about her father she was able to gather quickly, because he had been registered in a military archive. Yet she was not able to meet him in person for he had died years before. To find the mother was not as easy. She had married a few years after the birth of her daughter and had changed her name. Anne called everyone who had her mother's maiden name – without success. She called cemeteries and asked about the graves and people who looked after them. Again she received only negative answers. Fruitless searches in archives followed. Then chance came to her aid. She met a historian who had her mother's maiden name. By chance his family owned a personal archive which contained the name and address of her mother's sister. That woman sadly had to tell her that her mother had died half a year ago. Nevertheless she was able to meet her half-brothers and -sisters. They told Anne that they had known of an elder half-sister and that their mother had always regretted having given away her first child. This reconciled Anne with her mother.

This woman's research is symptomatic of the research of Lebensborn children. From my interviewees I heard a lot about the ambiguous need for true answers and information, the chance impulse (e.g. by a TV documentary) to start the search, the exhausting research in archives which requires energy and imagination, the stamina and the strength to continue through various setbacks, and finally the result – and there is no research without any result.
At the beginning some women and men are really tormented, while others seem to have a mainly historical interest. For some the motive is the question of the possible guilt of their mother, or the contrary, proof of her innocence. "I started my research," Rita G. explains, "because I feel insulted when my mother is spoken of as "Nazi whore" who was available for insemination – as the old image of the

Lebensborn says.” But most of the Lebensborn children are mainly interested in who their parents are, why their mother went into a Lebensborn home, whether they still have sisters or brothers and which family they belong to.

Sometimes Lebensborn children find a family which accepts the new member. Half-brothers and –sisters are excited and curious to encounter somebody unknown who belongs to the family. Old relatives are happy to break the promise of silence they once had given. Fathers enjoy the interest of a “new” son or daughter and are able to give love and attention in return.
But very often the Lebensborn children have to go through rejection and hurt once more. There are half-brothers and -sisters who are afraid of having to divide their legacy and refuse all contact. There are widows of their fathers who pretend to be uninterested in the old stories of their husbands and are not willing to hand out even a photograph. And there are mothers who deny their child once again. Bruno Z.’s mother, for example, welcomed her son with words: “I hoped you were dead!“

A Second Generation

Today the children of the Lebensborn children are between twenty and forty, an age at which they are mainly occupied with their own lives: busy finishing training or education, finding a job or a partner, starting a family and bringing up children. Lebensborn is not on the agenda of most of them.
Nevertheless many interviewees report that one of their children took up the topic during their school or university time, and my own experience supports this. “My grandmother was a midwife in Lebensborn,” a young girl once told me after a lecture I had given about the topic. And than she mentioned a heated debate in class with her teacher who insisted calling Lebensborn a “stud-farm”, whereas for her it had been very important to correct this image.
Many of my interviewees have noticed exactly the same interest in one of their children, who feel the taint lying on their mother or father and try to erase it. Some go further. Paul K., brought up by foster parents, was urged by his son to find out who his biological parents were. Only when he had made a serious start was his son satisfied. Hedda W.’s first son started to show interest in the concentration camp “Dachau” when he was twelve. After some time he continued his studies on the Holocaust and finally he began to study history. With his

interest, his concentration and seriousness this son started to tackle a question his mother had refused to take on, even though in his opinion she had every reason to do so. Hedda W. was not only born in a Lebensborn home. Some years later her mother married a high National Socialist official who adopted Hedda W. After the end of the war, that man was found guilty, and after some years in prison he was executed. Neither his wife nor his daughter ever disavowed him. “He was my father and a loving one”, explains Hedda W. A contradiction which the grandson could not live with. Finally he broke with his mother.

The story of Oskar D. and his daughters shows that the second generation not only deals with the problems their parents should have dealt with. Sometimes they really inherit them.[17] Both young women repeated the situation into which their father had been born. They became pregnant without being married. The first committed suicide just before giving birth, the younger one gave birth to the child but neglected it, disappeared one day and left the child with its grandparents.

The Current Situation

To this day my interviewees are trying to shed light on the dark corners of their past. Only a very few are still searching for their father and/or mother – most of them succeeded in finding out the names and the real persons. Today most of them are gathering widely-dispersed documents and trying to find explanations for some remaining questions. But even the solution of their life-puzzle cannot heal early wounds. The fact is that many of them are hurt and damaged - because they have been unwanted, left alone and pushed from place to place, because mothers lied to them and kept them at an emotional distance, because their fathers vanished and did not care, because they were called “bastard” or “SS brats” and felt guilty and ashamed of their birth under the sign of the SS. Even if much of it has been put into perspective or partially overcome, a feeling of loss and shortcoming still exists for many of the Lebensborn children. For them, it will never be normal to be a “Lebensborn child”. Maybe these feelings can be soothed through the planned association of German Lebensborn-children. Rita G. puts it like this: “When we Lebensborn children meet, it is almost like coming home.”

[1] See Georg Lilienthal: Der Lebensborn e.V. Frankfurt am Main 1985, 1993, 2002. Christiane Ehrhardt: Brand-Zeichen. Kinder aus dem Lebensborn. Bayrischer und Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk 1993. Dorothee Schmitz-Köster: Deutsche Mutter, bist du bereit. Alltag im Lebensborn. Berlin

1997, 2002. Georg Mascolo/Hajo Schumacher: Kinder für Führer und Stasi. In: Der Spiegel Nr. 25, 16.6.1997. Deutsche Mutter, bist du bereit. Alltag im Lebensborn. An exhibition in Delmenhorst, Bernburg and Wernigerode (there under the title: Lebensborn. Vom Gerücht zur Legende) 2001, 2002, 2003. Gisela Heidenreich: Das endlose Jahr. Die langsame Entdeckung der eigenen Biografie - ein Lebensbornschicksal. München 2002.

[2] The only essay concerning the issue was published in 1970 by Theodor Hellbrügge. He examined 70 young men and women between 17 and 23 who lived in Lebensborn homes at the end of the WWII and grew up later in foster families or in orphanages. Compared to other children they suffered from depressions, neurotic fears, low educational standards, difficulties in social contacts, lack of emotion, and a low intelligence quotient. Hellbrügge doesn´t mention if the 70 examined young people originally came from foreign countries or had German parents.
See Theodor Hellbrügge: Das Deprivations-Syndrom in Prognose, Diagnose und Therapie. In: Bericht der Arbeitstagung vom 15. bis 17. Mai 1968 für Heimärzte und Heimleiter an Säuglings- und Kinderheimen. Frankfurt am Main 1970, pp.42-59

[3] In Germany there were nine Lebensborn homes, but births only took place in seven of them. “Heim Sonnenwiese” (Kohren Sahlis near Leipzig) was a children’s home, “Heim Franken” (Ansbach) seemed to have been a home for mothers, children and employees who were evacuated from other homes at the end of WW II.

[4] Married women – round about 40 percent of the Lebensborn mothers – normally used the homes as quiet and comfortable maternity clinics, to which they could also bring their older children. In addition there was a political reason: Many of them were married to a member of the SS or another NS-organisation and felt in their proper place there. In general married mothers took their babies with them when they left the homes. This means that nearly 40 % of the Lebensborn children grew up in their parental home. See Schmitz-Köster 2002, pp 43-44, pp 137-168

[5] Complete files concerning registration, birth, death and weddings in the Lebensborn homes exist from “Heim Friesland” (near Bremen), “Heim Harz” (Wernigerode) and “Heim Hochland” (Steinhöring near München). The files from “Heim Taunus” (Wiesbaden), “Heim Kurmark” (Klosterheide near Berlin) and “Heim Schwarzwald” (Nordrach) are incomplete because employees hid them, destroyed them or did not fill in all birth data as correctly as they did before at the end of WWII. The files of “Heim Franken“ (Ansbach), “Heim Sonnenwiese” (Kohren Sahlis near Leipzig) and “Heim Pommern” (Bad Polzin, now in Połczin-Zdrój) have vanished and could not be found until today. In addition to this, data protection makes research more difficult: Officially only persons concerned are allowed to read the files, therefore fundamental evaluation is not possible.

6 See Heinrich Himmler: Rede vor Reichs- und Gauleitern in Posen, 6.10.1943. In Heinrich Himmler: Geheimreden 1933 – 1945 und andere Ansprachen. Edited by Bradley F. Smith/Agnes F. Peterson. Frankfurt am Main/Berlin/Wien 1974

7 See Georg Lilienthal: Der Lebensborn e.V. 1993, pp. 194 – 221

[8] In Norway Lebensborn had 10 homes in which about 1200 children with Norwegian mother and German father were born. Overall Lebensborn registered about 8000 children with the same parental constellation. See Kåre Olsen: Vater Deutscher. Das Schicksal der norwegischen Lebensborn-Kinder und ihrer Mütter. Frankfurt am Main 2002. Lebensborn homes too existed in other occupied countries. There were two in Austria and one each in Belgium, Luxemburg and France.

[9] Statistics from Lebensborn administration show that in 1940 53,4 percent of the women were unmarried, in 1941/42 the percentage was 64,3. See Schmitz-Köster 2002, p. 51.In my sample three quarters of the mothers were unmarried when the baby was born.

[10] For “Heim Schwarzwald” the following figures exist: 88 births from married couples, 159 births from single mothers. Of these 34 fathers had acknowledged paternity by name, 60 without name. In 63 birth registrations there is no hint about fathers at all.

[11] As can be seen in files from “Heim Schwarzwald” and “Heim Friesland” only a low percentage (7-10%) of the children were adopted, often by their own mother or her later husband. In the beginning Lebensborn had not expected such a low rate of adoption, later on the organisation idealized the fact that the mothers kept the children and regarded it as a sign of their “racial worth”. See Schmitz-Köster 2002, p. 44

[12] Contemporary views of a proper mother-child-relationship were introduced to Germany some years after the war. During the “Third Reich” the following educational guidelines dominate: strict rules, suppression of the child’s own ideas and the lack of emotions. See J. Haarer:: Die deutsche Mutter und ihr erstes Kind. München, Berlin 1938

[13] After the end of the war former Lebensborn employees living in West-Germany were denazified and mostly classified as followers. It is not known whether the East German government regarded the former employees as perpetrators of crimes. The Nuremberg court which ruled on the Lebensborn project judged it to be a welfare organisation. The four accused members of the leadership were declared not guilty with regard to their work for the project. Nevertheless three of them were pledged guilty for their membership in the SS as criminal organisation. See The RuSHA case. Military Tribunal No. 1, Case VIII. In: Trials of War Criminals before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals under Control Council Law No. 10, Nuremberg 1946 – April 1949, Vol. IV. pp 597 – 1185, Vol. V p. 1 – 177

[14] See Georg Lilienthal 2003, pp. 259 – 260

[15] See Georg Mascolo/Hajo Schumacher: Kinder für Führer und Stasi. In: Der Spiegel Nr. 25, 16.6.1997

[16] See Antje-Maria Lochthofen: Der Makel Lebensborn: Hans-Ullrich Wesch aus Altenburg wurde jahrelang in falschem Glauben gelassen. In: Thüringer Allgemeine 28.7.2001

[17] See Dan Bar-On: Die Last des Schweigens. Gespräche mit Kindern von Nazi-Tätern. Frankfurt am Main 1996. And: Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller, Karoline Tschuggnall: Opa war kein Nazi. Nationalsozialismus und Familiengedächtnis. Frankfurt am Main 2002