

Nurses In Nazi Germany: Moral Choice In History

Nursing Inquiry 2006; 13(4): 277-288

Feature

Nurses and the sterilization experiments of Auschwitz: a postmodernist perspective

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Accepted for publication 13 December 2005

BENEDICT S and GEORGES JM. *Nursing Inquiry* 2006; 13: 277-288

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The medical experiments conducted on non-consenting prisoners of Nazi concentration camps during World War II necessitated the codification of principles to protect human subjects of research. Auschwitz was the largest and one of the most infamous of the camps and the site of numerous 'medical' experiments. This historical study uses primary source documents obtained from archives in England and Germany to describe one type of experiment carried out at Auschwitz — the sterilization experiments. The purpose of these experiments was to perfect a technique in which non-Aryans could be prevented from reproducing while still being able to work as slave laborers. These narratives regarding the sterilization experiments at Auschwitz are remarkable in that they contain previously undocumented information regarding the voluntary and involuntary involvement of nurses. Following these narratives, a discussion of ethics in relation to the Holocaust is presented with a specific focus on the work of Agamben. Implications of the Auschwitz narratives for the application of codes of ethical principles and contemporary nursing are discussed from a postmodernist perspective.

Key words: ethics, experimentation, human subjects, Nazi, nursing, postmodernism.

Rosalinde de Leon, a Jewish woman from the Netherlands, testified against the Auschwitz gynecologist Dr Carl Clausberg on 26 July 1956:

The elder [Blockhelfer] told us in general that Dr Clausberg intended to perform scientific experiments on us and if we did not obey, we would be sent to Birkenau [location of the gas chambers]. We said that we would then

prefer to go to Birkenau and that we already knew that we would be killed. I cannot recall one woman who had agreed to any such experiments — to the contrary. Dr Clausberg performed sterilization experiments on my person without my consent. I did not protest because it would have been senseless. It happened anyway. Two nurses assisted him — the latter one was a prisoner herself ... The sterilization was done by injection and it was a very large size syringe that was injected into my body's vagina and a white substance was then injected into me. Most likely this substance was injected into my uterus. The syringe was about 30 cm long. Such injections were done to me three times with breaks of 3-4 months. After each injection, I had a terrible burning sensation in my abdomen. X-rays were taken following every injection and another one was done on the following day. After the injection, I had to remain in bed for one week. As far as I can recall, the pain was the same after each injection and the injections were so painful that the nurses would sit on the victim's arms (de Leon 1956).

It was medical experiments such as this, performed on non-consenting prisoners of Nazi concentration camps, that

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¹The Blockhelfer was a prisoner appointed by the SS and placed in charge of a block/matracks. They were often German or Austrian professional criminals (Michael and Doerr 2002).

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