

# EMANCIPATION- DESIRE OR NECESSITY? THE SOCIAL ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE SUDETENLAND DURING 30'S AND DURING THE WW2

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*The text focuses on the question of social roles changing before and during WW2 in Sudetenland and how women had perceived such changes. Sudetenland was a specific area with mainly German inhabitants where the status of men and women was equal in many ways. Then the area was annexed to the German Empire, where it had been typical for women to serve primarily the roles of wife, mother and housekeeper. The situation rapidly changed during WW2. Life brought new duties for men as well as for women. Women had to compensate for the deficiency of men who had to join the army and struggle at the front. Therefore, the role of women expanded into previously male areas in order to replace missing men. Thus there is a question whether this way to the emancipation of women was their desire or a necessity.*

*Keywords:* Emancipation; Social roles; Desire; Necessity; Sudetenland.

## **1. Introduction**

When the status of women in society is observed in historical context it can be considered quite variable. It changed from matriarchy to patriarchy. Christianity brought really big changes in a women's position in society and the main ideas can be seen in its canon "Holy Bible". In the Bible, Man and woman are represented in a gender stereotypical way. It corresponds with the order in the society and the social roles in the time the Holy Bible came into being. The subordinate role of women towards men is clearly expressed in it. Women are perceived as weaker than man, physically as well as intellectually. Beauty and goodness are emphasized in women, and intellect, power, hardiness and honesty in men (Bible, 1992). Church Fathers openly took the view that the woman is worse than a man. For instance, St. Aquinas characterizes a woman as an unsuccessful man and he calls her as occasional existence (Beauvoir 1967). The Holy Bible and its model of the family, man and woman has been influencing the status of man and woman in society a great deal. On the other hand, women play an important role in some newly discovered gospels, for instance, the gospel of Mary, the gospel of Philip. This text contains the idea of equality of women and men as well as the thought that God has no man's but a woman's shape (Pagels 1979). In any case, the Holy Bible and its thoughts have had a strong influence on society and the status of women and men until the present day.

Women demonstrated themselves as a useful workforce in the formerly purely male-dominated fields during the Industrial Revolution. These women mainly worked at factories but their salaries were low and they enjoyed few rights. Women acted as "a water heater" of economic growth. Young women were from the beginning of capitalism employed in factories and when they got married or had a first child, they were dismissed (Wichterich 2000: 18).

Since the 20s of the 20th century, a new phenomenon has appeared - an appeal to consumerism thanks to new products. Until now, women have decided what to buy and how to save time (Lipovetsky 2007: 227).

No wonder that demands for equality of the rights for women were more and more obvious and stronger. Even though the influence of stereotypes in gender were still strong, especially in Catholic countries, women started to become more equal to men and more emancipated in their personal as well as professional life. We can say that their desire to become emancipated slowly evolved into a reality.

It is interesting to see the problem of emancipation from a general historical point of view. It is also considered interesting how the emancipation process was perceived by the ordinary person, especially the person living in a specific place-in Sudetenland, and how the emancipation had changed during the transition from a democracy to an authoritarian regime.

Written memoirs of Gerda Eckelt, born and living in Ústí nad Labem/Aussig an der Elbe, are used as an example of the concrete situation. She was a middle-class girl. Her father was a journalist, her mother was a housewife. They also had a servant-girl who they called the home-helper. Gerda had an elder sister.

## **2. Women in Sudetenland**

Sudetenland was a specific area of Czechoslovakia, which was established as an independent Republic in 1918. Inhabitants of the Sudetenland were mainly Germans and they had been living for twenty years as a part of Czechoslovakia.

The name “Sudetenland” is derived from the Sudetes mountain range and it was described in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century by Romans but commonly used in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This area was mainly inhabited by German speakers because of colonization in the Middle-Ages.

The status of men and women was more or less equal in many ways at that time, especially with respect to leisure time. In the era of the First Czechoslovak Republic equality was enacted in the Constitution, which was one of the most democratic in the world. “The privileges of sex, gender and profession are not recognized”. Such explanation of equality was the first point of the 5<sup>th</sup> head of the Constitution. But differences that reflect old gender stereotypes can still be found - men working away from the families, women at home. But it could be also the cause of the situation after WW1 when many economic problems had been in Sudetenland including big troubles with supply and big unemployment. That was the reason why free working places were intended for men and women had to stay at home and take care of the household and do the house work. As Heda Kaufmannová (2002: 26) subscribed in her memoirs from her youth in Sudetenland she spent with her relatives, these activities were expected of women naturally.

The situation changed even more after the annexation into the German Empire and especially during WW2.

There are some interesting moments that can be observed in Gerda’s story. She could not freely choose a secondary school. Her parents chose the girls’ grammar school for her, which had different curricula from the boys’ grammar school. She was living a rich sporting life outside the school. She was swimming, rowing, and was interested in gymnastics.

Gerda changed the school in 1934 and she started to study at the Business Academy. The classes were mixed there for the first time. Some of her former classmates transferred to the “Family school” which did not have a graduation and the curricula were different with the emphasis on cooking and sewing.

Her social life was not a poor one. Voluntarily she started to exercise, mainly the gymnastics in the “Turnverein” since 1934. Turnverein was one of the most important associations of gymnasts in the German speaking areas.

Gerda had been enjoying that and it was very attractive for her because she found many friends there and participated in festive shows etc. Soon she became a leader of one group. The “Turnverein” began to be under the state power of the Czechoslovakia supervision in the 30’s. “Turnverein” was a rudiment of the “Movement for Germany” when Hitler seized upon the power. Gerda went to camps that were strictly for girls. She also went on exchange visits to Czech to learn Czech better during holidays. It seems that even though Gerda was a German she felt she was a real part of Czechoslovakia and wanted to have a fully integrated life with Czechs. She graduated in the breakthrough year 1938.

Gerda was not very interested in policy since beginning, she just registered that Hitler is in power in Germany. But her attitude slowly changed during secondary school when the nationalistic thinking became stronger. In general, Gerda had been living the life of a normal middle-class girl before annexation of Sudetenland. She was very socially active and she didn't perceive any problems connected to her gender or emancipation. The system was simply natural for her.

### **3. Women in the German Empire before WW2**

Observing the situation after an annexation into the German Empire, many changes in the life of inhabitants who had to live under strict rules of an official Nazi ideology in the authoritative regime can be found.

The main aim was to create the "Third Empire" where the emphasis was, beside others, on the pureness of the race – the German race which should beset the new territory. Logically the population policy had to change and relationships between men and women were strongly connected with racial aspects. Gender stereotypes where women were seen as mothers and housewife and men as organisers of life and warriors started to be very apparent and it was one of the demands that A. Hitler also expressed in his book "Mein Kampf".

In this frame the aim of the policy was to support the birth-rate. All healthy, racially and lineally biologically valuable parents should have as much children as possible and parents should see the sense and worth of their life in their children. The families with more than four children were intensively endorsed and the birth-rate had increased. As men got badges of honour for heroic merits, so women got Crosses of Honour of the German Mother for the amount of children they had parented. An effort for emancipation was considered as the only other retrogression and women of authority completely lost its importance.

A dichotomy can be found in this attitude. Hitler wanted as many German women as possible to be mothers of the family and educate their children. However, single women were encouraged to work and progress professionally. Almost 15 million women had paid jobs; one and half million mothers were working at full time jobs and four million on part time jobs. Also women with art talents or other skills found full professional positions. For instance Leni Riefenstahl made the document about NSDAP congress "Triumph of will" in 1934. Nurse Pia Wagner-Schulze became first general of the army in Europe, Melitta Wiedemann became general editor in the highly intellectual revue "Die Action" in 1940 when even feminist journals had mainly male general editors, and also a rare engineer Schwarz can be found. She was leading the research and development of the R4 rocket at BMW.

At first sight, this seems to be an example of emancipation in practice. But the real situation in Germany shows something else. Because of the propaganda of the traditional family life of women, Nazis in Germany disbanded all existing women organizations that were not in line of their official ideology. For example, these organizations include "International women league for peace and freedom", and the women's organization of political parties and trade unions etc. Women who executed important or leading places on institutions, ministries and organizations were fired because such places belonged only to men.

On the other hand, girls in the age range between 10 and 20 years were organized in The League of German Girls ("Bund Deutcher Mädel"), a direct organ of the NSDAP, to ensure their adequate education in race and national-socialistic spirit. Women had to execute many socially useful works, e.g. in agriculture or as children keepers in German families, namely with regards to the needs of the Nazi Empire in between 18 and 20 years of age. The aim of this organization was to lead women to fill tasks that were given by Nazi leadership. Women started to be members of NSDAP after the age of 20.

The right to study at Universities was limited to German women and girls. Only members of Nazi women organizations were allowed to study without any problems when Nazis became powerful. For instance just 1000 girls out of 10,000 were able to study at Universities in the year 1935.

Let us go back to Gerda. She started to work for patent lawyer after graduation. The job did not make any special demands on her. She just had to write on a typewriter. She was doing typical female work but for her it was natural and she did not complain.

She was excited and touched when the German military came because of the atmosphere - everybody was singing, celebrating and throwing flowers. Gerda was simply sharing her emotions with the others. Nevertheless, she was still able to notice a critical comment from her mother who predicted a bad end to the German behaviour. And the more or less free life, where free will was possible and natural in many aspects, started to change. Life became more organized. New and different directives were appearing.

Gerda entered in The League of German. "Turnverein" was deactivated. Everything was still divided according gender. Girls were separated from boys in their activities. Gerda remembers that a daughter of one of her acquaintances was named a leader of the group "Faith and Beauty" in Usti nad Labem in 1939. 18-20 year old strictly chosen girls belonged to this group. They were supposed to get married and produce a lot of beautiful children of pure race.

When Hitler began the war Gerda and the people around her were shocked and embittered by the situation but nobody expressed that out loud. Fear started and became more important or even dominating but emotions were hidden. How typical for an authoritative regime.

Gerda decided to serve for one year which the state established and which was obligatory for all young people, even though she had an exception because unlike others it was already more than one year after her graduation. She was working in the family in Karlovy Vary as a helper in the household and then on the farm where she was only with other working girls and where the work was very hard.

#### **4. Women in the Nazi Empire during WW2**

The WW2 brought more duties and obligations for women. It was possible to see the absence of men who had to join the army and then to struggle at the front. Therefore women had to be more active in the maternal role and simultaneously substitute for men in production. At the same time, they had to be a support for the men who were fighting at the front. It was "the real German woman" as the propaganda had been presenting it.

One new phenomenon appeared. Because of the war a lot of men were killed at the front and the number of excess women increased. Therefore, the Nazi leadership acceded to official appreciation of the institution of "war children". It meant that every German man being on holiday from the front - no matter whether married or single - could engender a child with every woman he met. Such connections were highly valued and publicly appreciated. Men got the honorable title "War father", the woman the title "War mother" and the child the title "War child".

Gerda did not understand the situation after the declaration of the war with Poland. All young men immediately got a call-up to the military. She was 20 and she was full of the faith in goodness. Conscripted men had to be replaced by women. For instance, many staff helpers, and telephone operators, operators for the transmitting and intelligence apparatus were needed.

As Gerda mentioned women lined up in NSDAP's card index were called. They were supposed to work at least some hours of each day on shifts including nights. For instance, they were directed to work in electrical engineering. The robust ones were trained to work as a metal turners and other hard labour that were previously done by men. Women full of fear were flocking to the front of the door of the bureau, waiting to find out in what place they would be made to work. Future mothers had good positions because Hitler needed children.

For example, the husband of Gerda's sister was called up to the army and she had to do his job in an assurance company. Her mother-in-law had to take care of the household after that. It is obvious that as a woman she would never do this job if there was no war.

Middle-aged men had to do the hardest work and were ripped out of their former jobs. But still, even in such horrible situations women were taken into account, and they did not do the really hard work.

Women immediately, from day to day had to replace men in their positions. Free decisions were not taken into account. Free will was impossible. Everybody became only a little component in the "great war machinery". Was this the way women wanted to become emancipated?

## **5. Conclusion**

The main topic of this text is whether emancipation of women was a desire or necessity. An example of the situation in Sudetenland before, after annexation and during WW2, was used also from the point of view of a real person who was living there at that time - Gerda Eckelt.

An existence of gender stereotypes mainly before and after annexation can be seen. Social roles of woman and man were different and people were educated in this manner.

This attitude appears for instance in after-school activities. Even though such activities were often similar, girls were separated from boys. So the awareness of "we – girls, women" and "they – boys, men" was reinforced unconsciously. Because of that hidden manipulation and the education, the separate social roles were not seen as a problem and the difference between genders was considered a natural part of the life. When somebody saw a problem then emancipation could be a desire for such a person. Free choice to some extent was possible and emancipation did not need to be a necessity. The situation changed after annexation. The official policy by propaganda and regulations differed in the social roles greatly. The pressure on people was obvious. Free choice disappeared. The tendency toward emancipation seemed to be just a desire in this context. The transformation from democracy to an authoritarian regime brought also the loss of free decisions and thus the limitation or even liquidation of emancipation tendencies and this is valid in general.

Women had to replace men in their working positions during WW2. They proved that they were able in many ways to perform the same work as men. It seemed to be a great step to emancipation. The problem is that women had to accept a place that was chosen for them by the system. Free will was missing. So we can say that such ways of emancipation was out of necessity, but was not an authentic emancipation with free decision making. Life after the war changed a lot. It was difficult for women to come back to the old system with strong gender stereotypes after experiencing men's work. Thus, the desire for emancipation appeared clearly and it was strongly expressed. The struggle for emancipation became more intensive and it seems to be a never ending story. But is it really a struggle only for emancipation or for power or domination as well?

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