

Himmler's Nursery

La pouponnière d'Himmler

Presented by: Filip Kučeković

One of the surprisingly neglected topics in an otherwise relatively well-represented literary subject such as the Second World War is *Lebensborn*. The program whose aim was to produce racially pure Aryan children and which was based on racist and eugenic assumptions represents one of the many horrifying episodes of the period that would receive its literary form in Belgian author Caroline De Mulder's novel *Himmler's Children*. The novel is divided into three narrative strands, one of which follows Renée, a pregnant French minor who is supposed to give birth to an Aryan child and who still naively believes that the child's father, an SS officer sent to the front, with whom she is in love, will return and that they will lead a normal life together. Her perception of the situation in which she finds herself gradually changes, and she comes to realize that her future will be permanently marked by her participation in one of the most sinister projects in the history of humankind, which ultimately has tragic consequences for her.

The second important character who is given space in the novel is Helga, a nurse and midwife, also a young woman who assists at births and cares for the children and their mothers. She is completely devoted to her work and does not fully understand her own role in the *Lebensborn* program or, more broadly, within the context of the Third Reich. However, she is far from being a sadistic representative of an inhuman system. When one of the mothers has her child taken away because the doctors consider it too weak and then have it killed, the event creates a moral problem for Helga that will shape her and shake her faith in the order and system in which she was born and raised. Nevertheless, that faith survives within her, and at the end of the novel, when the Nazi crimes are revealed, she concludes that perhaps the Jews should not have been killed, but merely driven away. She is the most dynamic character in the novel, someone in whom one can recognize the intersection of the political forces that shaped society and individuals and imposed upon them the conceptual frameworks within which they thought and acted. Helga also embodies Hannah Arendt's well-known concept of the banality of evil, in which there are no evil geniuses devising horrific crimes, but rather a series of ordinary people doing their jobs: delivering babies, caring for mothers, administering medication, just as they would in any other hospital. What to do with such characters in the novel is left to the readers; whether they condemn them or sympathize with them, whether they identify with them, become political decisions for which the reader is made responsible.

The third and final central character in De Mulder's novel is Marek, an escaped concentration-camp prisoner whom the Nazis capture and send to work at the *Lebensborn Heim* where the novel takes place. He is the character who introduces the context of war and the suffering of innocent people into the story of the *Lebensborn* project. The other side of forced reproduction and the creation of a new race is the killing of others and the destruction of those races designated as undesirable in the

new society. By bringing these two worlds together, the narrator presents an account of their disintegration, that is, of the final ten months during which the novel's events take place. The Allies are advancing from all sides, mothers and children from other *Lebensborn Heime* arrive at the home, creating overcrowding, tension continues to rise, and no one knows what will happen when the Americans finally arrive one day.

The political dimension of this novel is twofold. First, it is reflected in the alternation of narrative perspectives, ranging from a resident of the *Lebensborn* program, to one of its nurses, and finally to a political prisoner. Their perspectives prove to be different and provide insight into the various possibilities for narrativizing the events of the Second World War. On the other hand, the concept of Hannah Arendt's banality of evil is embodied in the novel's most complex character, the nurse Helga. She is a straightforward person who is not a criminal genius but rather a nurse who, in her own words, is simply doing her job and is satisfied with the way she performs it. The result is a novel about one of the most bizarre Nazi crimes and ideas in which none of the characters at its center is a criminal or morally depraved person who directly causes harm to others. Instead, the text transfers responsibility to the reader, making the reader responsible for their own reading and interpretation of what they have read, as well as for determining whether guilt for Nazi crimes can be distributed among people who themselves are not aware of their responsibility.

LANGUAGE: French / Français

CENSORSHIP STATUS: