Sexpiation

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

When the world is on fire, how far would you leap to escape the flames? That is how we looked at it. We were not escaping from justice – we were escaping from madness.

I am not going to comment on the crimes of Hans Giese who I once was, or the crimes of Erich Kreindl who leapt with me out of the inferno, or those of Dr. Aribert Heim who helped us. We all admit that in a world on fire we did more than stand by. We fed the flames or stoked the coals, because we believed in a concept, a perfect world that was promised to us.

The word “Nazi” is now associated with such atrocities, but for us it was the highest of ideals. World peace by domination. It seemed like the only way. And the advancement of the human race by purification. The elimination of filth and greed created by lower peoples. The belief that Germans who were at the heart of science and the arts in the first part of the 20th century, represented all that was good in the world.

But we all know now that it was all a fraud, perpetrated by a lunatic.

Justice for us would have to wait. At that time, the Russians were close to Berlin, and to them justice meant nothing. We were dead men. At that time, we were still men, but that would change.

Many spoke about surrendering to the Western Allies, but the three of us knew that for us, this presented no better option. We were war criminals, all three of us. We were not low enough to be regarded as unimportant, and not high enough to truly cover our tracks.

“We will be found,” said Aribert. “And we will be executed. We must get away but adopt a foolproof disguise. If I was not so tall, I would seek the help of Butenandt and Gohrbandt. You could.”

We may have regarded it as gallows humor, but we were not laughing. Fear is the strongest of all emotions. It can paralyze you and confuse you, but it can also give you a clarity of thought to enable the most outrageous plan to be thought through.

Aribert Heim, like Adolf Butenandt and Erwin Gohrbandt, was a physician and a gynecologist. But Heim was also in the SS as we were, whereas Butenandt was a *kriegswichtig* (important for the war) civilian, and Gohrbandt was in the *wehrmacht* (army). Aribert’s link to war crimes was clear and the same was true for us. Butenandt and Gohrbandt could assume themselves safe, but were still willing to help. In particular Butenandt had reason to secure our silence because of his experiments on high-altitude oxygen deprivation.

Let me explain who these people were. Dr. Adolf Butenandt who was to receive a Nobel Prize for his discovery of female sex hormones. He had been able to produce progesterone from the urine of mares and through his association with Magnus Hirschfeld’s *Institut fur Seualwissenschaft* (Sexology Institute) in Berlin he was able to see the effect of the chemical on male subjects. Dr Erwin Gohrbandt was a gynaecological surgeon responsible for the first sex change surgery on the Danish artist who became Lili Elbe. Aribert knew them both very well.

I posed the question when I started: How far would you go to survive? Before you say that you would never surrender your genitals, you need to look death in the face. When you have done that then you may understand. You would cut off an arm to free yourself from a sinking ship.

Butenandt and Gohrbandt were reluctant to help, but they agreed to perform the surgery and supply the hormones.

“The physical effects are irreversible,” Butenandt warned. “The mental effects are unknown. We have only operated on men who thought that they were women, which is not the case with you two. And remember that we can only make you appear as women but not behave as women. Those treated at the Institute were able to do that because they felt like women.”

Gohrbandt could offer us some assistance with our outrageous plan. He said that he had an ex-patient who was then known by her married name Schulz, but she had not always been female. She lived in Bamberg and she and her husband could be prevailed upon to take in two boarders in exchange for more hormones. Bamberg seemed ideal – well away from Berlin and the Russians, and close enough but not too close, to the advancing American army in the West.

The surgery took place in Berlin only days before the city fell. I could hear the sound of gunfire as I lost consciousness. I might well have died right there – a slip of the scalpel or a shell through the roof – I would never have known. But I resolved that if I woke, I would live and be free.

There was pain. But pain is like work – if it is shared it is halved.

“Let us hold hands as women do,” said Elsa, which was now the name my colleague would carry through her life. We both discovered that there was comfort in contact beyond anything men could share. It changed things for both of us.

In addition to removing all trace of male genitals both Erich and I had undergone some small level of facial surgery which was concealed under oxygen masks. We remained on stretchers for the journey West, in bandages and immobilized.

We were to be evacuated as patients under care, with Aribert and Dr. Butenandt physicians attending us. This would prove invaluable. Female patients are assumed non-combatants and civilian doctors are treated with respect. Aribert had burned his uniform and military papers, and Dr. Butenandt’s war merit crosses awarded by Hitler himself, were left in a safe in Berlin

Dr. Gohrbandt would go on to stay behind in Germany and he never left. The Russians needed his skills, and he went on to have a long medical career in Berlin. Dr Butenandt and Dr. Heim would go on to do the same thing. They had skills in demand.

The hunt was on for people like Hans Giese and Erich Kreindl. They were the visible war criminals. They were not looking for females. While there were women war criminals identified, this did not occur until years later, when the men were arrested and many of them already executed.

That could have been our fate, but we had new identities –Erich Kreindl became Elsa Stein and I became Carlotta Gruber.

These new identities were obtained from hospital records that would later be destroyed. It was as we had gone to hospital to die but we had survived by a miracle – two miracles in fact. That was what we told ourselves. We were alive and Hans and Erich had ceased to exist, like so many in the inferno that was our fatherland.

The people who knew who we truly were the three doctors who helped us, and their silence was assured.

The transit through the American lines was surprisingly easy, largely given to the respect given to physicians carrying civilian papers, and their patients in post-operative convalescence, especially if they were women. At that time and for a long while after the war, German women were seen as the saddest victims of war. Many had lost sons or husbands and had played no active part in the war, or even the politics that bought the Nazis to power. Elsa and I could draw upon the sympathy of many.

But before we did that, we would need to learn how to be woman, and Dora Schulz could be no better teacher, having herself changed from a man to a woman.

Dora was quiet and plain, and she wore simple clothes and no cosmetics, and yet she was clearly female. She had clear skin and soft hair, and she took pride in looking after those.

“You cannot step outside dressed as a cabaret singer,” she would say. “No real woman does that. Only men dressing as women.”

We listened, but Elsa had her own views. She had decided that she did not like the idea of being plain, so she spent time on presenting herself in a different way. She found the right balance eventually. The fact is that unlike Dora, she did have some rather heavy features which could be softened with makeup, and with an eye-catching hairstyle.

I can say with fear of contradiction that I was the prettiest of all three of us. I have large blue eyes but otherwise darker hair. My body responded well to Dr. Butenandt’s miracle drug, and I developed a bust and used an old-fashioned corset to create to shape so popular in the forties. I used makeup as Elsa would, but more sparingly, except when the occasion called for more.

The Americans had arrived and Bamberg was in the heart of the US sector, with 3 US military bases within 2 hours drive. Dora was not interested in the Americans. Her husband worked hard for her, and she loved him and cared for him so much that it did not matter she could not bear him a child. But women in Germany who were not married were interested in the Americans. It was a matter of survival.

You have to understand that Germany was destroyed by World War 2. The country was defeated and many men had died. Some were still interned in the Soviet Union and would take years to come back. Some were maimed or otherwise injured physically or mentally. There was little food, and in the parts of Germany where fighting had been desperate, little in the way of shelter. Paid jobs were few, so many just went about rebuilding without pay, and relying on community food rations.

But the Americans were increasingly seen as being there to rescue us. They had a plan – the Marshall Plan. We barely understood it at the time but we knew that the Americans were not going to be like the French who had sought to humiliate us after World War 1. They wanted to restore German pride and to promote a democracy that would prevent totalitarianism.

To many, the Americans were like us. Eisenhower is a German name – even Marshall if it is spelt correctly. The Russians hatred of us seemed perpetual, and the French hostile; the British seemed distrustful but the Americans were friendly.

For me, I still carried some concern in those days, because I was in shock that the dream of a new world order seemed lost. To me the Americans seemed selfish and decadent, whereas I believed in duty and the pursuit of a national goal. But all principles must be put aside.

I had always regarded myself as a person only sexually attracted to women too, but that was something that I needed to put aside too. The commissaries of the US military bases seemed to be overflowing with food, and to be invited there was to eat enough to last for a week. Elsa told me and I learned.

But we were living hand to mouth, and we knew it. If Elsa and I had one advantage it was that we were educated, and we both spoke English very well. The Americans were looking for local people to help them, and we both applied.

And then Hank walked into my life. He says it was love at first sight for him, but how could it be that for me. As I said, I could not imagine myself as being attracted to him because he was a man. I may have pretended to be interested to get what I needed, but his interest in me was real, and after a while I found myself responding to him in the same way.

I was troubled by it to start with, but he treated me like I was the most important person in the world. I don’t think that any man can appreciate what that feels like. Only women can live that experience, and that is what I now was.

I realized that I was becoming emotionally attached to him the moment that I decided that he needed to understand my medical condition. I had him call Dr. Butenandt to hear is directly, in English as the doctor could also speak it well. I listened.

“Yes, Carlotta is a patient of mine Captain,” the doctor said. “She suffered internal injuries. She has no womb or ovaries, and she will need further surgery to other female organs to function fully. These procedures can be arranged over time.”

When he put the phone done Hank seemed very distressed. In some ways that is what I wanted. I wanted to show him that I could never be more than a passing affair in a foreign country, and one where the sexual acts were limited to what I could do with my hands or my mouth.

“But he would not let go. He wanted me, and increasing I discovered that I wanted him.

It was love – I know that now. It seems strange to me still. To him it has always been love between a man and a woman, but to me love needs honesty and everything about me was a lie. And yet I needed him not to know – not ever.

Elsa was not able to find love the way I did, but like me she learned how to please a man. When I told her about Dr. Butenandt’s “surgery to other female organs to make them function fully” she was to find her way to Berlin to have that done.

For my part I waited years and I am glad that I did. My surgery was done in Morocco by the French surgeon George Burou who pioneered “penile inversion vaginoplasty”. At last I was able to give Hank all that a wife should.

I had been married to him almost 10 years by then and we had adopted 3 German orphans as our family during the three years he was stationed in Germany to implement the Marshall Plan. So he took me back to America as his wife in 1949 and that is where I have lived ever since – except for a monthin Morocco and a few visits back to Europe.

When I last visited Germany she told me that she had visited Dr. Butenandt, much to his embarrassment. He had won much praise and recognition for his work on hormones including German and foreign awards, but his role in the Nazi regime was never mentioned.

Dr. Heim had been more open about his past in the Third Reich and he suffered for it. For a while he ran a private practice in Baden Baden before the Nazi hunters caught up with him. But he was warned (it is said by the organization ODESSA) and he escaped to South America leaving his family behind.

It reminded both Elsa and I of our miracle. We were alive, even though our lives had changed beyond belief to do that.

Elsa said that to her it seemed that she knew a man once and his name was Erich – he was a Nazi and he did evil things but she had no hand in it. He is gone now, and the world is better off without him. It seems that for her playing some small role in his “death” is atonement.

I don’t feel the same way. Hans is no longer a person, but his sins are mine. I have always felt the need for expiation somehow, and for me I have achieved that with my family. My children and there children will always understand the need to see evil when a demagogue arises, spewing hate; to fight that, but otherwise to do good wherever they can. I cannot forget or even forgive myself, let alone seek the forgiveness of others, but I feel that a wife and mother has a role in ensuring that her family make the world a better place.

The End

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Author’s Notes:

1. It was often assumed that post op transsexual Dora Richter was killed on the burning of the Sexology Institute on May 6, 1933 but there is reffrence to her being married and named Schulz residing in Bamburg even after he war
2. Dr. Butenandt went on to continue in medical research and biochemistry finally settling in Munich in 1956.
3. Dr. Aribert Heim up a medical practice in Baden Baden after the war and to live there openly until 1962. Having been warned of impending arrest he evaded investigators and fled to South America and lived there until 1993. Then he once again fled, this time to Egypt where died in 2009.
4. The organization “Odessa” - *Organisation der ehemaligen SS-Angehörigen* or the organization of former members of the SS, did exist but was never the underground railroad of fiction. Even today there are people who say that it never existed at all.