



## Death's accomplices

### Nurses in Nazi Germany: moral choice in history

Bronwyn Rebekah McFarland-Icke  
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Nurses killed or were involved in killing 70 000 mentally and physically handicapped people in Nazi Germany. How can this be so, when the ideals of nursing are to help and to heal? The Nazi years continue to attract the attention of researchers seeking to understand a time when certain lives were deemed “unworthy of living.” Over the past decade this historiography has focused on ordinary people in an attempt to understand, as Bronwyn Rebekah McFarland-Icke puts it, “how and why Germans under National Socialism behaved as they did in a time of moral crisis — what mobilized or immobilized them — and how their choices, regarded collectively, produced institutionalized barbarism” (p. vii).

In her meticulously researched and disturbing study, *Nurses in Nazi Germany: Moral Choice in History*, McFarland-Icke draws on a variety of primary sources to understand the mentality of Nazi nurses. She gains insight into their training through the window of a psychiatric nursing journal, *Die Irrenpflege*, published from 1896 on, which instructed psychiatric nurses through articles written by psychiatrists, nurses, social welfare workers and members of the clergy. She examines personnel records from two psychiatric institutions to reconstruct the atmosphere created by administrative policies. Finally, she scrutinizes the postwar trial testimonies of nurses accused of involvement with the “euthanasia” measures employed by the Nazis between 1939 and 1945.

McFarland-Icke describes the developments in psychiatry that led to the “euthanasia” program and the role

nurses played in the killing of mentally and physically handicapped people in Germany between 1939 and 1945. Indeed, the techniques deployed against the Jews were first tested on Germany’s disabled citizens. She focuses on two areas, the professional morality of psychiatric nurses and the realities of institutional life, and sets the evolution of psychiatry and psychiatric nursing against the backdrop of World War I, the Weimar Republic, the emergence of National Socialism and, finally, World War II. Changes in psychiatry and psychiatric nursing contributed to a changing view of the psychiatric patient. The roots of this change lie in World War I and the emerging concept of the *Volk*, “the people,” to which individuals ideally subordinated themselves through sacrifice. During the economic hardships of the thirties, the moral value of “the people” superseded that of the individual, thus contributing to a situation in which the patient receded from view as an object of moral concern for nurses.

Psychiatric nurses in Nazi Germany generally came from working- or lower-middle-class backgrounds and had only a rudimentary education. Formal nursing training did not exist; some nurses were promoted into psychiatric practice from housekeeping or the kitchen. The group examined by Mc-

Farland-Icke was very different from the professional nurses of today. That being said, psychiatric institutions in Nazi Germany did not differ greatly from psychiatric institutions around the globe at the time. Although administrative policy paid lip service to the notion of nurses’ training, it became increasingly difficult to obtain qualified nursing staff during the National Socialist years. The characteristics that governed the profession, however, remained the same. As members of a respectable calling, nurses were expected to exercise moral abstinence, confidentiality, patience, economy and self-control.

It was within a changing institutional and political climate that nurses became supporters of the National Socialist euthanasia program. As McFarland-Icke notes, “formal changes and rituals designed to promote National Socialist ideals cultivated an acceptance of structured authority, a readiness to contribute to a collective effort, and the

habit of taking orders from superiors without asking for reasons” (p. 202). In psychiatric institutions nurses were discouraged from establishing friendships with their patients, felt powerless to influence or make decisions and were sur-

rounded by the probing eyes and ears of potential denounciators. Was this how their moral deliberation and sense of responsibility were destroyed? For McFarland-Icke, “the National Socialist regime’s most devastating power lay not in its ability to mobilize people against its victims through propaganda but rather in its ability to deploy propaganda in conjunction with specific physical, discursive, and hierarchical arrangements so that the desire for psy-



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chological comfort would prevail over courage” (p. 264).

Nazi nurses did not see the violence and blood associated with the deaths of patients, who were sent away in buses, “fell asleep” following an injection administered by a nurse, or simply wasted away from hunger. The author concludes that these “ordinary” nurses, previously trained to care for patients, became mass murderers for complex reasons that cannot be reduced simply to their willingness to follow orders. Among these were fear of reprisals, isolation from one another and their patients, a sense of powerlessness and an enforced moral paralysis. Some had an

“unpleasant feeling” but did not act upon it. One nurse testified that she suffered unbearable conflicts of conscience but did not feel guilty about her assistance in the murder of adults because she was not directly involved (p. 255). A troubling comment indeed.

This research poses the unanswerable question: How would we behave in similar circumstances? The distance between Nazi nurses and nurses in Canada may not be as great as we would wish to imagine. The first nursing school in Canada opened with the motto, “I see and am Silent.” At what point do obedience and professional detachment become dangerous? McFarland-Icke iden-

tifies 1933 as the year in which “strategies of eugenic management suddenly became the cornerstone of a new authoritarian regime” (p. 130). The result was the passage of the Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Progeny. Alberta’s Sexual Sterilization Act came into effect in 1928, and nurses played a significant role in its execution. Do nurses continue to remain silent today when they ought to speak out?

I thank Carolee Pollock for her comments on a draft of this review.

**Diana Mansell**  
Faculty of Nursing  
University of Calgary

## Lifeworks

# Remarking the unremarkable

“I have measured out my life with coffee spoons”  
T.S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

Poor J. Alfred, caught in that awkward modernist moment when the manners of polite society had become hollow and the monotony of life paralysed the soul. But now that we are thoroughly postmodern, banality has apparently become something to celebrate.

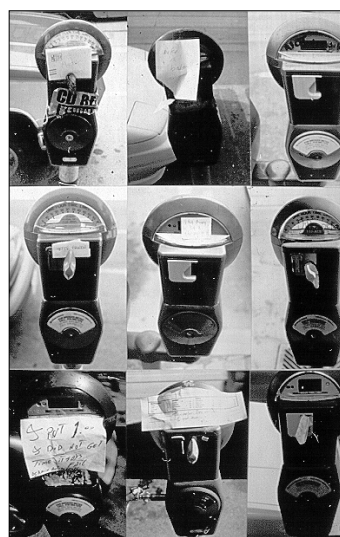
Exhibit A: Canadian artist Kelly Mark, whose latest solo show was recently mounted at Vancouver’s Contemporary Art Gallery. Since 1991 Mark has been attracting notice as a young conceptualist to watch. Her work engages with utilitarian objects and materials, which she subjects to compulsive orderliness and quirky forms of stress testing. *White Jars* (1994) is an arrangement of 144 Mason jars containing white substances; *Black Jars* (1995) repeats the exercise with black items. *1000 Hemlock Hits* (1994) consists of two wooden beams that have been struck together 1000 times; *Split Axes* (1995) is a row of wooden axe handles that have been split by an axehead and repaired. *Object Carried for One Year*

(1996–1997) is an aluminum bar carried in the artist’s back pocket for the stated period. These pieces bluntly declare the effort of producing them, which may

invite the viewer to reassess the nature of our engagement, through work and repetitive action, with the material world. They also constitute a mimicry of modern, industrialized consumption: *1000 Watts* and *1000 Hours* (1997) are displays of illuminated lightbulbs that offer, as one reviewer notes, “a conceptually eloquent, home-hardware meditation on entropy and hope, vigilance and excess.”<sup>1</sup> The consumption necessary for art is also enacted by a series of pencil drawings from 1997, which singlemindedly records the scribbling of graphite

on paper: when the pencil runs out, the drawing is finished.

In some of her more recent works, however, a sense of human agency relieves the materialist weight of Mark’s brand of minimalism. A grid of photographs entitled *Broken Meter* documents notes found on dysfunctional parking meters, giving us a gratifying sense of talking back to mute authority. *Placed* records adaptive responses to a mundane, repetitive environment with photographs of styrofoam cups, crumpled pieces of paper and other detritus that has been tucked into odd corners rather than being relegated to the pure randomness of litter.



**Kelly Mark, 1999.** *Broken meter* (detail). Photographs, 4" × 6" each.

*Origami Transfer* is an arrangement of bus transfers folded by fidgety travellers into interesting shapes. With these iterations Mark’s study of materials inches