

Woman with Two Children in Front of the Breast Milk Collection Site of the Health Office in Berlin-Wilmersdorf (1936)

Abstract

In the Nazi regime, the public health system had far-reaching power to intrude into the private lives of individuals, and this was particularly true in the area of family planning. Decisions about who should procreate and how their offspring should be fed and brought up became a matter of “national health” [*Volksgesundheit*]. The “Law on the Unification of the Health Care System” (adopted in 1935) sparked the construction of a network of health care offices in cities and rural areas that would become the instrument of Nazi race and population policy in the area of public health. The primary objective guiding the activity of the health offices was “care for heredity and race,” and this provided the basis for decisions about forced sterilization and marriage prohibitions, internment in concentration camps, and even killings euphemistically described as “euthanasia” cases. For the “capable” segments of the population—those people who were regarded as important for Nazi population policy and were thus encouraged to reproduce as actively as possible—government health offices offered services ranging from medical care for pregnant women and infants to instruction in proper housekeeping and social hygiene.

The dual nature of these health offices is illustrated by this photograph, which features two small children with their mother, a woman who would have counted as a productive member of society according to the Nazi definition. The mother has come to a health-office supported breast milk collection site in Berlin-Wilmersdorf to donate a few bottles of her own milk to mothers who were having difficulty nursing. Breast milk distribution was just one of the many services offered to “desirable” members of the population. The sign behind the mother, however, points to the other types of “services” provided by these public health offices: it reads “Counseling Center for the Care of Heredity and Race.”

Source



Source: Woman with two children in front of the women's milk collection point of the health department in Berlin-Wilmersdorf. Photo by Arthur Grimm.

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