

Ambivalent but Not Indifferent: Interview Narratives of *Lebensborn* Children Born in the Wienerwald Maternity Home, 1938–1945

Klaus Steiner was born on February 23, 1943 in Feichtenbach, Austria, where the Wienerwald Home (known as the *Ostmark* Home until 1942) was located. Only women who were classified as Aryan were allowed to give birth in this maternity home run by the *Lebensborn* association. The central tasks of *Lebensborn* included “supporting racially and hereditarily valuable large families,” “accommodating and caring for racially and hereditarily valuable expectant mothers who, after careful examination of their own family and the family of the biological father by the *Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt-SS* (SS Race and Settlement Main Office, RuSHA), can be expected to give birth to equally valuable children,” “caring for these children,” and “caring for the mothers of these children.”¹ During the naming ceremony at the Wienerwald Home, a pseudo-religious ceremony conducted by the Home’s Director Norbert Schwab, Steiner became a part of the so-called *SS Sippengemeinschaft*.² This is also evident from the letter of congratulations written by his mother’s superior, Richard Jury, a member of the *Gauleitung* (*Gau* leadership) of the *Reichsgau* (Reich District) *Niederdonau*. Jury conveyed his congratulations to

1 Provincial Archives of Lower Austria (NÖLA), Office of the Lower Austrian Provincial Government, Provincial Office I/2, number 33/1975, *Lebensborn* e.V. in Munich, brochure, Miesbach, 8. All translations from German are the authors’ own.

2 The *SS Sippengemeinschaft* was a term Heinrich Himmler used in keynote speeches to not only describe the male members of the SS but also their wives and children, thus establishing them as an elite component of the people. Isabel Heinemann, “*Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut*”: *das Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS und die rassenpolitische Neuordnung Europas* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003), 49; Gudrun Schwarz, *Eine Frau an seiner Seite. Ehefrauen in der “SS-Sippengemeinschaft”* (Hamburg: HIS, 1997).

the family “on the birth of your young SS man Klaus Ferdinand. My wife and I hope that he will have every happiness. Above all, mother and child are healthy.”³

The Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Research on Consequences of War (BIK) conducted thirty-four interviews with *Lebensborn* children formerly from the Wienerwald Home, including an interview with Steiner, in a three-year project running until 2023.⁴ The following project description provides insight into the topic, the scope and range of the project, conducting the interviews, analysis of the interview data, and, based on Steiner’s biography, how *Lebensborn* children deal with their family and life history. To this day, the *Lebensborn*, or rather the taboo surrounding it, its distortion, and its concealment continues to impact and burden some of those who were under its care, as well as their descendants.⁵

Defining the Parameters: Childbirth in a Lebensborn Maternity Home

“Racial hygiene” was one of the central elements of National Socialist ideology. It was based on eugenic, social Darwinist, racist, and population policy ideas which had been discussed nationally and internationally since the end of the nineteenth century. However, after the National Socialists came to power, the radicalism of propaganda related to “racial hygiene” and the implementation of “racial hygiene” policies differed considerably from pre-1933 Germany and other countries. The *Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses* (Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased

3 Private collections of Klaus Steiner, Letter from *Gauamtsleiter* Richard Jury, 1943.

4 BIK, Project *Geboren im Lebensborn-Heim Wienerwald. Sammlung, Dokumentation und Aufbereitung lebensgeschichtlicher Interviews*, funded by the Future Fund of the Republic of Austria, P21-4314 (Project Lead: Lukas Schretter).

5 One of the most well-known works on family memory and family history concerning the Nazi period is by Welzer et al. The authors analyse family discussions in order to understand what “normal Germans” remember about the past. See: Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller, and Karoline Tschuggnall, “*Opa war kein Nazi.*” *Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 2014). See also, among others: Margit Reiter, *Die Generation danach. Der Nationalsozialismus im Familiengedächtnis* (Vienna: Studienverlag, 2006); Gabriele Rosenthal (ed.), *Der Holocaust im Leben von drei Generationen. Familien von Überlebenden und von Nazi-Tätern* (Gießen: Psychosozial, 1997); Harald Welzer, Robert Montau, and Christine Pläß, “*Was wir für böse Menschen sind!*” *Der Nationalsozialismus im Gespräch zwischen den Generationen* (Tübingen: Edition discord, 1997).

Offspring) in 1933 created the basis for forced sterilizations. The *Nürnberger Gesetze* (Nuremberg Laws) in 1935 were one of the legal foundations for the persecution of Jews; persecution which would eventually lead to the Holocaust. In 1939, the “Euthanasia” Memorandum was another step on the path from exclusion to the murder of population groups who were classified as “racially undesirable,” “inferior,” or “unworthy of life.” It authorized the selection of patients “deemed incurably sick” and the administering of a “mercy death” (*Gnadentod*).

In contrast to antinatalist policies, Nazi racial and population policies also included the promotion of “hereditarily healthy” offspring. In 1935, Heinrich Himmler founded the *Lebensborn* (which can be translated as “fount of life”) association to increase the number of births of children of “Aryan” origin.⁶ Based on racial theories and so-called positive eugenics, *Lebensborn* served the ideals and goals of the SS.⁷

Lebensborn initially aimed to provide the best possible care for unmarried pregnant “Aryan” women who faced societal challenges and pressures at the time. *Lebensborn* hoped to discourage them from having illegal abortions and thus promote the growth of a strong “racial elite” among the German population. It offered the opportunity to give birth secretly

6 NÖLA, Office of the Lower Austrian Provincial Government, Provincial Office I/2, number 33/1975, *Lebensborn e. V.* in Munich, brochure, Miesbach, 3.

7 Georg Lilienthal, *Der “Lebensborn e. V.” Ein Instrument nationalsozialistischer Rassenpolitik* (Stuttgart and New York: Gustav Fischer, 1985). Further studies on the history of *Lebensborn* include, among others, chapters in the following volumes: Angelika Baumann and Andreas Heusler, *Der Lebensborn in München. Kinder für den “Führer”* (Munich: Schiermeier 2013); Gisela Heidenreich, *Born of War – Vom Krieg geboren. Europas verleugnete Kinder* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2017). Monographs published on *Lebensborn* include: Thomas Bryant, *Himmlers Kinder. Zur Geschichte der SS-Organisation “Lebensborn e. V.” 1935–1945* (Wiesbaden: Marix, 2011); Catherine Clay and Michael Leapman, *Herrenmenschen. Das Lebensborn-Experiment der Nazis* (Munich: Heyne, 1997); Marc Hillel and Clarissa Henry, *Lebensborn e. V. In Namen der Rasse* (Cologne: Zsolnay, 1975); Dorothee Neumaier, *Das Lebensbornheim “Schwarzwald” in Nordrach* (Marburg: Tectum, 2017); Kåre Olsen, *Vater: Deutscher. Das Schicksal der norwegischen Lebensbornkinder und ihrer Mütter von 1940 bis heute* (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus, 2002); Rudolf Oswald, *Den Opfern verpflichtet. Katholische Jugendfürsorge, Caritas und die SS-Organisation “Lebensborn” nach 1945* (Munich: Sankt Michaelsbund, 2020); Dorothee Schmitz-Köster, “Deutsche Mutter, bist du bereit ...” *Der Lebensborn und seine Kinder* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2010); Dorothee Schmitz-Köster, *Kind L 364. Eine Lebensborn-Familiengeschichte* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2007); Dorothee Schmitz-Köster and Tristan Vankann, *Lebenslang Lebensborn. Die Wunschkinder der SS und was aus ihnen wurde* (Munich and Zurich: Piper, 2012); Dorothee Schmitz-Köster, *Unbrauchbare Väter. Über Muster-Männer, Seitenspringer und flüchtende Erzeuger im Lebensborn* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2022).

in its maternity homes, away from the gaze of family members and acquaintances. In addition, *Lebensborn* offered mothers financial support and, in rare cases, adoption services. Strongly influenced by Nazi racial policies and theories of eugenics, it only accepted healthy applicants who could prove their “Aryan” ancestry and rejected those with health problems. If applicants had a family history of physical, mental, or psychiatric disabilities, they were denied because of their alleged racial impurity.

Moreover, *Lebensborn* encouraged SS men, whom Himmler believed to be the biological and racial elite of Nazi Germany, to have large families. These men and their wives had already been required to pass medical examinations and have their “Aryan” ancestry established before marriage. Along with unmarried pregnant women, the brides and wives of members of the SS and police could take advantage of the services offered by the *Lebensborn* maternity homes. Additionally, following Himmler’s wishes, all children born in *Lebensborn* maternity homes who met the criteria of the SS were—as was the case with Steiner—to be subjected to a naming ceremony instead of a Christian baptism, and thus admitted to the SS.⁸

Between 1936 and 1945, *Lebensborn* maintained a total of nine maternity homes in Germany (present-day German borders) and fifteen more in Austria, Luxembourg, Belgium, France, and Norway. After the outbreak of the Second World War, German SS, military, and civilian personnel had children with women living in these countries. *Lebensborn* assumed control of these children if the mother’s health, family history, and “Aryan” ancestry could be established. *Lebensborn* maternity homes in the German Reich and in German-occupied territories were designed to be pleasant places where “Aryan” women could receive prenatal care, deliver their babies, and recover from labor. The Wienerwald Home, established in 1938, was one of the largest maternity homes in terms of the number of births. When Steiner was born in February 1943, approximately 950 children had already been born there. By the end of the war, this number had increased by approximately 350 births.⁹

From 1942 onwards, *Lebensborn* was also involved in the so-called Germanisation of children classified as “Aryan,” from Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. Thousands of children were kidnapped because they had German ancestry or because of their supposed racial features. *Lebensborn* placed these children with selected German families. In Austria, a second

8 Lilienthal, *Der “Lebensborn e. V.”*, 99–100.

9 BIK, database on the *Lebensborn* Maternity Home Wienerwald, Registry Office Pernitz II, 63/1943.

Lebensborn facility, the Alpenland Home near Gmunden, “germanized” kidnapped children and afterward placed them with selected childless couples. After the war, searches for these children’s biological families have often been futile. They described the return to their home countries as painful—and emphasized the further traumatization caused by their non-recognition as victims.¹⁰

Laying the Groundwork: Scope and Scale of the Oral History Project

How did BIK come into contact with people born in the Wienerwald Home, the so-called *Lebensborn* children? The oral history project is part of a comprehensive research study by BIK on *Lebensborn*, which started in early 2020 and included the analysis of data obtained from historical files on hundreds of children born in the Wienerwald Home between 1938 and 1945.¹¹ As some *Lebensborn* children only accidentally learned of

10 Ines Hopfer, *Geraubte Kindheit. Die gewaltsame Eindeutschung von polnischen Kindern in der NS-Zeit* (Vienna, Cologne, and Weimar: Böhlau, 2010). Also see: Verena Buser, “‘Mass Detective Operation’ im befreiten Deutschland: UNRRA und die Suche nach den eingedeutschten Kindern nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg,” *HISTORIE* 8 (2016): 347–60; Isabel Heinemann, “‘Bis zum letzten Tropfen guten Blutes.’ The Kidnapping of ‘Racially Valuable’ Children as Another Aspect of Nazi Racial Policy in the Occupied East,” in *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History*, ed. Dirk Moses (Oxford and New York: Berghahn, 2004), 244–66; Isabel Heinemann, “Fundament der Volksgemeinschaft. Familientrennungen und -gründungen in der nationalsozialistischen In- und Exklusionspolitik,” in *Familientrennungen im nationalsozialistischen Krieg. Erfahrungen und Praktiken in Deutschland und im besetzten Europa 1939–1945*, ed. Wiebke Lisner, Johannes Hürter, Corenlia Rau, and Lu Seegers (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2022), 57–80; Dorothee Schmitz-Köster, *Raubkind. Von der SS nach Deutschland verschleppt* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2018).

11 BIK Project *Lebensborn-Heim Wienerwald, 1938–1945. Tabu und Projektion*, funded by the Jubilee Fund of the Austrian National Bank (18270) and the Province of Lower Austria (Project Lead: Barbara Stelzl-Marx). Existing research on *Lebensborn* in Austria includes: Hiltraud Ast, *Feichtenbach. Eine Tallandschaft im Niederösterreichischen Schneeberggebiet* (Vienna: Brüder Hollinek, 1994), 61–77; Corinna Fürstaller, “Lebensbornheime in Österreich” (Master’s thesis, University of Graz, 2010); Elisabeth A. Märker, “‘Rassisch wertvoll.’ Die positive Eugenik: Ihre Handhabung am Beispiel des Lebensbornvereins im ‘Heim Alpenland’ und ‘Heim Wienerwald’” (PhD diss., University of Innsbruck, 1999); Sandro Rupprecht, “Aktion Lebensborn – Die Züchtung von Herrenmenschen in Feichtenbach,” in *Wie es bei uns in Niederösterreich war 1938–1945. Spurensuche im Nationalsozialismus. Materialien zur Zeitgeschichte*, ed. Franz Vonwald and Margarethe Kainig-Huber (Berndorf: Kral, 2015). Recent works of fiction dealing with *Lebensborn* in

their place of birth in adulthood, BIK estimates that others are not aware that they were born in a *Lebensborn* home. Confronting *Lebensborn* children with this aspect of their past for the first time via an interview request, and thus bringing to light potential family secrets or repressed memories, could have had incalculable personal or familial consequences. As a result, the decision was made to only trace and contact individuals for interview requests who had already gone public with their stories through autobiographical publications or media features.¹² Few interview partners have been referred to the institute through so-called snowball sampling, which is a sampling technique where currently enrolled research participants help recruit further research participants among their acquaintances.¹³ Calls for participation in the interviews published in Austrian media proved successful by the end of 2020.

Not every contact led to an interview, but, in total, thirty-four interviews were conducted with *Lebensborn* children. The interview phase

Austria include: Eleonore Rodler, *Feichtenbach. Eine Faktion* (Vienna and Klosterneuburg: Edition VaBene, 2009); Alois Hotschnig, *Der Silberfuchs meiner Mutter* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 2021). In 2001, Günther Knotzinger presented a manuscript with his research results on the history of the former Wienerwald Home, titled “Das SS-Heim ‘Wienerwald’ und die Geschichte des Hauses von 1904 bis zur Gegenwart.” The manuscript has not been published. At the time of publication of this paper, Knotzinger’s manuscript is available through Adelgunde Knotzinger, Feichtenbach.

- 12 Astrid Eggers, together with Elke Sauer, published her own life story and those of other *Lebensborn* children. See: Astrid Eggers, “Ich war die Marionette meiner Mutter,” in *Verschwiegene Opfer der SS. Lebensborn-Kinder erzählen ihr Leben*, ed. Astrid Eggers and Elke Sauer (Leipzig: Engelsdorfer, 2015), 134–50. Brigitta Rambeck also published an autobiography, see: Brigitta Rambeck, “Ich war ein Schubladenkind,” in *Born of War – Vom Krieg geboren. Europas verleugnete Kinder*, ed. Gisela Heidenreich (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2017), 155–61. Hilde S. (name changed) participated in various documentaries: Gesa Knolle and Birtha Templin, *Was bleibt*, Silvia Loinjak production, 57 minutes, 2008; Simone Bader and Jo Schmeiser, *Liebe Geschichte*, Klub Zwei production, 98 minutes, 2010; Christoph Bendas, *Kinder für das Vaterland: Das Schicksal der Lebensborn-Kinder*, ORF2-Thema, December 5, 2016; Robert Altenburger and Andreas Nowak, *Lebensborn, die vergessenen Opfer*, ORF2-Menschen&Mächte, November 7, 2019. No contact could be established with Horst Martin Widdershoven, who participated in the following documentary: Beate Thalberg, *Geheimsache Lebensborn*, Cult Film production, 42 minutes, 2002.
- 13 The *Lebensspuren* association is a support group for people who were born in *Lebensborn* maternity homes or who were “germanized.” The association supports them and their families in coming to terms with their past. Astrid Eggers, its former chairperson, drew the attention of some *Lebensborn* children of the Wienerwald Home to the oral history project. Gisela Heidenreich and Dorothee Schmitz-Köster also arranged contact between *Lebensborn* children and BIK.

lasted several months due to restrictions resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, one interview was conducted with a *Lebensborn* mother, which, at her request and the request of her family, was recorded in writing rather than with an audio recorder. Another interview was conducted with a former student nurse, and others with several people from the vicinity of the former Wienerwald Home.

The focus of the oral history project was on the *Lebensborn* children of the Wienerwald Home; however, BIK also conducted interviews with their siblings and children. In some families, descendants of *Lebensborn* children born in the Wienerwald Home tended to not question the biographies of their (grand)parents but rather to perpetuate family narratives established in the decades after the Second World War—repeating that their (grand)parents were only marginally involved in the Nazi regime and did not benefit from it. In some families, on the other hand, the younger generation was interested in the family history and, because of their age and distance from the Nazi period, they critically engaged with it: What role did my family play during the Nazi regime? What has already been spoken about within the family, and what has been concealed? How do I gather further information and understand it? However, it is not only family memory that plays a role in passing on memories of *Lebensborn* to the following generations. Since the younger generation's image of the Nazi period is strongly influenced by movies and television, such depictions of *Lebensborn* are also of interest for research. As such, how grandchildren and great-grandchildren of *Lebensborn* mothers and fathers deal and dealt with the actions of their relatives during the Third Reich requires further attention.

Doing Oral History: Recording Interviews, Interview Analysis, and Use of Data

Most of the interviews with *Lebensborn* children were conducted in their home environment and recorded with an audio recorder. *Lebensborn* was the starting point and central topic of the interviews, but they ultimately encompassed the entire biography of the interviewees. The interviews were conducted by various interviewers and did not follow any pre-defined guidelines, rather allowing sufficient time for the interviewees to tell their stories to the extent they desired. The interviews, therefore, demonstrate a wide range of formats and content; the shortest interview lasted approximately thirty minutes and the longest approximately

320 minutes.¹⁴ Although designed to accommodate the wishes and needs of the interviewees as much as possible, the oral history project has been characterized by a structured and systematic planning process which considered the challenge that the families often did not talk openly about the Wienerwald Home and what the interviewees' parents did during the Nazi era. This planning included thorough research before the interviews, preparations for deciding on a suitable time and place for the interviews, and considerations about the rights of use of the recordings. Also, outside of the interviewing phase, external factors had to be considered, such as the health of the interviewees, as well as their gender, age, and class.

The transcripts of all interviews with *Lebensborn* children from the Wienerwald Home were indexed. The computer software MAXQDA was used for this purpose. This allows so-called *codes*, or keywords, to be created using both an inductive research approach (a bottom-up method in which researchers start with specific observations and then move on to more general ideas) and a deductive research approach (a top-down method in which researchers start with a general idea and test it through their observations). These keywords are then assigned to individual words, sentences, and passages of a transcript. In this project, more than fifty codes were keyworded on a wide range of topics, such as "Narrative of Own Stay at the Wienerwald Home," "Admission of Biological Mother to the Wienerwald Home," "Military Career of Biological Father," "Denazification," "*Lebensborn* Children Networking in Adulthood," "*Lebensborn* Grandchildren," and "Visits to Birthplace in the Postwar Decades." The keywords were assigned to six overarching themes: "*Lebensborn* Children," "Biological Parents of *Lebensborn* Children," "Staff of the Wienerwald Home," "Social and Family Environment of *Lebensborn* Children," "Dealing with One's Own Life and Family History," and "Noteworthy Occurrences During the Interviews."

The central work undertaken on the interviews was carried out by two BIK team members, who independently keyworded each of the transcripts. The results were subsequently compared, discussed, and merged. The process of keywording with dual control formed the basis for the interpretation of the interviews. This yielded a comprehensive understanding of the narrated content, enabling the team members to reflect

14 In preliminary telephone conversations, *Lebensborn* children already shared aspects of their life and family history which they considered important for the topic. Central to the research process was, therefore, the creation of so-called memos, or protocols, which accompanied the pre-interview phase, served as preparation for the individual interviews, and also documented the post-interview phase.

on the framework conditions of the respective interviews and to jointly answer open questions that arose while working through the transcripts. Keywording did not replace the detailed study of individual lives and family stories, but it was an essential part of the analysis process intended to capture the overview content of the entire interview sample.

Methodological and ethical considerations are relevant in every oral history project—starting with the recruitment and selection of interviewees, through the conduct and follow-up of the interviews, to the storage of research data, and the publication of research results. For example, of the thirty-four interviews conducted, only the twenty-eight that were conducted face-to-face and not via telephone were subjected to a detailed analysis. Three interviews were not included because they could not be recorded with a recording device. Two further interviews, which were emotionally challenging for the interviewees, had to be terminated and were also not included in the keywording process. Furthermore, the use of interviews with *Lebensborn* children is only possible to a limited extent. For the time being, most interviewees agreed to the preservation and use of the interview files exclusively for BIK research projects on *Lebensborn*; therefore, any availability for general research will be on a case-by-case basis and only after consultation with the interviewees and interviewers.

Some of the interviewees expressed an interest in learning more about the racial ideological background of *Lebensborn*, exchanging perspectives with others, and visiting their birthplace. For the first time in Austria, BIK organized a non-public meeting of *Lebensborn* children, which included the disclosure of personal files by the former home registry office in the municipal administration of Feichtenbach/Pernitz, together with the registrar. Additionally, a public event with a panel discussion took place, in which four *Lebensborn* children talked about their biographies, and a visit to the abandoned building of the former maternity home took place. In a follow-up project, BIK continued to investigate various aspects of the history of the Wienerwald Home together with people whose lives and family stories are connected to *Lebensborn* in different ways.¹⁵

15 BIK, Project “MEMORY LAB. Partizipative Forschung zum Lebensborn-Heim Wienerwald, 1938–1945,” funded by the Open Innovation in Science Center of the Ludwig Boltzmann Society (Project Lead: Lukas Schretter).

Lebensborn in Family Memory: A Brief Case Study of Coming to Terms with the Past

Klaus Steiner was one of few interviewees who had already intensively dealt with the history of *Lebensborn* before the oral history project—unlike others who had become interested in the history of *Lebensborn* in advanced adulthood, or when they read and responded to the media call to those born in the maternity home to participate in this oral history project. As detailed below, Steiner tried to trace his family history and gain certainty about what his parents did during the Nazi period.

Steiner's father Ferdinand Steiner, born in Hallstatt in 1909, joined the NSDAP in August 1932.¹⁶ Until the so-called *Anschluss* in March 1938, the NSDAP was illegal in Austria. In April 1933, Steiner's father became a member of the SS. From 1933 onwards, he was a member of what was later called the *Österreichische Legion* in Nazi Germany.¹⁷ He married Klaus Steiner's mother, Margaretha Theiner, in 1940. During the Second World War, Ferdinand Steiner served as a member of the *Waffen-SS* in the Netherlands, France, the Soviet Union, Finland, and finally Italy. In June 1944, it was proposed that he would be promoted to *SS-Hauptsturmführer*. After the end of the war in 1945, he became a prisoner of war in Italy. From 1947, he stayed in Bolzano, where he remarried in 1950 after divorcing his wife. In 1951 he moved to Innsbruck. Sentenced by the *Volksgericht* in Innsbruck, he was soon pardoned against the background of the Cold War.¹⁸

As the wife of a member of the *Waffen-SS*, Steiner's mother, born in Vienna in 1920, met the requirements for giving birth in the Wienerwald Home. During the war, she worked for the *Reichsbund der Deutschen*

16 BIK, Interview with Klaus Steiner, conducted by Lukas Schretter, Vienna, 22 June 2020.

17 The *Österreichische Legion* was formed in 1933, after the NSDAP was banned in Austria, and was made up of Austrian Nazis who had fled to the German Reich to receive military training for a German invasion of Austria. Michael Holzmann, "... und steht die Legion auf dem ihr zugewies'nen Posten." *Die Österreichische Legion als Instrument früher NS-Aggressionspolitik* (Berlin: LIT, 2018); Hans Schafranek, *Söldner für den Anschluss. Die Österreichische Legion 1933–1938* (Vienna: Czernin, 2011).

18 Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde (BArch), Personnel files of the SS and SA, R 9361-III/199681. The *Volksgerichte* (people's courts) were an Austrian juridical instrument which was installed in 1945 and terminated in 1955. Based in Vienna, Graz, Linz, and Innsbruck, the *Volksgerichte* dealt with investigations on suspicion of Nazi crimes or illegal Nazi membership before 1938. For more information, see Claudia Kuretsidis-Haider, Winfried R. Garscha, and Siegfried Sanwald, "Verfahren vor den österreichischen Volksgerichten. Die Tätigkeit der Volksgerichte 1945 bis 1955," in *Verfolgung und Ahndung*, ed. Christine Schindler (Vienna: DÖW 2021), 15–104.

Beamten im Gau Niederdonau, first as a typist and later as a secretary. Her place of work was at the *Gauleitung* in the Palais Todesco opposite the State Opera in Vienna.¹⁹ After giving birth to her child in the Wienerwald Home, she moved to Hallstatt, where her parents-in-law lived. In the postwar period, after her divorce, she remarried the local dentist.

In his interview, Steiner reported that early on, “I realized what it meant to be the child of an old Nazi.”²⁰ Growing up in Hallstatt in the postwar years, he was confronted with the social contrasts in the village community. In Hallstatt, there were socialists and “those who belonged to the saltworks and the mountain”²¹ on the one hand, and the bourgeois and the former Nazis on the other. However, no one in the family talked about his parents’ Nazi past: “It was kept quiet and concealed from A to Z.”²² Steiner was not even informed about his true place of birth; instead, he was told that he was born in Muggendorf, a neighboring community of Feichtenbach.

As his father had lost his Austrian citizenship after becoming a member of the *Österreichische Legion*, according to Steiner, this led to problems when he entered primary school. His mother, therefore, made an agreement with the local priest: she would comply with the priest’s wish to have Steiner baptized and in return, the priest would ensure that he was allowed to go to school. After primary school, Steiner attended a private secondary school in Bad Aussee for four years, and then he switched to public school in Gmunden.²³ After the Second World War, the Second Austrian Republic failed to address the large number of Austrian Nazis, including those in teaching and academic professions. Due to Cold War tensions, the United States, Britain, and France helped to downplay Austria’s responsibility to secure the state against the Soviets.²⁴

19 BArch, R 9361-III/199681.

20 BIK, Steiner, minute 4.

21 BIK, Steiner, minute 4.

22 BIK, Steiner, minute 15.

23 The private secondary school in Bad Aussee had been founded in 1952 by Wilhelm Höttl—who was an *SS-Sturmabführer* and, from 1944, Head of Intelligence and Counter Espionage in Central and South East Europe. Höttl had been an employee of the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (Reich Security Main Office, RSHA) and the SD. In the postwar period, he worked for Allied intelligence services. The school he founded was attended by well-known personalities such as artist and musician André Heller, author Barbara Frischmuth, automobile racing drivers Jochen Rindt, Helmut Marko, Harald Ertl, and Niki Lauda, film director Karin Brandauer, and politician Thomas Prinzhorn. Martin Haidinger, *Wilhelm Höttl. Spion für Hitler und die USA* (Vienna: Ueberreuter, 2019), 156–58 and 170–71.

24 Siegfried Göllner, “Da waren die Nazis ja noch humaner” – *Sichtweisen ehemaliger NationalsozialistInnen auf die Entnazifizierung in Österreich 1945–1957* (Göttingen:

In 1961, Steiner started studying architecture in Vienna. At that time, he visited his father in Innsbruck to ask him for financial support for his studies. However, he refused the amount his father offered because it was so small. This was Steiner's first and last time meeting his biological father, with whom he sought less and less contact both because of his father's Nazi sentiments and because of Steiner's disappointment at his father's lack of care for him. During his studies at the Technische Universität (Technical University) in Vienna, Steiner had teachers who were former Nazis. Consequently, as a student, Steiner was surprised "that there was exactly the same ensemble at the Technical University in Vienna as in the Salzkammergut. All of them old Nazis."²⁵ For example, his teachers included the artist Rudolf Hermann Eisenmenger, who had been a member of the illegal Nazi party in 1933, and the art historian and later president of the *Bundesdenkmalamt* (Federal Office for the Protection of Monuments), Walter Frodl, who had been director of the *Gaumuseum* (district museum) and *Gaukonservator* (district curator) during the Second World War.

After having completed his university education, during which he worked for the influential architects Harry Glück and Carl Auböck, Steiner was assistant to the Viennese architect, spatial planner, and professor Rudolf Wurzer. Steiner reported that he stopped working for Wurzer when the latter suggested honoring architect Friedrich Tamms. During the war, Tamms had been an employee of Albert Speer, an artist listed in the *Gottbegnadeten-Liste* (list of artists considered crucial to Nazi culture), a professor at the Technische Hochschule (Technical University) in Berlin, and was responsible for the construction of flak towers in Vienna.

Steiner was an employee of the Vienna City Planning Department for several decades. In addition to his profession, he started researching the construction and planning activities of the Nazi regime in Vienna,

V&R Unipress, 2020); Heimo Halbrainer, Susanne Korbel, and Gerald Lamprecht, *Der 'schwierige' Umgang mit dem Nationalsozialismus an österreichischen Universitäten. Die Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz im Vergleich* (Graz: CLIO, 2022); Roman Pfefferle and Hans Pfefferle, *Glimpflich entnazifiziert. Die Professorenschaft der Universität Wien von 1944 in den Nachkriegsjahren* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2014); Oliver Rathkolb, *Fiktion 'Opfer' Österreich und die langen Schatten des Nationalsozialismus und der Dollfuß-Diktatur* (Innsbruck, Vienna, and Bolzano: StudienVerlag, 2017); Dieter Stiefel, "Forschungen zur Entnazifizierung in Österreich: Leistungen, Defizite, Perspektiven," in *Entnazifizierung im regionalen Vergleich*, ed. Walter Schuster and Wolfgang Weber (Linz: City Archives of Linz, 2004), 43–57.

²⁵ BIK, Steiner, minute 8.

encouraged by the Austrian architecture critic Friedrich Achleitner. For the collection of documents and planning materials, he contacted city planning employees from the Nazi period and their relatives. According to Steiner, referring to his birthplace helped to gain trust and was “somehow a recommendation.”²⁶ In the interview, he spoke about his motivation to deal with Nazi architectural history and how this was linked to his parent’s involvement in the Nazi regime and his birth in a *Lebensborn* home; “Through the constant confrontation with these things, they slowly unfolded and cleared up for me. I therefore started with: Do not take me for a fool. I am fiercely interested in this now. I ask around and do research. Not in terms of being ambitious, but I just want to know.”²⁷

In 2011, the *Architekturzentrum Wien* (Az W) added all the documents Steiner had collected to its archive. It brought him a sense of professional achievement and recognition for his personal commitment, which had been challenging: searching for former Nazis in post-Nazi Austria, on the one hand, and dealing with his family history, on the other. The documents were the basis for the Az W’s temporary exhibition “Vienna. The Pearl of the Reich: Planning for Hitler” in 2015. The exhibition catalogue, which includes an interview with Klaus Steiner, states: “The material collected by Klaus Steiner since the 1970s still represents the most important collection of primary sources on Vienna’s architectural history during the Nazi period. The fact that immediately after the war, an extensive ‘cleansing’ of private holdings, as well as public archives took place makes this collection of original documents unique and an indispensable basis for coming to terms with Nazi history.”²⁸

Conclusion

The oral history project pursued the goals of collecting information about the history of the Wienerwald Home from 1938 to 1945 and examining how *Lebensborn* children dealt with this aspect of their life and family history. As if under a magnifying glass, ways of coming to terms with and dealing with Nazi family history become visible in *Lebensborn*.

26 BIK, Steiner, minute 10.

27 BIK, Steiner, minute 9.

28 Ingrid Holzschuh and Monika Platzer, *Wien. Die Perle des Reiches. Planen für Hitler. Ausstellung im Architekturzentrum Wien vom 19. Mai 2015 bis 17. August 2015* (Zurich: Park Books, 2015). See also: Klaus Steiner, interview by Renata Schmidkunz, *Ör*, June 5, 2015; Klaus Steiner in “Des anderen Glückes Schmid,” part 2, by Ute Maurnböck-Mosser, *Ör*, December 19, 2023.

The ways in which *Lebensborn* children deal with their place of birth are contradictory. Although not all interviewees described this aspect of their biography as decisive for their own identity, they are not completely indifferent to it. Some consider the racial-ideological background of *Lebensborn* to be of little importance and stated that their mothers chose this place for birth exclusively due to practical reasons, for example, because of the proximity to their hometown. Others emphasized the emergency in which their unmarried mothers found themselves. Without *Lebensborn*, they assume, their (unmarried) mothers would have decided to terminate the pregnancies. For other *Lebensborn* children, such as Steiner, the feeling that “something was wrong” accompanied them from an early age and throughout their adult life. It was part of their individual coming to terms with their parental Nazi past. Against the background of Steiner’s detailed explanation of his professional career, and his research on the construction and planning activities of the Nazi regime in Vienna, his interview is both a testimony to Austrian architectural history and a source of information for a family history connected with *Lebensborn* and the Wienerwald Home.