

Unsubstantiated Claims Surrounding Irma Grese

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Irma Grese's cruel character and notorious sadism has earned her a place in history as one of the most feared and well-known female perpetrators during the Nazi Holocaust. Her violent cravings and strong sexual appetite made her an especially intriguing and complex figure, whose reputation precedes her to this day. Known for carrying a loaded pistol and whip that she had no hesitation in using, Grese has also captured the imaginations of scholars and writers alike due to both her extreme beauty¹ and young age. At only 21 years of age during the time of her trial,² many scholars and amateur historians have struggled with the concept of how someone so young and inexperienced could transform into such a murderous "beast." Although she has reached an almost mythical status in terms of Nazi "lore," Grese herself remains fairly well known to Holocaust scholars. However, there is relatively little research about her when compared to information available on other "famous" SS officers such as Dr. Josef Mengele or Josef Kramer, former Commandant of Bergen-Belsen. Additionally, the chief witnesses to Grese's behavior, particularly in regards to her sexual veracity, come from three women who survived Auschwitz: Dr. Gisella Perl, Olga Lengyel and Isabella Leitner. These claims are documented in their respective memoirs.

During the Belsen Trials, talk of how Grese treated her prisoners, other than in regards to her extremely violent behavior, was wholly disregarded. Instead, the focus remained solely on how Grese handled her prisoners, whether or not she

¹ Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: The Story of Auschwitz* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1995), 186

² Daniel Patrick Brown, *The Beautiful Beast: The Life and Crimes of SS Aufseherin Irma Grese* (Los Angeles: Golden West Historical Publications, 2004), 70

carried a whip or truncheon during her daily activities, if she carried a pistol and used it on prisoners and whether or not she knowingly selected prisoners for the gas.³ While she did attest to committing these grievous acts in the camps (although rather reluctantly, first accusing those who testified against her as lying and then later admitting that they had spoken the truth), nothing was ever mentioned about any other depraved activities that may have taken place, such as her sexual abuse of prisoners and her participation in medical experiments. As a result of this, unsubstantiated rumors persist in the Grese case, which have neither been confirmed nor denied by historians and scholars. While survivors testify to witnessing different inhumane acts committed by Grese during their internments in Auschwitz, very few of the stories corroborate with one another. This is to be expected, as each woman is explaining what happened to each of them individually, and in some cases when they are alone with Grese, and from their testimonies. The women do not appear to have known one another or witnessed, or at least recorded, any one of Grese's sexual or other depraved acts at the same time. Thus, Grese herself runs the risk of becoming a misunderstood figure, or at least one whose entire narrative is based simply on conjecture.

Although she is most known for her sadism in regard to sex, there are other claims which have not been substantiated that do exist. For example, the Jewish Virtual Library claims that once the British arrested Grese, a lampshade made of prisoners'

³ Raymond Phillips, *The Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-Four Others* (Glasgow: William Hodge and Company, 1949)

skin was found amongst her things.⁴ However, no other resource seems to corroborate this statement. Daniel Patrick Brown's *The Beautiful Beast*, the only book written solely on Grese, does not even mention it in his findings, making it appear suspect at best.

Irma Grese is one of a very small group of SS women who had a propensity for extreme violence. Another woman joins her with a reputation almost equal to that of Grese: Ilse Koch. Koch worked alongside her husband Karl Koch, the Commandant of Buchenwald, and was also known for her cruel and sadistic behavior toward the inmates just like Grese. It is documented that Koch did indeed house a collection of bizarre household goods made of human skin and bones, including tables and lampshades.⁵ Perhaps, as the two women were so well-known for their propensity to violence yet are so under researched, the rumors and facts concerning the two have somehow gotten mixed up along the way. While Grese may have, indeed, had such a lampshade, and it certainly would match up with the stories the prisoners have divulged about her, there is currently no evidence to suggest that this claim is true. Further research on the matter may provide more light on the subject.

Grese's extremely good looks and sexual appetite have also made their way into the annals of the Holocaust narrative. Her affairs were curiously omitted from the Belsen Trial, although they could have served as further evidence for her cruel

⁴ The American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise "Irma Grese," The Jewish Virtual Library, at <http://www.JewishVirtualLibrary.org>, accessed 4 December 2011.

⁵ David A. Hackett, *The Buchenwald Report* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 43.

nature as many of them appeared to have been forced on her prisoners by the threat of death. In Olga Lengyel's *Five Chimneys*, she writes "...Irma Grese frequently had homosexual relationships with inmates and then ordered the victims to the crematory" (186). According to Daniel Patrick Brown, Isabella Leitner and Olga Lengyel are the only documenters of Grese's affairs with prisoners. These affairs, as Brown points out, would have been a supreme violation of Grese's contract and tenure as an SS officer in addition to violating the Race and Resettlement Act.⁶ Sexual relations between an Aryan and non-Aryan could potentially result in death for Grese, however Leitner and Lengyel claimed that she continued these depraved acts of sexual sadism. Lengyel also claims on page 186 of her memoir that Grese often forced women she took as lovers to work as her maids in order to have access to them at all times. In Lengyel's memoir, they are described, perhaps more aptly, as Grese's "slaves" rather than "maids." At this juncture, none of Grese's former "lovers" are known to have survived the camps, or at least have never come forward to tell their stories publicly. Although the stories and "lore" of sexual coercion and force upon prisoners are both repeated by Leitner and Lengyel, the same exact stories are never corroborated with one another.

The "love affairs" perpetuated in the camps were not strictly homosexual, according to witnesses. Although Grese likely had unrestricted access to the women she oversaw, she also yielded her power against the men in the camp. She would then often punish women attached to the men (such as wives or girlfriends) for the

⁶ Daniel Patrick Brown, *The Beautiful Beast: The Life and Crimes of SS Aufseherin Irma Grese* (Los Angeles: Golden West Historical Publications, 2004), 48.

lack of the male's compliance. Olga Lengyel describes a grotesque scene in her memoir, *Five Chimneys*, in which Irma Grese finds a male prisoner with whom she wishes to pursue a sexual relationship. When the man refused, Grese tried to force him to do so, not by punishing him, but by finding his girlfriend and beating her until he submitted to her commands. Lengyel states camp gossip informed her that the man was shot and his young girlfriend was sent into forced prostitution at the dreaded Auschwitz brothel.⁷ While Lengyel had seen the beating of the male prisoner with her own eyes, the "back story" of the love affair seems to have been passed through one of Grese's maids (187). In fact, much of the stories about Grese, as told by Lengyel, seem to have been filtered through Grese's domestic help, besides those Lengyel witnessed with her own eyes. Knowing the fear the inmates must have had toward these beings that yielded a kind of "ultimate power" over their fate, it is more than likely that gossip and untruths were prevalent within the camps. Therefore, it is hard to discern whether or not the fates of these lovers and their stories are actually true, or perhaps the conjecture of frightened inmates.

Grese is also said to have had love affairs with several high-ranking SS officials, although no documents exist to prove this to be the case. Several witnesses have said they had observed behavior that may have suggested that Grese was carrying on several affairs at once. On page 148 of her memoirs, *Five Chimneys*, Lengyel states, "In the camp, it was gossiped that [Josef] Kramer and Dr. Mengele

⁷ Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: The Story of Auschwitz* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1995), 186-189

were her chief lovers. But her greatest affair was with an SS engineer whom she frequently met in the evenings."

Very little, beyond snippets of speculation, exists to prove that Kramer and Grese did, indeed, have a love affair with one another. However, the relationship between Grese and Mengele has become a subject of much interest in both the media and with scholars. Perhaps because both parties were known for their striking good looks, charisma and twisted acts, it only seems logical that together the two would make the "perfect Nazi pair." Daniel Patrick Brown states on page 47 of his work, *The Beautiful Beast*, that Auschwitz survivor Kitty Hart testified to the two being together in a romantic sense, although Hart fails to mention any real evidence aside from seeing them often in one another's company. Hart does not mention seeing the couple embrace, kiss, hold hands or any other sort of evidence that would undoubtedly point toward an affair.

While the very nature of the relationship remains unsubstantiated, it has attracted some attention from writers and artists. The play, *Angel: a Nightmare of the Holocaust*, takes the speculation to a whole new level by making the relationship between Mengele and Grese a central theme of the play. While the play is based on the work of Olga Lengyel, even employing her as a character in the drama, the relationship with Mengele somehow manages to take the focus. On stage, in it insinuated that the two regularly meet-up for sexual rendezvous, however the playwright, Jo Davidsmeyer, has little evidence to show for this. The playwright does

state that she has done substantial research into the life of Grese⁸, but dramatic license and intrigue in order to keep the audience engaged may be the motivation for perpetuating claims that have a shaky grounding in reality.

It is clear by all accounts, no matter the nature of their relationship, that Mengele and Grese were cohorts. Irma Grese herself admitted to often being in the company of Josef Mengele during the "selection parades," in which inmates were forced to strip off their clothing and run in front of Mengele to determine if they were fit to continue work or if they should be taken to the gas.⁹ Irma Grese was often "helping," although there is conjecture over whether or not her "help" included selecting victims to be experimented on, such as dwarves and twins that Mengele was often fond of "working" on. However, this speculation may prove false if Grese was assisting in parades of inmates who had already been processed, as most of Mengele's twins and dwarves were noted and selected at the "ramp."¹⁰ It would be unlikely that twins and dwarves would have been processed into the camp without an SS officer taking notice, but perhaps Grese did assist in selecting pregnant women for Mengele's experiments.

⁸ Jo Davidsmeyer, "Angel: A Nightmare of the Holocaust." Jo Davidsmeyer's website at http://www.jodavidsmeyer.com/_borders/plays/angel.html, accessed 4 December 2011.

⁹ Raymond Phillips, *The Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-Four Others* (Glasgow: William Hodge and Company, 1949), 257.

¹⁰ Lucette Matalon Lagnado, *Children of the Flames: Dr. Josef Mengele and the Untold Story of the Twins of Auschwitz* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 39

It is known, however, that Grese had a strong interest in medicine and often accompanied Mengele to watch his sadistic experiments.¹¹ It is not said which of his experiments she often sat down to watch. It is noted by Dr. Gisella Perl in her memoir *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*, that Grese was fond of watching experiments on women. Whether it was her bisexual nature or a pure hatred for women that motivated this is unknown. Perl claims that watching women being experimented on (usually by Mengele) did not just delight Grese, but in fact sexually excited her.¹² Perl also goes on to state that Grese would often pick out the women in her care with the biggest breasts and flog them until they became so cut up that they would become infected and need surgery. Once the breasts were infected enough, Perl would find herself ordered to operate on the women, often without the benefit of anesthesia. Perl claimed that this act specifically sexually excited Grese, although this is not fully substantiated, as Perl never then goes into detail. Daniel Patrick Brown discusses on page 48 of his book, *The Beautiful Beast*, that Grese also "invented" ways to medically torture patients, even though she did not possess a medical license and thus did not have the "qualifications" to "operate." Brown cites an example in the form of a testimony in which the victim states Grese would pick out pregnant women, wait for them to near labor and then tie their legs together while sitting and watching (with pleasure) the pain that transpired.

¹¹ Daniel Patrick Brown, *The Beautiful Beast: The Life and Crimes of SS Aufseherin Irma Grese* (Los Angeles: Golden West Historical Publications, 2004), 48.

¹² Gisella Perl *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz* (New York: International Universities Press, 1948), 61

Brown also states that Irma Grese's conjectured relationship with Mengele came to an end when he found out about her bisexual love affairs. He was, evidently, so disgusted by her homosexual activity that he decided not to continue the affair with Grese.¹³ Whether or not the two did carry on an affair will remain a historical mystery until documents or more information comes to light to prove it did, indeed, transpire. While several attest to gossip and body language that may have suggested an affair, it is difficult to use that as a definite conclusion. Clearly, the two spent quite a bit of time together during their work and are both regarded in the annals of history for their dual nature of good looks and perverse nature, making them both almost larger than life. To that respect, it would make sense that whatever the nature of their relationship, romantic or otherwise, writers, artists and perhaps some sentimental historians would want to link them together romantically. After all, it does make for some interesting historical drama.

Other claims include those that Grese's sexual veracity did catch up with her. Dr. Gisella Perl evidently states in her memoirs *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz* (the book is currently out of print and all other references to it are direct quotes from other studies in which the book is used), that she was forced to perform an abortion on Irma Grese . The story is "retold" in the form of a dramatization in the film *Out of the Ashes*, which ultimately deals with Dr. Perl's immigration to the United States after the war. The scene is depicted that Grese has become pregnant (although there is never any mention of who the father is; SS prisoner or otherwise) and calls Dr.

¹³ Daniel Patrick Brown, *The Beautiful Beast: The Life and Crimes of SS Aufseherin Irma Grese* (Los Angeles: Golden West Historical Publications, 2004), 48.

Perl to help "take care of it." In the scene, Irma Grese worries quite a bit about the pain of the abortion, the character of Grese even going so far as to say, "I can't stand any pain." According to Perl's account, Grese ordered her to perform the abortion at gunpoint, first complimenting her on her skills as a doctor (Perl was a well known gynecologist from Sighet prior to the outbreak of World War II) and telling her that it is "a shame [Perl] has to die."¹⁴ Whether or not this scene happened verbatim (as by this point it has been deluded from memory and then reinterpreted by an artist who has not consulted with Perl), it still contributes to the unsubstantiated claims and aura that surrounds Irma Grese and paints her as promiscuous, yet uncaring. Obviously, no one will ever know if Grese told Perl that she cannot stand pain, however the line could have come from the claim made by Irma's sister Helene during the Belsen Trials. At that time, Helene stated that she had always known her sister to be meek and never having the courage to stand up to anyone who pushed her around as a child.¹⁵ While this abortion story is certainly fascinating, there are unfortunately no other witnesses to corroborate it and it was never even touched upon during The Belsen Trial. Sadly, when searching for information about this incident, much of the write-ups about it were those that were attempting to defend Irma Grese as a victim of lies and claim Dr. Gisella Perl made up the story in order to glean money from it. As Perl was a well-known gynecologist before the war, and has stated that Grese respected her work, it is likely that Grese would have asked Perl to "take care" of her situation.

¹⁴ *Out of the Ashes*, Dir. Joseph Sargeant, Ardent Productions, 2003

¹⁵ Raymond Phillips, *The Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-Four Others* (Glasgow: William Hodge and Company, 1949), 260.

Irma Grese's legacy has continued on in rather unique ways since her death in 1945. She was the youngest SS officer to be executed for her war crimes, and the crimes she was charged with were ultimately only those dealing with her violence and not her sexual abuse, nor her role in experimentation. Her physical stance during the court proceedings during the Belsen Trial later provided fodder for more rumors, namely that she was unaffected by the abuse she had inflicted and felt no remorse. At the time, reporters commented on her stone-cold stare and the way she glared at both former prisoners and prosecutors alike. She was even nicknamed "Jutjaw" by the British soldiers who guarded her in her cell. It is also noted that Grese spent a large amount of time scribbling in a notepad during her trial and at one point covered her mouth to suppress a laugh during a defendant's testimony. Grese, along with the two other females accused of war crimes, Isle Loethe and Herta Ehlert, laughed brazenly during a witness testimony.¹⁶ Although Grese never expressed remorse, at least that was documented, it can be argued that this wonton behavior in the courtroom helped perpetuate the rumors that Grese was an intolerant, dangerous monster. These claims of a lack of remorse may or may not be true, however, the issue lies in the fact that there is no hard evidence that can make the claims undoubtedly true or false.

While Grese remains an under-researched figure, there is no doubt that she continues to attract attention. Because of her impressive looks, sadistic nature and stories of an unquenchable sexual (albeit sadistically sexual) appetite, Grese has

¹⁶ Daniel Patrick Brown, *The Beautiful Beast: The Life and Crimes of SS Aufseherin Irma Grese* (Los Angeles: Golden West Historical Publications, 2004), 70-77.

been the inspiration for a variety of Nazi exploitation films in the 1970s. These films are both violent and pornographic in nature and often combine several stories of female SS officers into one narrative. They usually also include "chop-shop" scenes from fictional SS experiments. For example, one of the most "popular" of these films contends to be *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS*, which no doubt plays upon Ilse Koch's name as well as the legacy of Irma Grese.

Whether or not many of these stories of Grese's nature are true, it is obvious that Grese was quite a violent and depraved woman. However, much more research about her life and these claims that do not have to do with her violence will need to take place in order to fully place her in the context of history.

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