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# Fräulein's 'help my baby' plea to future Queen

Christopher Goodwin, Berlin Published: 8 March 2015



Elizabeth with Prince Charles in 1948, the year she received a letter from Germany asking for help (Alamy)

A REMARKABLE letter has come to light that was written by a young German woman to the future Queen pleading for help raising her baby after the father, a sailor from Glasgow serving with the victorious allied forces after the Second World War, was sent home.

The poignant letter from one young mother to another — the then Princess Elizabeth, 21, had just given birth to Prince Charles — highlights the plight of many German women in the aftermath of the war, a theme thrust under the spotlight by two new books about the darker side of the allied occupation.

In a letter addressed to Buckingham Palace, Eva Erkner, 23, told the princess she had been unable to contact William Gardiner, 25, the father of “our little baby girl Ramona” after he had been sent home in 1947.

The child had “had to stay in hospital for a long time and now I don’t know how to earn enough money to live on . . . I have no property”, she wrote.

“The German authorities don’t help me, the English authorities don’t help me either. That’s why I most respectfully dare to ask Your Royal Highness for help in this distressed condition.”

The princess appears to have been touched by Erkner’s plight. Margaret Hay, her lady-in-waiting, replied that “this is not a matter in which Her Royal Highness can give any assistance”, but Erkner’s letter was passed to the civilian authority in charge of British-occupied Germany with a covering note asking whether anything could be done.

Erckner’s letter was unearthed in the National Archives at Kew by the historians Silke Satjukow and Rainer Gries, the authors of *Bastards: The Children of Occupation in Germany after 1945*, which claims that 400,000 German women had children with allied soldiers.

Another book, *When the Soldiers Came*, claims a large number of those births may have been the result of rape. Miriam Gebhardt, an author and academic, estimates British troops may have committed 30,000 rapes at the end of the war and American soldiers 190,000, many more than has previously been suggested.

Whether their children were the result of rape or not, the mothers suffered horribly.

“These mothers and their children were stigmatised and suffered discrimination from the time of the birth on,” said Gries. “They were the children of the enemy.”

There were enormous obstacles in the path of relationships between British soldiers and German women at the end of the war. Until September 1945 all “fraternisation with the enemy” was banned and intermarriage was forbidden until 1946. Even then, soldiers had to apply for permission from commanding officers to marry Germans. Approval took months. By then the soldiers were likely to have been sent home.

British and US occupation authorities refused any help to German mothers of children fathered by their troops. “Pregnant frauleins are warned!” was the headline of an article in *Stars and Stripes*, the US military newspaper: “Girls who are expecting a child fathered by an American soldier will be provided with no assistance by the American army.”

Until 1955 the Allied High Commission for Germany forbade “proceedings to establish paternity or liability for the maintenance of children”. This was partly because the occupation authorities did not want to dole out money for thousands of children and also because the authorities knew that a significant number of births were the result of rape by allied troops.

Gries said: “The British military government argued that if we accept publicly that we did this — that we are responsible for rapes, that we are responsible for these children — then this will be an argument the Soviets can use against us for propaganda. So they tried to keep it hidden.”

It has always been known that British and US troops raped German women after occupying the country. One British Army chaplain reported at the time that there was “a good deal of rape going on”. He added that “those who suffer have probably deserved it”.

Although some experts on the period have suggested Gebhardt’s figures may overstate the number of rapes, she has insisted her book “is not about accusing the allies, but about revising a very one-sided view that only Soviet soldiers were involved in rapes”. It is widely believed that Soviet troops committed as many as 2m rapes at the end of the war.

According to Gebhardt, rape was covered up or ignored by the allied prosecuting authorities. Germans may have played a role, too, in suppressing discussion of the issue.

She said: “Germans have had an understandable problem addressing their own victims in the light of the atrocities committed by the Nazis. Also,

loyalty towards the West and especially towards the US was an important reason not to touch on this subject.”

Such sentiments were reflected in the treatment of Erkner. Despite the royal intervention, the British occupation authorities were reluctant to help her. They suggested the baby’s father had the primary responsibility, and if he would not help then the German authorities were responsible.

It is not known what happened to her or, as Gries puts it, “if Ramona ever found out that once upon a time her mother wrote to a princess”.

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