

GERLINDA  
SWILLEN

# koekoekskind

DOOR DE  
VIJAND  
VERWEKT  
[1940-1945]

# Koekoekskind door de vijand verwekt ("Cuckoo child conceived by the enemy") Gerlinda Swillen

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Reviewed by Thomas Dirven

*"Do you know the difference between a swallow and a Wehrmacht soldier? Well, a swallow takes his young with him, a Wehrmacht soldier leaves them behind!" (p. 83)*

This book tells the story of the WWII children born from German soldiers and young Belgian mothers during the German occupation. As one German soldier's father said to his newly discovered daughter "Du bist ein Kuckucksei", referring to the fact that cuckoos lay their eggs in nests of other bird species. Generally, these children were neither recognized nor accepted by their fathers and very often despised and humiliated by their mothers. Therefore, it is not astonishing that these children, while growing up, did not want to make their hidden and negated origin public. Quite the contrary, they kept it a secret for decades and decades. This was not the case in other neighbouring countries such as France, Holland, ... Why? In what way was the Belgian situation different?

Swillen states that in other countries a number of books has been published on this matter. In Belgium, however, this book is the first study on the matter. The author is a cuckoo child herself and has found the great courage to give up her anonymous origin and contacted about 70 other children of foreign military parents in Belgium.

Surprisingly enough, the first women to respond to her enquiry were not Flemish (Dutch speaking), but French speaking, living in Wallonia and Brussels. This was surprising because of the complicated Belgian linguistic and cultural situation in Dutch speaking Flanders, where strong collaboration with the German occupier took place and a full recognition of this collaboration was given after the war. All the war archives were opened and accessed by Flemish scholars. Because of this, various PhD theses and books were devoted to this collaboration. While Wallonia and Brussels suffered

from negationism, they acted as if there was no collaboration during the war. Up till now, the war archives in Brussels and Wallonia are still not accessible, let alone used for academic research.

As a result, this book contains more than one surprise in its rich documentation of the relations between German troops and the Belgian female population. Only very few women were raped by the German soldiers but there was a whole series of motivations for poorer and lonely women, suffering from hunger and a lack of human warmth, to have sexual intercourse with Germans and to give birth to cuckoo children.

The main value of this book and of similar books in other languages, is that it provides testimonies of the circumstances in which these children were raised and put into boarding houses, where they often completely alienated from their mothers and other members of their family.

The author proposes a very particular way of researching this issue: Alongside the traditional historical research based on documents and objects, it's also very interesting to gather as many oral testimonies as possible about the greatest events in recent history. This may seem quite similar to the normal research approach, but it's not. Her idea is to start from several individual experiences, to understand the bigger picture. She calls this practical historical research, which must still find its way into a global approach to historical study, although she's certainly not the first one to encourage this way of historical research. Steven Spielberg for example encouraged this method too, while collecting testimonies for his Shoah Foundation.

Apart from the 70 women and men the author interviewed, there are still a couple of 1000 'hidden victims' alive, so there is still a lot of work to do. Hopefully her book will persuade many people to raise their voices and to contribute to a more correct picture of the past.

The challenge for any author collecting oral historical material is to find a way to organize it. Roughly speaking there are two possibilities: either a biographical organization by presenting the different accounts one by one or a thematic approach, which structures the work by the topics dealt with, i.e. to place testimonies with similar elements or subjects in the same chapter. The author chose the latter. Some of the chapter's themes are for example: the falling in love between the mother and the soldier, the feeling of imprisonment while staying in catholic or boarding schools, child abuse by so-called professional educators, loss of national identity, search for their parents' and their own identity, etc.

The advantage of this method is that we can get a view on people's situations. The disadvantage is that the children concerned do not get a real face and personality, but only the naked facts experienced by the person are revealed. On top of that, Swillen's decision to use pseudonyms to safeguard the privacy of her interviewees, contributes to the distance between the testimonies and the reader. This passage gives a good impression:

*“Hélène B. was born in Torhout, just as Monika C. in Flénu or Rudi D. in the farm in Cipllet and Irmgard G. in Loksbergen, or as Rosa V. in Leopoldburg and Edwige H. in Frameries, or Mylène P. in a hotel room in Luxemburg.”*

Only in the very last part of the book we get somewhat longer story fragments. Therefore, it is also the most catching part of the book. I personally hope that many other Gerlinda Swillens will stand up and tell their life stories, only then she will have reached her goal, namely to lay the first foundations of the historical research of this unexplored and forgotten piece of Belgian history.