



A Perpetrator's Confession: Gender and Religion in Oswald Pohl's Conversion Narrative

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Ideally, Christian confessional writings are a public testimony, in which a sinner exposes his shameful past to others, namely to God and the public, so that a reconciliation and transformation can occur. This article pursues the question of whether genocidal perpetrators are capable of such a confession, using the example of Oswald Pohl's conversion narrative, Credo: My Path to God. Pohl had overseen the economic exploitation of slave laborers in the Nazi concentration camps. While in Allied imprisonment after the war, he converted to Catholicism. This article analyzes Credo's religious and gendered rhetoric within the larger political discourse of postwar Germany. Commenting on the conspicuous absence of women in Pohl's confessional testimony, I argue that religion assisted in negotiating a crisis of postwar German masculinity.

On February 12, 1950, in the American War Crime Prison of Landsberg (Bavaria), the former Nazi leader Oswald Pohl officially converted to Catholicism. Shortly after his conversion, he published *Credo: Mein Weg zu Gott* (Credo: My Path to God), a small booklet containing his public confession. In this largely apologetic text, Pohl presents himself as a new man, who, purged of his sins, has received God's grace. In this article, I will take a closer look at select aspects of this confessional narrative. I will pay attention specifically to the interplay of religious and gendered rhetoric, which assisted in the attempt at normalizing a National Socialist (NS)-perpetrator and at portraying Pohl as a decent human being. The essay will proceed in three steps: After a short biographical sketch, I will first show that it took the collaborative effort of the accused Pohl and his Catholic prison chaplain to turn a religious conversion into a public testimony of a Nazi perpetrator; second, I argue that the absence of women in *Credo* is not coincidental but a central element of confessional writings in which men try to take account of their past selves; third, I will suggest that the religious rhetoric of *Credo* negotiates a crisis of postwar German masculinity.

Pohl and his Credo

Born in 1892 into a Protestant family, Pohl grew up in a home of "true religiosity" following the "evangelical-reformed faith tradition" (Pohl, 1950, p. 17). As a member of the National Socialist movement, he joined the SS in 1934 through the recruitment efforts of Heinrich Himmler, who had been impressed by Pohl's

administrative and organizational skills. Pohl soon moved up and became the head of the WVHA, the Reich's Economic-Administrative Main Office. He was responsible for organizing the industrial production within the concentration camp system, building and supervising a complex administrative web between the SS, the armament industry and private firms (see Allen, 2000; 2002; Schulte, 2001). Between 1942 and 1945, Pohl oversaw the entire workforce of concentration camp inmates, including the economic utilization of personal possessions of the exterminated Jews, such as their clothing, gold teeth and hair. Arrested in 1946, he was sentenced to death at the Nuremberg trials in 1947. After several failed appeals for clemency, he was executed by the Americans in the Landsberg prison on June 7, 1951, among the last seven Nazi war criminals hanged by the American military.¹

In the summer of 1950, shortly after his conversion to Catholicism and before his execution by the Allies, Pohl wrote *Credo*. Among accused Nazi war criminals, it was not uncommon after 1945 to (re-)convert to Christianity or to renew their church membership while in Allied captivity. But rarely did anyone *publicly* repent. *Credo*, as a public confession and conversion story of a high-ranking Nazi perpetrator, is the exception to the rule. Nine thousand copies of this 75-page booklet were printed with the imprimatur of the Catholic Church in Munich.

On the surface, *Credo*, which is arranged in four chapters, is a political document that puts a conversion story into the service of reintegrating a perpetrator into postwar German society. For this reason, *Credo* has not sustained much attention in the scholarly community, and the few times it is briefly mentioned by historians, it is treated as a document without much historical value. *Credo*, however, is also a religious document that appropriates a Christian convention to address the question of German guilt. Its peculiar blend of religious, political and gendered rhetoric, which veils a perpetrator's culpability, has not yet been analyzed.²

In terms of Christian conventions, *Credo* seems to satisfy the postwar German churches' ambition to successfully re-convert a lost sheep among Nazi perpetrators, and it had the potential of becoming a popular devotional booklet. In general, within the spiritual economy of redemption, the person most to gain from a confession is the one furthest removed from God. The more abusive the power and pride of the former self, the more humbling the process of recovery of the new self. Since the dramatic suspense of a conversion story is based upon the assumption that public confessions are agonizing processes into which people are drawn by an irresistible force, *Credo* as the testimony of a high-ranking Nazi perpetrator seemed to fit the bill of an extraordinary conversion drama.

Instead, it failed. Why? First, if one of *Credo's* aims was the political reintegration of a NS-perpetrator into postwar Germany, it did not succeed: Pohl's life was not spared despite *Credo's* moral attempt at normalizing him and at portraying him as a spiritually cleansed man not guilty of the charges brought against him by the Allied court. Second, due to its stilted and conventional style, *Credo* did not capture a wider popular imagination at the time of its publication, and today it remains largely unknown outside of a circle of specialized historians. Lastly, despite *Credo's* deliberately suggestive links to Augustine's masterful *Confessions*, the booklet does not measure up to the task of self-reflecting disclosure that the genre of Christian confessional writings exerts on sinners. As a male perpetrator, Pohl does

not open himself up to public moral scrutiny but, instead, engages in a discourse of evasions. *Credo*, I suggest, must be read as a testimony of a Nazi perpetrator employing the Christian confessional form during a transitional moment of Germany's restoration period.³

A Public Testimony: Pohl and his Hagiographer

Pohl describes the crucial moment of his religious transformation in the following words: "I was shaken to the depth of my soul. My eyes were able to see with more clarity than before: They gazed into a new world. Before my inner face, something marvelous passed by. *Credo!*" (*Credo*, p. 53).⁴ This is the measured rhetoric of a conversion story typical of the Christian confessional form. The soul is in profound crisis and compelled to undergo a radical transformation; as a result, the sinner discovers with unambiguous clarity the essence of what truly counts in the world—true faith in the love of God. Similarly, Augustine deplors the state of his soul in his *Confessions*: "Such was my heart, O God, such was my heart. You had pity on it when it was at the bottom of the abyss ... With your word, you pierced my heart, and I loved you" (2.4.9; 10.6.8).⁵ Taking his cues from Augustine's confessional narrative, Pohl writes:

The moment of transformation filled me with an ardent love. It is love that counts. Indeed, love is the essence and main objective of Christianity. Everything else is only a means to an end. Sermons and the gospels, sacraments, fasting and praying—all of them are meant to educate us towards love, to kindle love within us, to nourish, complete, strengthen, purify and fortify love: the true love for God and our neighbors (*Credo*, pp. 57-58).

Oswald Pohl is credited as sole author of *Credo*, but it is fairly certain that he did not write *Credo* by himself, but must have received active help from Karl Morgenschweis, the official Catholic prison chaplain of Landsberg and fellow German, who initiated Pohl into the Catholic faith.⁶ A linguistic analysis of the text reveals drastic stylistic differences. For example, in the fourth chapter we read about the spiritual nature of humans:

The more a person knows about himself, or thinks he knows about himself, the more he disappears to himself as a unified whole and clearly definable entity ... Herein lies the deepest meaning and the greatest riches of salvation: to lift up the rationally endowed creature [*Geschöpf*] from the infinite distance of his ontological powerlessness [*Seinsohnmacht*] and from the abysmal forlornness of his sin to divine vitality, and thereby enable him to join in the work of salvation. (*Credo*, pp. 53, 65)

It is unlikely that Pohl's theologically untrained, thoroughly nationalistic and bureaucratic mind could have penned those sentences. Elsewhere in *Credo*, a cruder and remarkably different understanding of Christianity emerges, which mirrors more closely Pohl's soldierly mind. He ponders, for example, the "totalitarian claim" of Christ's teachings (p. 19), portrays his awakening to the Catholic faith as a "frontal

breakthrough" (*Frontaldurchbruch*), and speaks of the "new armor of faith" that helped him in his "battles" with doubt (p. 58). "After all, no one will blame an old soldier for being highly impressed by the strong love of order and authoritative leadership of the Catholic Church by which it distinguishes itself from all other Christian denominations: Order, unity, leadership and obedience all rest in the sphere of the military" (p. 60). The difference between these passages is striking and only a most credulous reader could claim that *Credo's* ornate theological constructions were authored by Pohl himself.

As prison chaplain, Morgenschweis is Pohl's hagiographer, whose task it is to normalize the extraordinary evil of a Nazi perpetrator by humanizing and Christianizing him.⁷ In his six-page Preface, which is an integral part of *Credo*, Morgenschweis identifies the booklet as an exemplary conversion/confession story. He establishes a theological and ideological framework that directs the reader's gaze rather forcefully to a partisan interpretation. Morgenschweis describes Pohl as a confessing sinner, "a man full of energy, willpower and vigor." He is a military "officer from top to toe," a man of a "highly cultured mind and heart [*hohe Geistesbildung und Herzensbildung*], upright, honest and truthful." "Pohl," Morgenschweis reports, "lives like a monk in his cell, in prayer and sacrifice and where, whenever possible, he works and studies." He is a man "filled with the ardent love of Christ," who, as a new convert, has "entirely succumbed to God" and awaits "his fate" with calm composure. His poise is "testimony" to his "*Haltung*" (attitude),⁸ "which is the fruit of his total inner conversion to God and his homecoming to the Catholic Church" (*Credo*, p. 12f).

The saintly qualities ascribed to Pohl by Morgenschweis do not reside in any past miraculous deeds but in his present ordinariness. As hagiographer, Morgenschweis has to convince his audience that the true miracle of Pohl's conversion is his human decency, in spite of the Allied trial at Nuremberg that condemned him to death. "As priest and pastoral counselor," Morgenschweis argues, "I have the holy duty to portray Pohl in just the way as I have seen him as his spiritual father and soul-guide in the several years of direct intercourse [*Verkehr*] with him" (*Credo*, p. 12f). Morgenschweis portrays Pohl as his spiritually intimate Other. The term "intercourse" (translated literally but correctly from the German *Verkehr*⁹) offers a linguistic clue for the intimacy of the devout exchange between confessor and confessant, between spiritual father and prodigal son, hagiographer and saint.

Because of the textually symbiotic relationship between Pohl as confessant and Morgenschweis as his confessor-cum-hagiographer, *Credo* must be approached as the creative product of confessional conversations between these two men. Oswald Pohl probably hoped for clemency leading to his eventual release and social reintegration. This hope was not far-fetched, given how persistently the Protestant and Catholic churches in postwar Germany kept appealing to the Allied forces to grant political amnesty to Nazi war criminals.¹⁰ Likewise, Morgenschweis must have hoped for clemency as well. He, too, wished to see his prodigal son reintegrated into German society. To this effect he kept defending Pohl's reputation even long after his execution, claiming that only false accusations had brought him to the gallows. Pohl "was not responsible for the concentration camps and the annihilation of Jews," Morgenschweis is reported to have said in 1965.¹¹ In addition, Morgenschweis

probably hoped to promote Catholic faith and to reinforce the claim that the churches have always kept their moral integrity, even in times of corrupt and corruptible secular powers, of which Nazism was as much a bad instance as communism and modernism.¹²

What *Credo* presents, then, is a truth that these two men consented to, and they felt confident enough to share it with the public. Indeed, Morgenschweis is very conscious of publicity, and in the opening page of his Preface he acknowledges that Pohl's actual *Bekehrung* [conversion] —before *Credo* was written— “caused a great sensation in the *public*,” and he expects that the now available written conversion story [*Bekehrungsgeschichte*] will also “cause a great sensation.” Morgenschweis states that Pohl wanted to use “this writing to make *public* his acceptance into the Catholic Church,” “to renounce *publicly* his previous religious and ideological profession [*Bekenntnis*]” and “to declare *publicly* his belief [*Bekenntnis*] in the Catholic Church” (*Credo*, p. 9; emphasis B.K.).¹³ The prison chaplain insists from the very beginning on two important points: that *Credo* belongs to the tradition of conversion narratives [*Bekehrung*] and that, as a confession [*Bekenntnis*], it is truly a public testimony.





Morgenschweis' main task, then, is to correctly frame the experience of the repentant sinner, and he does so theologically through the form of a conversion miracle and, politically, through a normalizing discourse that trivializes guilt. In the 1950s, postwar West Germans felt they were ready to move on with their lives, yet they needed to figure out how to integrate their totalitarian and genocidal past with the current democratic and economic reconstruction efforts (cf. Schwarz, 1989). Especially vexing was the problem of the personal guilt of individual Germans (see Jaspers, 1947; Frei, 1999). How should a democratic society handle the thousands of people who had been active perpetrators or complicit in genocidal crimes? These people were, after all, colleagues, teachers, peers, friends, neighbors and family members. Morgenschweis and Pohl knew they had to address this issue. But they carefully avoided any admittance of severe wrongdoing. Although *Credo* does not deny that Pohl held a high position in the NS-regime, he is never called a perpetrator, and the crimes for which he was sentenced to death are not mentioned. What *Credo* tries to foreground, instead, is Pohl's faith-induced tranquility. Shortly before his execution, Pohl received an apostolic benediction from the Pope (though somewhat by accident).¹⁴ As a man, he is portrayed as the national embodiment of a denazified but still conservative morality geared toward normalizing Germany's place among the nations.

Male Affections: Of Absent Wives and Mothers

In 1942, Pohl married his second wife, Eleonore von Brüning, who, given her biography, must have been as convinced a Nazi as her husband (see Koch, 1988, pp. 83-91). Heinrich Himmler had a not so inconsequential hand in bringing Oswald and Eleonore together, and their marriage ceremony took place in Himmler's military quarters in East Prussia (Schulte, 2001, p. 40). Eleonore stood by her husband's side after his arrest. The forty-one-year-old Eleonore, writes Schmitz-Köster (2007), is “determined to remain loyal to Pohl ... He is her husband, and she would never betray ‘a German soldier.’ She writes this line in her notes during the first postwar year” (p. 158).

Eleonore contributed four drawings to *Credo*, each of them illustrating a major theme of the four chapters that follow Morgenschweis' Preface. Three of these black-and-white drawings present a pensive male figure (presumably representing Pohl), deeply immersed in contemplation. The first shows a young male figure in Navy uniform bending his head before crosses marking the burial sites of German soldiers on an island in the Pacific Ocean.¹⁵ It illustrates in visually-condensed form the emotional theme of chapter 1, which is titled: "Protestant Youth and Years of Travel." In it, Pohl traces his Protestant upbringing within the context of the Great War of 1914-1918. With sentimental simplicity, he asks large religious questions about God and Christianity ("How can Christianity claim to be the only true and hence redemptive religion on this earth? ... Who, after all, is Christ?" [*Credo*, p. 18f]). The chapter is organized around the juxtaposition of powers that had guided him in his childhood (God, the Bible, his mother's piety) and the distress he experienced as a young man returning from the war in 1919: skepticism, religious dissatisfaction, and a growing distance from Christianity.

Eleonore's next drawing illustrates the title and theme of chapter 2, "Between Faith and Disbelief." Here, we see a stylized figure, a silhouette, standing uneasily on a path that seems to pull him back to the sword and books on the bottom half of the picture, but also drawing him to the sun and heavenly planets on the top half (the sun, we assume, symbolizing spiritually-charged hope; note, though, that the sun was also a Nazi symbol for the reawakening of the German nation). Pohl is caught between different ideologies and beliefs. In this chapter, Pohl gives an account of his professional career in the SS. He does not hide the fact that he had supported National Socialism from early on, but portrays himself as a task-oriented man of the military ("*Berufssoldat*") who was "politically untrained and inexperienced" (*Credo*, p. 29). He tries to establish a sense of respectability by taking, on the one hand, responsibility for his career choices and, on the other, trying to present himself without blame in regard to the murderous NS-policies. Religious discourse helps him to perform this straddling act. His career decision to join the SS is embedded in a discussion about the tension between faith in the Christian God and in the Nazi "*Gottgläubigkeit*" (God-Believers; p. 30f), the term Nazis, and especially the SS, adopted to indicate their religious classification after leaving the churches. Pohl left the Protestant church in 1936.¹⁶ He claims that the category *gottgläubig* was just a formality for his personnel files: "True religious feeling, when it saturated a person, did not suffocate even underneath the black uniform [of the SS]" (*Credo*, p. 34).

 <p>PROTESTANTISCHE JUGEND UND WANDERJAHRE</p>	 <p>ZWISCHEN GLAUBEN UND UNGLAUBEN</p>
<p>Chapter 1: "Protestant Youth and Years of Travel"</p>	<p>Chapter 2: "Between Faith and Disbelief"</p>
 <p>ZURÜCK ZU GOTTE</p>	 <p>IM SCHOSS DER ALLEINSELIG- MACHENDEN KATHOLISCHEN KIRCHE</p>
<p>Chapter 3: "Return to God"</p>	<p>Chapter 4: "In the Bosom of the True Catholic Church"</p>

In her third drawing for the chapter, "Return to God," Eleonore assumes the perspective of someone peeking into a dark and empty prison cell. There, a figure on a plank bed is holding his head in his hands. Eleonore framed the whole picture by a thorny wreath decorated with one small rose bud—no doubt a symbolic representation of the rosary and possibly Christ's crown of thorns. In this chapter, Pohl—now a prisoner in Landsberg—wonders aloud about the extent of his guilt, but never admits having played an instrumental role in the extermination of Jews. The chapter opens with the ominous sentence, "Then came the atrocious year of 1945"—a frighteningly remarkable opening line if one realizes that Pohl refers to his captivity after the war but says nothing about the victims of Nazi terror or about his brutal policy of the industrial utilization of concentration camp inmates. After the collapse of Nazi Germany, Pohl sees himself as a victim of the victor's justice of the Allied forces. He admits that he feels partially responsible for the "moral morass" (*Credo*, p. 42) and "moral failure" (p. 45) of the Nazi ideology, but maintains that he is personally innocent of any crimes. "I had never beaten anyone to death," he writes, "nor did I encourage others to do so" (p. 43).

Eleonore's fourth drawing is less literal and plays with Catholic religious imagery. She depicts a pastoral setting of a shepherd in a black habit surrounded by a flock of sheep and cradling a lamb in his arms—a metaphoric rendition of the last chapter's title, "In the Bosom of the True Catholic Church." Here, Pohl describes his spiritual homecoming. The longest of the four chapters, it is the least autobiographical. It is a pastiche of moralizing proclamations, Catholic dogma, theological citations (especially of Catholic theologian Karl Adam)¹⁷ and religious trifle. Pohl's autobiographical insertions no longer dwell on the past but are very much in the present, centering on the official conversion, the moment when "I made my life's confession to our prison chaplain ... and experienced the zenith of my life" (*Credo*, p. 66). Pohl presents himself purified, calm and resigned. He is beyond the passions and follies of this world and has put his trust entirely into the Catholic Church and God. The famous line from the opening of Augustine's *Confessions* is deliberately placed in the text, "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (p. 69).¹⁸ A little later, in another conscious reference to the confessional tradition with its dual nature of confessing sins and praising God, the chapter's very last words read, "Te Deum laudamus" —God, we praise you (p. 70).

Together, these chapters do not constitute a memoir but an account of Pohl's religious and moral self-questioning through a mélange of select autobiographical details, theological and political musings and various citations of Catholic authorities. The scant literary value of the text corresponds well to the pathos-filled aesthetics of Eleonore's drawings, which bear traces of the "naturalist, idyllic style" of Nazi aesthetics (Schmitz-Köster, 2007, p. 43). They are the product of a commercial designer with a personal and ideological agenda. The lack of artistic merit, however, is compensated by Eleonore's ability of distillation, condensing visually the psychodynamics of *Credo's* religious-political rhetoric. Her illustrations are significant nevertheless, because they reinforce *Credo's* core sentiment: Pohl is to be imagined as a lonely, contemplative and decent man, whose soul does not find peace until it rests in God.

Nowhere in *Credo* is Eleonore credited as the illustrator,¹⁹ which is all the more surprising if one recalls how loyal she remained to Pohl after the war and also learns that she was trained as a graphic designer. Her own biography is anything but uncomplicated. Born in 1904 to Richard Holtz and Hedwig Müller, Eleonore's father died shortly after her birth. After some schooling in housekeeping and stenography, she arrived in Berlin at the age of 17 and eventually got a secretarial position at the Walter de Gruyter publishing house, where she later worked as a graphic designer. Shortly after starting her formal education at the Hamburg school of arts and crafts, she met her first husband Karl Mass (fifteen years her senior); in 1933, she married her second husband Rüter von Brüning (twenty-eight years her senior). After the birth of her second child, von Brüning died. A love affair with Ludwig Gniss led to yet another pregnancy, but after the break-up, Eleonore decided to give birth to her third child, Heilwig, in a home of the *Lebensborn*, a SS-organization for "Aryan" mothers of "pure blood." She also joined the NSDAP (the National Socialist German Workers' Party) in 1937, where she eventually met Oswald Pohl (see Schmitz-Köster, 2007; for the *Lebensborn*, see Lilienthal, 2003).

Not a word about her life is found in *Credo*. Not credited as an artist, she also disappears as a wife in this confessional text. She is entirely absent. And so are all the other intimate “others” of Pohl. His father is as absent as are his seven siblings. His children are not mentioned in *Credo*, and neither is his first (divorced) wife. Constructed as a man’s spiritual self-examination, *Credo* leaves no room for any private talk about relatives.

Since *Credo* is not an autobiography, the nonappearance of his family members is not entirely unwarranted. However, there are many reasons why at least his children and his wives would have deserved an appearance in the text, not least because all of them had helped Pohl to survive in hiding after the war for over a year. After his arrest on May 27, 1946, Pohl kept in contact with them as much as possible under prison restrictions; Eleonore must have felt especially close to him, given her drawings that visualize well the gendered and religious rhetoric of the text.

The total absence of intimate others in *Credo*, especially of his former and current wives, calls for some explanation. The nonappearance may, on one level, simply demonstrate that male confessional writings generally resist the incorporation of women (in the *Confessions*, for example, Augustine’s new Christian self can be born again only through the displacement of all real women, especially sexually active women). Women are perceived as disrupting a man’s immersion in spiritual self-examination. Because they embody the realm of the trivial—that is, of home and bed, both of which obstruct the spiritual sphere the confessing man seeks to enter—women are omitted or relegated to the margins of a text.

On another level, it is conceivable that Morgenschweis, too, had an interest in silencing Pohl’s wives since the divorce and second marriage rubbed against Catholic moral teachings. Rather than complicate the image of a true Catholic convert, it seemed easier not to open this can of worms. After all, at the time of the writing of *Credo*, the German churches tried to curb what they perceived as the sexual licentiousness of the Nazi era and of the immediate postwar years. “In the early to mid-1950s,” Dagmar Herzog (2005) observes, “an abrupt shift toward far greater sexual conservatism” occurred in West Germany, spearheaded by the Protestant and Catholic churches, with “Christian spokespersons often present[ing] sexual propriety as the cure for the nation’s larger moral crisis” (pp. 101, 73). In such climate, Morgenschweis would have been ill-advised to shout from the rooftops improper sexual behavior of his spiritual client, especially since Pohl had no inclination to annul his marriage to Eleonore, which he had entered under the banner of Nazi *Gottgläubigkeit* rather than the tutelage of the church.

Given the complete textual absence of his wives and other intimate others, it is all the more astounding that one woman is repeatedly acknowledged: Pohl’s pious mother. Since no other family member and intimate other is inserted into the conversion narrative, why does she enjoy such privilege?

It is, for sure, a limited privilege his mother enjoys: She is never called by her name and is painted in a dreadfully monochromatic fashion. She is a “self-sacrificing mother,” who modeled for Pohl an “inner piety” (*Credo*, p. 17); she a “pious mother,” who installed a “religious fervor” in her young son (p. 21); she is a “simple but infinitely caring and pious mother,” who created a “paradise” in his childhood (p. 42). The maternal typology is plain to see: As mother, she is the guarantor of Pohl’s humanness, the paradise from which Pohl was expelled, and the seed (and model) of

piety to which he eventually returns. In her narrative function, she is modeled after Augustine's mother Monica, who similarly represents a steady Christian piety. "From his earliest references [in the *Confessions*]," writes Kim Power (1996), "Monica is the ever present and significant figure who mediates the gifts of God to Augustine" (p. 77). As models for piety, these women are textually bereft of all sexuality. As biological mothers, they are half carnal, half archetypical (see Hawkins, 1990, p. 242). They are harbingers of the eventual arrival and triumph of the ultimate spiritual Mother—the church.

Augustine's *Confessions* are the unacknowledged yet recognizable foil for *Credo*. For example, *Credo*'s first chapter is crudely modeled after the *Confessions* in at least three respects, and Pohl's mother holds a symbolic key in it. First, during his travels with the German Navy, for the first time away from home (and mom), the young Pohl is exposed to the "restless and sinful hustle and bustle of the large Asian ports and trading centers luring with excitement" (*Credo*, p. 17). One recognizes here a reference to Augustine's student years in the Roman-African port of Carthage, where "all around me hissed a cauldron of illicit loves" (3.1.1). Second, Pohl's wavering between his dutiful Bible reading in his youth and the increasingly stronger pull of the Stoics, Voltaire, and Nietzsche emulates Augustine's elaborate philosophical struggles between, on the one hand, his attraction to Neo-Platonism and Manichaeism and, on the other, the superior wisdom found in the Scriptures. Third, Augustine's Monica and Pohl's nameless mother are introduced as representations of a stable piety. They are a measuring rod by which the degree of their sons' moral corruption and distance to God can be determined. At the end of the first chapter, Pohl has abandoned the Protestant piety of his mother and is about to go astray. Appropriately, Pohl concludes the chapter by declaring his existential sense of loss: "I was entirely caught in myself, in the shameful hopelessness of [thinking] that I can handle my inner battles myself" (*Credo*, 23). Similar sentiments of loss of self in contradistinction to maternal piety are expressed throughout Augustine's *Confessions*: "What was my state of mind?" Augustine wonders early on. "It is quite certain that it was utterly shameful and a disgrace to me that I had it" (2.9.17). Later, Augustine writes: "I had departed from myself ... [and] could not even find myself, much less you [God]" (5.2.2). And still later, when already in Milan: "I had no confidence and had lost hope that truth could be found ... [Yet] my mother, strong in her devotion, had already come to join me" (6.1.1).

Whatever one can say about the parallelism of *Credo* and the *Confessions*, we should not forget that the former can never hold a candle to the latter. *Credo* only replicates opportune Augustinian themes, and Pohl as confessing perpetrator is never moved to explore himself in any comparable depth to Augustine's soul searching. The same is true with respect to their mothers: To Pohl, she is no more than a trace, devoid of flesh and blood and personality. She is there to signify the virtues of piety and Bible reading. As such, she stands in contrast with the ills of modern secularism: the Stoics, Voltaire and Nietzsche.²⁰

Without a life of her own, the portrayal of Pohl's mother does not come close to the limited complexity of Augustine's portraiture of Monica. Of course, Monica is also an "idealized figure" (Brown, 1969, p. 164): she is "Augustine's eternally unfinished business" (Burrus, 2004, p. 77) and is "redolent with the imagery ... of Mary," "based on the template of the ideal Roman mother" (Power, 1996, pp. 91,

71). Monica is never fully fleshed out, but late in his *Confessions*, Augustine returns to her portrait: After his own conversion and shortly before her death, he adds a few “rough edges of real life” to it (Paffenroth, 2003, pp. 145). No longer just an exemplary model, Monica is described as somewhat flawed and “deliberately sinful” (Paffenroth, 2003, p. 144). She is “subtly transformed into an ordinary human being,” as Peter Brown (1969) put it, “an object of concern, a sinner like himself, equally in need of mercy” (p. 164). In contrast, Pohl’s portrayal of his nameless mother remains entirely flat and monotone. What remains of her are a few empty and clichéd markers: pious, caring, simple. If Monica is already a trace, then Pohl’s mother is but a trace of a trace.

Neither mother, of course, will have the last word. Both are eventually replaced by a mother far greater than any real woman can embody. In the famous vision at Ostia, after Augustine’s conversion, he and Monica experience a moment of shared spiritual ecstasy. Their shared vision seems to indicate that mother and son are finally on equal footing: Augustine has ascended to the level of maternal piety, while Monica, whose steadfast faith had just been a little unhooked by Augustine’s telling, is exposed as sharing some of her son’s sinful weaknesses. It would be wrong, however, to assume a lasting equality between mother and son. The narrative placement of the Ostia vision suggests that their shared experience is less about a moment of spiritual “equal opportunity” and more about Augustine’s permanent displacement of his mother. Newly converted, Augustine no longer needs Monica’s maternal piety as measurement. “With her goal accomplished,” writes Power (1996), “she literally has no further purpose in life” (p. 89). As bishop of Hippo, *he* now speaks for the church. Monica, the biological mother, has been exchanged for a female *ecclesia*.²¹

Similarly, after Pohl’s conversion, his mother is no longer needed. Halfway through the text, she simply disappears. In the early parts of *Credo*, she embodies a sentimentalized memory of Protestant piety, who must be supplanted the instant her son returns to the bosom of the only true Catholic Church. In the economy of spiritual gift-giving, the Protestant, natural mother is exchanged for the Catholic *ecclesia* as spiritual mother.

Intriguingly, it is only after Pohl’s mother disappears in the text that a strongly gendered image of a male-male intimate exchange surfaces in *Credo*. The gentle and erotically suggestive male-male encounter occurs between Pohl and his prison chaplain. The text purged of his mother (and of other women), Pohl takes on a passive-receptive, feminized role vis-à-vis his relationship to a “forcefully” manly Morgenschweis:

I now opened my heart to the Catholic prison chaplain. Had the eloquently forceful man of God earlier loosened the dried soil of faith through his stirring sermons, he now planted his seeds of divine revelation into the seed-craving land. My whole being changed under his leadership ... [Like] a powerful torrent, the Good News, as taught by the only true Catholic Church, flooded me (*Credo*, p. 49).²²

In the gendered imagery of this sexually charged passage, the chaplain as confessor spiritually inseminates the confessant’s starved but now lubricated soul. The

perpetrator finds himself on the receiving end of this male exchange, the one in need of spiritual impregnation. Pregnant with spirit, he himself “gives birth” to his conversion narrative. More importantly, though, Pohl is not just giving birth but, given his effeminized position, is the one given birth to: he is born again, and the church becomes his new mother, his spiritual mother. She ensures the homecoming of her prodigal son and nourished him at her bosom.

The metaphoric allusions and gender reversals do not yet end. Eleonore’s drawing, after all, renders the “the bosom of the church” as a male shepherd wearing the black habit of a priest. Pohl as (innocent, purified) lamb is cradled in the arms of Morgenschweis, his shepherd. In this male-male embrace, the perpetrator and his hagiographer have created a new family bond that gets by without women. Intuitively (and perhaps enviously), Pohl’s wife Eleonore has captured the sexual-spiritual dynamic of this encounter: it is closed to women. Women have no access to and no place within this world. Biological mothers are no longer needed, just as the presence of any woman would only disrupt the pastoral tranquility of this scene.

Religious Discourse as Remasculinization

The new church teachings were not accepted without some internal resistance on Pohl’s part. After all, to be measured by the standards of a new morality produces anxieties, and Pohl as former head of the WVHA (the Economics and Administrative Department of the SS) is not free of them. He writes:

My fate has taught me something else. The teachings were quite bitter, the methods of the gallows barbaric, but extremely curative. In the purgatory of this extreme dejection I was purified to receive the true faith in God ... The moment of transformation filled me with a longing love. It is love that matters above all (*Credo*, p. 57).

Pohl had been shaken up to some degree by reading his life through the lens of a newly acquired belief system. Certainly, we must assume that his transformation was credible to Morgenschweis, who, after a period of Christian instruction, administered the Eucharistic sacrament and welcomed him into the Catholic Church. Moments of spiritual sincerity must have transpired between Pohl and Morgenschweis to which the reader is not privy. Yet, *Credo* falls short of the demands that the genre of public confessional writing exerts on men. Though *Credo* emulates aspects of the *Confessions*, it never reaches Augustine’s literary and philosophical sophistication. It does not show Pohl to be a man willing to open his heart and soul without reservation. He does not render his sinful self naked to the public eye and, hence, to judgment. Instead, *Credo*’s apologetic discourse seeks to protect its male subject. In this sense, we can say that *Credo* is not an original adaptation of the confessional form in order to account for the extraordinary culpability of a genocidal perpetrator. Rather, it rehearses certain narrative conventions and inserts external markers of the confession tradition in order to persuade readers of the credibility of Pohl’s moral transformation.

On the one hand, the conversion story portrays Pohl as a man rendering himself passive, powerless and victimized. He must let go of his former martial masculinity to be nurtured and spiritually inseminated by his confessor. He is, so to

speak, temporarily “feminized.” In addition, other accused Nazis who shared the same prison routine with Pohl continued to view Christianity as a religion of weaklings, a belief system for unmanly characters.²³ Not by accident does *Credo* report on Pohl’s anxiety over his Christian conversion. In the Preface, Morgenschweis writes that Pohl, as former head of the WVHA, was at risk for being ridiculed among his fellow inmates. Pohl might have feared that he had turned too soft. Yet, he must have also realized that this “softer” self allowed him to portray himself as an ordinary human being. Religious language, in this instance, helped to present a male perpetrator in need of care and compassion—an admission of emotional dependency, which was no small feat for men socialized and politicized in the Great War and its aftermath.²⁴ It is precisely this turn to a feminized passivity—the self-pitying and self-victimization—that allowed Pohl to briefly expose his soul. Through tiny cracks in the manly façade of a (former) perpetrator, small concessions and incomplete confessions slipped through.

The temporary feminization of a male persona had advantages, especially in the early 1950s. The image of a “softer” male self—a suffering man receptive to a new morality—became a ticket for the possibility of clemency and social reintegration. *Credo* plays with these potentialities, even if, at the end, Pohl was not awarded another chance but hanged by the Allies.

On the other hand, religion is more than just a mechanism by which men like Pohl rendered themselves weak and vulnerable. Religion also empowered and re-masculinized them. Ultimately, *Credo* as a confessional narrative does not document a self-critical and self-interrogative soul-searching but an exchange of powers. The authoritative appeal of religious language makes possible not only the distancing from but also the supplanting of one’s old ideological loyalties. In *Credo*, this is explicitly expressed when Pohl pleads for himself that he, as “an old soldier,” can’t be blamed “for being highly impressed by the strong love of order and authoritative leadership of the Catholic Church” (*Credo*, p. 60). The dictatorial NS-ideology is replaced with ecclesiastical supremacy.

After the conversion, Pohl seeks to speak with a new moral authority and new respectability²⁵ invested in him by Morgenschweis and the church. He feels newly empowered to criticize his accusers (the American Allies) as he, at the same time, wants to embody the virtues of humility and tranquility. Beyond the secular goal of social reintegration, religion provided the male self the possibility of renewing masculine morality. Pohl is truly reborn as a new *man*—this, at least, is what the gendered and religious rhetoric tries to convey.

Credo thus exemplifies a discourse specific to perpetrators who are trying to become witnesses to themselves by taking recourse to religious language. Religion helps them to make meaning of their lives within a context of changed power relations. The result is deeply apologetic. Their testimonies straddle a fine line between asserting (masculine) responsibility and (feminized) self-disempowerment. The perpetrators disempower themselves by denying agency for their own culpable actions in the past and by portraying themselves as victims in the present. The passivity and self-pitying that accompanies these presentations amounts to a certain self-feminization—if by “feminization” we understand not a representation of real women but a cultural code that stands in contrast to traditional views of masculinity, to which Pohl like other men from his generational cohort had subscribed before

their arrests. The fine line that is being walked in Pohl's testimony is between holding on to one's masculinity while allowing also a softer version of the male self to emerge.

This new masculine version, however, is largely a masquerade. The *new* man, who finds himself in a disempowered social situation after 1945, continues to cling to power by attempting to replace one ideological loyalty with another. Pohl fell from power as a Nazi leader but now, as a Christian convert, poses as a new man. Only through the textual fissures of his flawed confession do hints of his troubled masculinity break through.

Outside the Allied prison cells, German masculinity was in trouble as well. With the defeat of Germany, with four million German men dead and close to twelve million in POW camps, men generally had difficulties in the postwar period in readjusting and reintegrating into society—a conflict that lasted well into the 1950s (see Schissler 2001b). The lost war, the denazification program and the question of guilt were particularly called upon to explain the deflated sense of the German male, including physical impotence. One German physician wrote in 1947 that “the male gender [was] hit harder in its soul by the lost war than the female,” while a German psychologist reasoned that “the question of guilt” was deeply damaging to marriages (quoted in Herzog, 2005, p. 86f). Denazification was blamed “for the decline in high-quality manliness.” “Strong masculinity was in disrepute,” Herzog remarks, “*both* because of Nazism *and* because of its defeat” (p. 97; emphasis in original). In one word: the “straight male egos needed boosting” (p. 97).

This crisis must have been felt even more strongly among imprisoned Nazi perpetrators like Oswald Pohl. Certainly, the world had turned out to be dramatically different than they had envisioned it only a few years earlier. Their dream of a racially cleansed *Lebensraum* (living space)²⁶ for a Greater Germany was reduced to the size of their prison cell (see Eleonore's illustration for chapter 3). In this new world, the religious discourse provided by the postwar German churches began to play a comforting and supporting role. It negotiated the delicate act of maintaining one's masculinity while rendering oneself selectively passive and effeminate.

Conclusion

With the Latin phrase *Te Deum laudamus*, the main narrative of *Credo* concludes. It is, of course, yet another deliberate reference to Augustine's *Confessions*. But *Credo* is not a confession in the sense of the Augustinian master narrative. In order to accomplish the latter, one must hold on to—at least ideally and in principle—the ethical claim that a true confession requires a male self-making the best possible effort of rendering himself vulnerable to himself, to the public eye and, possibly, to God. Submission to judgment outside of the control of the confessing self is crucial. Relinquishing all control means to confess *all* grievous sins, which, in the case of genocidal perpetrators, translates into confessing culpability for all acts of abetting and committing atrocities. This, however, did not happen. *Credo* is a document that lacks any sustained effort of soul-baring.

Augustine writes in a commentary to the Gospel of John that “to testify (*confiteri*) [is] to speak out what the heart holds true. If the tongue and the heart are at odds, you are reciting, not testifying” (quoted in Wills, 1999, p. xvi). In *Credo*, tongue and heart are at odds, and hence Pohl's confession, in light of Augustine's

admonition, is merely a “reciting.” By and large, Pohl and Morgenschweis recite a litany of already practiced arguments that are part of an emerging postwar German discourse by and about perpetrators. They repeat these arguments, rehearse them, modulate them. What *Credo* adds to this chorus of apologetic voices is its deliberate adoption of the genre of the Christian confession. But precisely that which is most desperately needed from the confession of a genocidal perpetrator, namely the public recognition of his failed moral agency in the past, is almost entirely absent in *Credo*. Such an evasive discourse did not end with the execution of Oswald Pohl in Landsberg in 1951, but continued to characterize the legal and psychological defense of Nazi perpetrators for many decades to come.

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Notes

¹ See Schulte (2001, esp. pp. 44-45). For a detailed history of the Landsberg prisoners, including Pohl, and the various legal appeals and calls for clemency and amnesty, see Buscher (1989) and Schwartz (1990).

² The other person working on this narrative from a somewhat different perspective is Katharina von Kellenbach. She introduces Pohl in her study with the working title *The Mark of Cain*. She develops a theological criticism of the efforts of postwar German church and theology to reintegrate Nazi perpetrators; it is a counter-reading of perpetrator documents and testimonies through the biblical narrative of Cain.

³ For a fine collection of various cultural aspects of this period in West Germany, see Schissler (2001a). For the German situation of the Catholic Church in the 1950s, see Gabriel (1993). For a socio-political perspective on the 1950s as a new epoch, see Schwarz (1989).

⁴ All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, I am using Henry Chadwick's (1992) translation of Augustine's *Confessions*. I omit Chadwick's text insertions of the biblical references. For the Latin text, see O'Donnell (1992, vol. 1).

⁶ In his Preface, Morgenschweis emphasizes that Pohl "has written the conversion story himself" (*Credo*, p. 9) and that he, on his own accord and without undue external influence, longed for converting to Catholicism: "Pohl came to his conversion solely under the influence of God's grace" (p. 10). The chaplain needs to insist on Pohl's independent decision-making and authorship in order to uphold the integrity of the conversion experience.

⁷ A detailed analysis of *Credo* as a collaborative product between Pohl and Morgenschweis and their common attempt to trivialize Pohl's guilt is forthcoming in a separate piece, "A Perpetrator and his Hagiographer: The Case of Oswald Pohl's Confession."

⁸ “*Haltung*” is a term rich with meaning, which pre-1945 generational cohorts embraced as a positive virtue; see Autsch (2000). It simultaneously refers to an inner attitude, one’s overall attitude toward life/general view of life, and one’s physical posture. It is the embodied expression of a person’s moral, political, social and religious interior. *Haltung* implies a principled attitude that moves a person beyond individual gratification to the point of self-sacrificial duty. Often, it carries a certain emotional coldness and is employed to describe or self-describe conservative men. Pohl uses the term several times in *Credo*, mostly to describe his straight and righteous attitude in face of the desperate situation he faces in prison (pp. 39, 40, 46).

⁹ Like the English “intercourse,” the German word *Verkehr* (which also means “traffic”) can refer to social exchange/company as well as to sexual intercourse. Morgenschweis clearly uses it in the former sense, and I do not intend to insinuate any sexual impropriety.

¹⁰ For a short summary on the trials and German efforts of political amnesty and clemency, see Von Kellenbach (2001, p. 47f). For Pohl, see Schulte (2001, p. 432). For the Catholic Church, see Phayer (2000, esp. pp. 138-144). For detailed historical studies on the social, legal and political dimensions, see Buscher (1989, pp. 91-130), Frei (1999, pp. 133-233) and Schwartz (1990). During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the most important spokespeople for clemency were, in the Protestant churches, Hans Meiser (Munich), Theophil Wurm (Stuttgart), Otto Dibelius (Berlin) and even Martin Niemöller; among Catholics, it was Cardinal Frings and auxiliary bishop Johannes Neuhäusler.

¹¹ Posset (1993, p. 25). According to Posset, Morgenschweis continued his defensive attitude on behalf of accused Nazis long after 1951 in various lectures, articles and letters to newspapers. Unfortunately, Posset does not properly identify his sources.

¹² German Catholics participated vigorously in the anti-modernism battles of Catholicism during the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth century. For role of the Protestant churches in postwar Germany, see Hockenos (2004) and Greschat (1990); for Catholicism, see Löhr (1990) and Gabriel (1993). See also Herzog (2005, pp. 103-107).

¹³ The German word for conversion is unambiguously *Bekehrung*. The term *Bekennntnis*, however, carries both the meaning of “confession” (confession of sin) and “profession” (declaration of faith). In the German original, the repeated usage of *Bekennntnis*, hence, leaves no doubt from the very start that *Credo* must be read in light of a Christian confession story.

¹⁴ Pohl received the Papal blessing by telegram in March of 1951. The Vatican later explained that it did not know that Pohl was a Nazi criminal at Landsberg and that the benediction was given simply in response to a request for a member of the church who was dying. I am thankful to Katharina von Kellenbach for providing this information. She tracked down an English translation of an article on this issue (*Münchener Merkur*, March 28, 1951) at the National Archives in Silver Spring, Md. (RG 549 USAEUR, Records of War Criminal Prison No. 1 at Landsberg, Records Related to Executed Prisoners, Jan 2, 1946-June 7, 1951).

¹⁵ Chapter 1 opens with a memory in the summer of 1913, when the 21-year-old Pohl landed with the German Navy on a small island in the Pacific Ocean. There he

came across military graves of German sailors who had lost their lives during an indigenous uprising.

¹⁶ Pohl's 1936 departure was part of the wave of *Kirchenaustritte* (leaving the churches) following Heydrich's and Himmler's examples. Steigmann-Gall (2003) summarizes the situation in 1936: "There was no directive from the party leadership ordering *Kirchenaustritt*; the evidence suggests that it arose as a spontaneous movement within the NSDAP ... In 1936 there came a flood, however, beginning with Himmler and Heydrich leaving the Catholic Church early that year" (p. 219). Pohl's account echoes the historian's observation: "Members of the SS were never ordered to leave the church. I am not familiar with any such order by Himmler" (*Credo*, p. 29). See also Nanko (1993).

¹⁷ Karl Adam's work *Das Wesen des Katholizismus* (1924) is most often quoted in *Credo*, sometimes in long passages. It was Adam's most popular book, reprinted thirteen times until 1957. On Adam's Nazi complicity, see Scherzberg (2001). Other theologians occasionally quoted in *Credo* are Romano Guardini, the Swedish bishop Söderblom, the Protestant Heiler and Augustine, as well as biblical verses and, briefly, Goethe and Kant.

¹⁸ The citation is from the opening of the *Confessions* (1.1.1).

¹⁹ Koch (1988) identifies Eleonore as illustrator.

²⁰ Pohl (*Credo*, p. 21) also mentions briefly his disenchantment with the gospels after reading Ernest Renan's, *Das Leben Jesu* (1863). Renan's book created a sensation in the late 19th century, presenting the gospels as legend rather than historical accounts (see Heschel, 1998, pp. 154-158).

²¹ According to Power (1996), the church "for Augustine is overwhelmingly maternal. Like Monica her yearning is ever for her erring children and, like Monica, she seeks them patiently but inexorably ... motivated by the desire to convert the prodigal" (p. 92).

²² In German: "Da öffnete ich mein Herz dem katholischen Gefängnispfarrer. Hatte dieser wortgewaltige Gottesmann bis dahin durch seine aufrüttelnden Predigten den verkrusteten Glaubensboden gelockert, so säte er nun den Samen göttlicher Offenbarung in das saatkierige Land ... [I]n gewaltigem Strom überflutete mich die Frohe Botschaft, wie sie die alleinseligmachende katholische Kirche lehrt."

²³ For example, Karl Brandt, fellow prisoner at Landsberg and sentenced to death for his leading role in the euthanasia program, proudly maintained his anti-Christian, pagan world view until the very end. He accused Christians of hypocrisy and lying and wrote shortly before his execution that "only the pagan dies joyfully" (letter from April 6, 1947, reprinted in *Deutsche Hochschullehrer Zeitung*, 10/1, 1962). Brandt was hanged in 1948.

²⁴ Pohl belonged to the political cohort of the so-called 1918ers. These men were defined by their war enthusiasm at the beginning of 1914 and their subsequent disillusionment and anger with the German defeat in 1918. For the mentality of the 1918ers, see Krondorfer (2006, pp. 46-49).

²⁵ For George Mosse (1996), "respectability" is a crucial aspect in the construction of modern masculinity, while masculinity, in turn, is closely linked to "modern national consciousness." "Respectability ... provides society with essential cohesion" (p. 192f).

To portray Pohl as a respectable new citizen, then, is an attempt of a new nation-building.

²⁶ *Lebensraum* was one of the key concepts of Nazi ideology, arguing that Germany rightfully deserved more living space, especially in the East.

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