THE LEBENSBORN
Project
A precursor to the horrors of the Holocaust was the *Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honour* enacted as a part of the Nuremberg laws on the 15th September 1935. The law forbade marriages and extramarital intercourse between Jews and Germans in order to segregate Jews and keep the bloodline pure of the "Master Race".

Anni-Frid “Frida” Lyngstad is best known as founding member of the Swedish pop group Abba.

The famous pop singer was born on November 15, 1945, and raised by her grandmother after the death of her mother Synni.
Lyngstad believed that her father, Alfred Haase, had died during the war on his way back to Germany as his ship was reported to have sunk. However, in 1977, the German teen magazine Bravo published a poster and a complete biography with details of Lyngstad's background, including the names of her mother and father.

It was seen by Lyngstad's half-brother, Peter Haase, who went to his father and asked him if he had been in Ballangen during the war. A few months later, Lyngstad met Haase in Stockholm for the first time.

This cultural icon is the most famous Lebensborn child.

**What was the Lebensborn Project?**

The Lebensborn Project was a secret and terrifying Nazi project. Lebensborn translates to “fountain of life” designed for the "Master Race".

Heinrich Himmler founded the Lebensborn project on December 12, 1935, the same year the Nuremberg Laws outlawed intermarriage with Jews and others who were deemed inferior. Himmler "encouraged" SS and Wehrmacht officers to have children with Aryan women.

He believed Lebensborn children would grow up to lead a Nazi-Aryan nation.
Beginning in the early 1900s, Germany’s birth rate was in decline. Due to tough economic times, and a shortage of marriage-age men, particularly after Germany’s defeat on November 11, 1918 in the First World War, the use of birth control and women seeking abortions became common practices. By 1933, the birth rate per thousand was only 14.7%.

The Lebensborn Program was a method for the Nazi’s to reverse the birthrate decline and at the same time create a superior Aryan master race, which would dominate Europe as part of German Fuehrer Adolph Hitler’s Third Reich, or Thousand Year Reich. Young girls who were deemed “racially pure” were ‘encouraged’ to give birth to a child in secret.
If a woman wanted to participate in the Lebensborn Program, she had to have blonde hair and blue eyes, no trace of any genetic disorders and she had to demonstrate her Aryan ancestry, as far back as her grandparents. She also had to prove the identity of the father, who also had to have the proper racial characteristics. Only 40% of the women who applied to join the program actually passed the racial purity test. More than 60% of Lebensborn mothers were unmarried.

The Lebensborn Program had its own registry office system to keep the mother’s and father’s identities a secret and most of these documents were burned at the end of the Second World War.

The Nazi’s believed that women from Norway were perfect for their program, as most were fair-haired with blue eyes. It is estimated that about 50,000 Norwegian women had affairs with German soldiers. They were thought of as German Whores, by other Norwegians and were disciplined with treatments like publicly having their heads shaved, once the war ended. Their children were taken away from them and most never saw them again.

The SS Officers fathers needed state consent to marry and this consent depended on the officer’s prospective wife meeting the strict Lebensborn standards.

In 1936, an ordinance was issued advising every SS member that he should father at least four children. Many of the fathers of Lebensborn children were married members of the SS with their own families, who had obeyed Himmler’s order to spread their Aryan seed, even out of wedlock.
Due to the secrecy of the program, the identities of the fathers were not recorded on birth certificates.

**The Lebensborn Homes**

In the beginning, the Lebensborn were taken to SS nurseries. But in order to create a “super-race,” the SS transformed these nurseries into “meeting places” for “racially pure” German women who wanted to meet and have children with SS officers. The children born in the Lebensborn nurseries were then taken by the SS. Lebensborn provided support for expectant mothers, wed or unwed, by providing a home and the means to have their children in safety and comfort.

The first Lebensborn home was opened in 1936 in Steinhoering, a tiny village not far from Munich. Furnishings for the homes were supplied from the best of the loot from the homes of Jews who had been sent to Dachau. Ultimately, there were 10 Lebensborn homes established in Germany, nine in Norway, two in Austria, and one each in Belgium, Holland, France, Luxembourg and Denmark.

Himmler himself took a special interest in the homes, choosing not only the mothers, but also attending to the decor and even paying special attention to children born on his birthday, October 7th.
Kidnappings

One of the most horrible aspects of the Lebensborn policy was the kidnapping of children “racially good” in the eastern occupied countries after 1939. Some of these children were orphans, but it is well documented that many were stolen from their parents’ arms.

These kidnappings were organized by the SS in order to take children by force who matched the Nazis’ racial criteria (blond hair and blue or green eyes). Thousands of children were transferred to the Lebensborn centers in order to be “Germanized.”

These “Germanized” children were told that their parents were dead or had abandoned them and they were given new identities, including new names, birth certificates and even fake lineage and were then sent to Germany to live in institutions or with German families.

Children two to six years old were sent to Lebensborn homes. The children who could not be “Germanized” were sent to concentration camps.

It is nearly impossible to know how many children were kidnapped in the eastern occupied countries. In 1946, it was estimated that more than 250,000 were kidnapped and sent by force to Germany.

Only 25,000 were retrieved after the war and sent back to their families. It is known that several German families refused to give back the children they had received from the Lebensborn centers.

In some cases, the children themselves refused to come back to their original family – they were victims of the Nazi propaganda and believed that they were pure Germans.
The Nazis’ Lebensborn Program and The Quest to Breed a Master Race

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Through breeding, kidnapping, and even murder, the Nazis’ Lebensborn program aimed at creating a super-race of Germanized children.

Bundesarchiv, Bild/Wikimedia Commons: A baptism performed under a Swastika.
As far as secretive government projects go, the Lebensborn project was a doozy. The purpose of the Nazi-led program was to create the German’s glorified ‘super race’ by means of a breeding bank for ‘racially-pure’ babies. Of course, indoctrination to Nazism for both mother and child followed.

The nature of pregnancy made this creation of a new master race a rather lengthy process. To rev things up a bit, the Nazis also set out to Germanize fair-haired kids who already existed.

This meant kidnapping and brainwashing what were seen as genetically superior European kids into the Nazi regime. If the child resisted, they found themselves in a concentration camp where their ultimate fate was extermination.

Head Nazi SS officer Heinrich Himmler was the driving force behind the decade-long Lebensborn program, which started in 1935. He assured any unwed mother who fit the racial profile that giving birth inside a Lebensborn home was the best thing to do for their children. The Nazis would provide the best in care and education, and even handle the adoption process if desired.

Before the war, Germany's birth rate had plummeted due to industrialization. Now the country's goal was to grow the birth rate, especially with the ‘right’ kind of babies. With the Nazi party enacting the Nuremberg racial hygiene laws, which restricted Jews and Germans from marrying or having extramarital intercourse, they needed a plan to up the numbers.
The idea of using eugenics came largely from the United States, who was working to advance the ideology in the early 1930s. The Rockefeller Foundation, a funder of U.S. eugenics at the time, even financed some research conducted by Auschwitz doctor Josef Mengele.

Because the Nazi government wanted to grow the population quickly, the view of illegitimate children as shameful began to change. Any German baby born was now a blessing in the eyes of the SS – unwed mother or not. If the baby carried the coveted Aryan genes, that – of course – was the optimal scenario.

Universal History Archive/UIG/Getty Images: A Nazi nurse with “German super race” children, whom Nazi scientists tried to lighten their hair and eyes to a more Aryan appearance 1941.

Part policy, part propaganda, the Lebensborn program literally translated to “Fount of Life.” It was first ‘marketed’ to unwed and pregnant women who wanted to have their babies in secret. The stigma of out-of-wedlock birth still lingered among the public; therefore girls living in poverty likely jumped at the chance to receive free top-notch care.

The first Lebensborn home opened its doors in 1936 in a tiny village near Munich named Steinhöring. Financial assistance and maternity ward privileges were incentives to enter. For Norwegian women, the program was a way out of the poverty-stricken country; a strategy for survival.
Of course, you had to qualify for such privileges; not by ways of money or class or connections – but by genealogy. Proof of paternity and a racially-pure family tree for three prior generations gained you access. The program accepted only 40 percent percent of the women who applied under this staunch rule.

However, the Lebensborn program was not producing offspring quickly enough for the likes of the Nazi officials. So, Himmler began using the facilities to arrange secret meetings for ‘suitable’ women to meet SS soldiers to make more babies.
A report to the Ministry of Justice stated, “Leaders of the [League of German Girls have] intimated to their girls that they should bear illegitimate children; these leaders have pointed out that in view of the prevailing shortage of men, not every girl could expect to get a husband in future, and that the girls should at least fulfill their task as German women and donate a child to the Fuhrer.”

Reformation of the German Divorce laws in 1938 made it easier for men to dump wives in their late forties and fifties for younger women more capable of making babies.

Approximately 30,000 divorces occurred in Germany within two years, and 80 percent of them fell into this categorization.

The German Reich practically made motherhood into an Olympic event, issuing a Mother’s Cross of Honour in three classes: gold, silver, and bronze. This was a symbol of an exemplary mother who conceived and raised at least four children. These mothers received numerous privileges such as no waiting in lines, government subsidized care for the kids, and even the best meats from the butcher shops.

By 1939, the population numbers of the super-race still didn’t impress Himmler. Orphans throughout occupied Europe that fit the Aryan profile started disappearing. Other children, most notably from Poland and Yugoslavia were stolen in plain sight and kidnapped by Nazi soldiers for Germanization.
Reportedly, Himmler stated, “It is our duty to take [the children] with us to remove them from their environment, if necessary by robbing or stealing them.” When confronted by the cruelty of this action, he retorted, “How can you be so cruel as to leave on the other side a brilliant future enemy who later on will kill your son and grandson?”

After being forcibly taken from their loving parents, they would be examined. The stolen children would then fall into three categories: desirable, acceptable, and unwanted. If the children were deemed ‘unwanted’ by the regime, they would be sent to labor until their death inside a concentration camp.
This abhorrent offshoot of the Lebensborn nurseries turned an already highly questionable program into one that facilitated murder. Even in the name of birthing new life, the Nazis found a way to kill children.

Leaders took the ‘desirables’ and the ‘acceptables’ and placed them in foster homes or boarding schools. Lost children were told to forget their old names and their parents. Often the authoritative figures convinced the children that their parents didn’t want them anymore.

Germany was their home now, and they were to pledge allegiance to it. Resistance was futile and led to death.
Himmler now declared that every SS soldier should father at least one child before going off to war. He assured the soldiers that while men fought, the mothers and babies would be cared for in a Lebensborn home.

These changing attitudes towards sex had lingering effects. By the time the war was over, venereal disease was rampant, affecting as many as 23 percent of young Germans.

The Lebensborn program spread to other areas of occupied Europe, including Norway in 1941. Maternity wards were located in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, and Luxembourg. Often the Germans converted buildings or homes – now vacant – that once belonged to Jews.
The focus of the Norway locations was taking care of babies born to the local women, fathered mainly by German soldiers. It's probably safe to say that SS soldiers forced these 'relations.' Between 8,000 and 12,000 children were born into Norway's Lebensborn facilities during this time which was a much higher number than other locations.

When the war ended, the government continued to care for the mothers and children of Lebensborn. Even with limited food and resources now available, the children were well fed and safe. Some of the public resented this and resorted to beating the women out in public; attempting to run them off.

**National archives of Norway/Flickr**: The first Lebensborn mother and birthcare home in Norway; just a few weeks after its opening in September of 1941.
In post-war Norway, the children of Nazi descent were often bullied. Some were even sent to mental institutions where they endured further abuse.

Of all the estimated 200,000 kidnapping victims, it's difficult to say how many parents recovered their children. The Nazis destroyed almost all of the Lebensborn documents as the Allied forces neared victory.

The most famous child of Lebensborn is the Norwegian ABBA singer Anni-Frid Lyngstad; fathered by a German sergeant. Her widowed mother escaped after the war and took her daughter to Sweden, who accepted several hundred ‘refugee’ children and saved them from persecution.

Many parents chose not to tell their children of their involvement due to the controversial nature of the program. The identities of these kids’ fathers remained a secret; their names not on the birth certificates.

Some are still in the dark about their heritage. In 2006, some Lebensborn survivors gathered to meet in Germany to discuss their shared experience.

Dorothee Schmitz-Köster, author of a book about Lebensborn, tells The New York Times, “Most grew up knowing they had a secret,” she said. “They were angry at their mothers, because they had been lied to or abandoned. Some feel shame. There are also a small number who are proud of being Lebensborn. They feel they are part of an elite.”

Had the Germans won the war, however, Himmler and associates considered enacting laws allowing bigamy for Nazi officials and war heroes.