

Veronique Mistiaen

IT TOOK MONA WEISSMARK many decades to be able to say thank you. But this past summer, the Chicago psychologist managed to have the family of a German pastor awarded Yad Vashem's "Righteous Among the Nations" title for saving her father's life and that of a Jewish friend in April 1945.

The recognition represents the culmination of a long, difficult personal and professional journey for Weissmark, author of "Justice Matters." It was a journey that led her from being an ardent German-hater through writing about inter-generational conflict and reconciliation, and finally to becoming someone who could "see the other side."

"It was my way to express gratitude, and to finish my father's unfinished business," says Weissmark, 49, an associate professor of psychology and founder of the Mansfield Institute for Social Justice at Roosevelt University in Chicago, and a visiting scholar at Northwestern University.

In April 1945, weeks before VE Day, the SS were rounding up all the prisoners in Langenstein-Zwieberge concentration camp, with the intention of taking them to a nearby mine to shoot them. Adolf Weissmark, Mona's father, and a friend, Rudolf Klepfisz, managed to escape and reach the nearby village of Börnecke, in the Harz Mountains, in north-central Germany. There, starving, covered in lice and ill with typhus and dysentery, they collapsed on the doorstep of Pastor Julius Seebasz.

The pastor's wife and his daughters, Renate and Ricarda, bathed and clothed the two fugitives and nursed them back to health, and they remained with the family for several months, until they could immigrate to America. Ricarda, who had contracted typhus — probably from them — died the following January, and soon after, Renate moved to England, where she became an Anglican nun.

The compassion of the Seebasz family — and the grave risks they took — saved more than her father's life, Weissmark says. "It saved his belief and my belief in the goodness of humankind. It saved his soul and mine and that of my daughter, because it is passed down generations."

Weissmark is known for her social experiments in the 1990s in which she set up meetings between children of Holocaust survivors and children of Nazis, and between descendants of African-American slaves and slave-owners. The purpose of bringing such antagonistic groups together "is not to forget or forgive the past but to create a new future," says Weissmark, who



PHOTOS COURTESY MONA WEISSMARK

From Generation to Generation

Mona Weissmark was a leader in bringing together members of groups locked in age-old conflicts. But that didn't make it any easier for her to reach out to the family that saved her father's life in the Holocaust.

chronicles these painful, but ultimately productive, encounters in "Justice Matters."

Mona Weissmark grew up in Forest Hills, New York, without any relatives outside her immediate family, but it's only when she was 7 that she understood why her family tree was little more than a stump. It was 1961, and her mother was watching coverage of the Eichmann trial from Jerusalem on TV. "He should be tortured and then killed," her mother whispered, before explaining that the number on her arm was not their phone number but had been tattooed there at Auschwitz. She also told Mona that her father was a survivor of both Dachau and Langenstein-Zwieberge, a Buchenwald sub-camp, and that all other family members had been murdered by the Nazis. Later, when she was about 15, she heard another story, from her father, of "a nice German pastor who saved my life."

NEARLY 60 YEARS HAVE PASSED since, but Sister Renate says that the rescue of the two young men affected her whole life. "Since then, I treat life as so important and precious, having seen that two skeletons could regain their humanity after receiving not so much food, but acceptance and love."

Mona, on the other hand, never discussed the rescue or Ricarda's death again with her father, and buried the memory deep inside for more than 30 years.

"I ignored and radically belittled what

Pastor Seebasz and his family did for my father, because I grew up with a deep hatred of all Germans, and was not prepared to make an exception," she says.

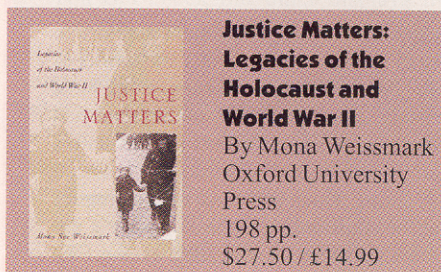
And her father, although grateful, didn't make a bigger case of the Seebasz's actions. "Present in my parents' heads was the terrible loss, the murder, the devastation — not those who helped him. When you have experienced such devastation, you cannot fit in this other category. You have an undifferentiated view of the other side: They are all bad," explains Weissmark, who had encountered that attitude many times during her meetings between antagonistic groups, and describes it in her book.

That attitude is not surprising, says Brendan Maher, professor emeritus of psychology of personality at Harvard University. "It is very, very hard to give up the perception that we have been wronged. This is not only true in individuals who are victims, but with anybody who has invested belief in a point of view — even in matters when it is they who have been wrong."

After graduating from high school, Weissmark, a fervent Zionist, moved to Israel, feeling, she explains, that "the greatest thing I could do was to join the Israeli army to defend

'NO ROOM FOR A GUILTLESS GERMAN': Weissmark (left) says that until she began to acknowledge the other side's suffering, she never thought of Pastor Seebasz (right) and his family

the State of Israel." Although the IDF wouldn't take her, because she lacked fluent Hebrew, Weissmark did begin her university studies in Tel Aviv. Back in the U.S., she earned a PhD in psychology in 1986, at the University of Pennsylvania. Slowly, her academic interests began to reflect her personal ones. "I was reading the literature on the pathological effects of the Holocaust on the survivors, on their children, on the Nazis and on their children. I began to see injustice as an intergenerational and interpersonal matter." She decided to organize a study that focused on the relationship between the children of survivors and of Nazis, and have them meet face-to-face for the very first time.



Justice Matters: Legacies of the Holocaust and World War II
By Mona Weissmark
Oxford University Press
198 pp.
\$27.50 / £14.99

These extraordinary meetings, and the process by which both sides ultimately learned to accept their mutual pasts, are described in "Justice Matters." The book's findings provide a new framework for understanding the psychology of injustice, she says, showing "how feelings about injustice are kept alive generation after generation." And she adds, they can be applied to many conflicts stemming from centuries-old disputes, such as those in Israel, Northern Ireland, Bosnia or Sri Lanka. "The circumstances are different; the numbers of victims are different — and personally, I believe the Holocaust is incomparable to other situations. However, I think that the psycho-social mechanisms are the same. The way people respond to injustice is universal," Weissmark says.

Asked how she would apply the book's framework to Israelis and Palestinians, she explains that "each side sees itself as the legitimate 'victim' of a previous injustice. Although they can sometimes agree on historical facts, the clash includes the meaning of these facts and extends to names, language, causes and responsibilities. For each side, the conflict is represented as a legacy that includes values, beliefs and emotions that are incompatible and, therefore, fuel conflict," she explains.

Such a reconciliation needed to take place

even between herself and Sister Renate, whom she would eventually befriend. The nun, says Weissmark, has "a completely different view of the events.... Sister Renate views the Holocaust in the context of German history and especially what happened to Germany in World War I. According to that viewpoint, at the end of that war, many Germans felt humiliated. Then came economic hardships. Hitler provided Germans with hope for a better future and a sense of restored self-esteem. My viewpoint of events was quite different. I grew up believing that pre-Nazi Germany was uniformly pervaded by a deep-seated anti-Semitic Christian culture. A few years ago, I wouldn't even have been able to listen to the 'German viewpoint.' Now I can have compassion for the other side, for their losses and suffering."

Until her change of heart, adds Weissmark, "I held fast to the view that all Germans were accountable. There was no room in it for a guiltless German or a kind and decent German pastor, or a German girl who sacrificed her life to save my father's. The Seebaszes lost their home" — which the Russians expropriated when they occupied the city — "their jobs and their beloved Ricarda during the war, but I couldn't see their loss because my family's victim's status absolved me from considering it. I never thought of Pastor Seebasz and his family."

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After months of soul-searching and hesitation — and Internet research by her husband, Daniel Giacomo, a psychiatrist — Weissmark succeeded in tracing the pastor's surviving daughter to the Convent of the Holy Name, in Derby, England.

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Weissmark has invited both Sister Renate and her brother Stephen Seebasz, a music professor in Germany, to visit her in Chicago in February, and to address the Goethe Institute about their experiences during the war.

"It is a beautiful gift, a great enrichment to my life," says Sister Renate, who is looking forward to meeting Weissmark in person. And the Yad Vashem naming, which was marked at a ceremony at Israel's London Embassy in early November, "means so much to me," she adds. "My sister and parents are dead, but that they are actually recognized like that is incredible."

Adds Weissmark: "Sometimes children have to finish what their parents couldn't. That's what I am doing with Sister Renate."

Recently, she started talking with her daughter about her family's legacy. Britany is now 7, the same age as her mother was when she learned about her past. "I realized that I started our family history with the positive, with Pastor Seebasz and Sister Renate. Perhaps resentment against all Germans belonged to my generation; maybe gratitude toward some Germans can belong to my daughter's."

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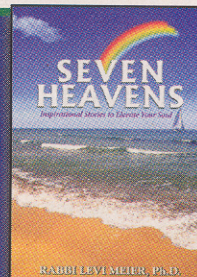
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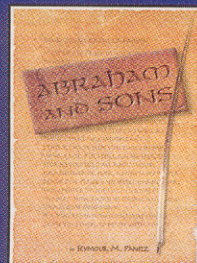
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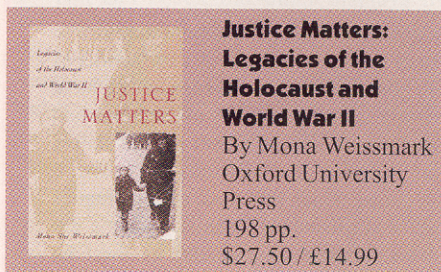
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Author, ABRAHAM AND SONS

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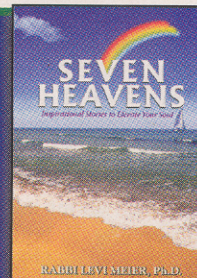
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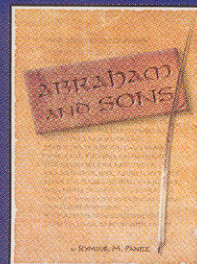
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