

CURRENTS: HISTORY

Generational healing

A daughter of Holocaust survivors comes to terms with past for the sake of the future

By Veronique Mistiaen
Special to the Tribune

Every Thursday at noon, Chicago psychologist Mona Weissmark shuts herself in her home office in Evanston. There, among scattered papers and books, she dials a number in England.

In an Anglican convent in central England, Sister Renate, 83, sits by the telephone eagerly awaiting Weissmark's call.

The two women have never met in person, and until last April, had never been in contact. Yet without the elderly nun, it's likely Weissmark and her 6-year-old daughter, Brittany, wouldn't exist.

In April 1945, Renate Seebasz, then 20 years old, and her family rescued Weissmark's father, Adolf, and his childhood friend, Rudolf Klepfisz. The pair had fled the concentration camp of Lagenstein-Zwieberge and stumbled on the Seebasz's doorstep in Bornbecke, ill with typhus and dysentery, covered in lice and starving.

More than fifty years have passed since that day, but Sister Renate remembers it vividly.

"I had just come home from the front. We saw two figures collapsed in front of our door. My mother called the doctor and he said: 'They are not human beings any longer, forget about them.' But my mother didn't listen," she said.

Renate, her sister, Ricarda, and their mother fed, bathed and clothed the two young men, and nursed them back to health. Her father, Pastor Julius Seebasz, and her four brothers welcomed them into the family.

"Adolf was the same age as me. He called our parents Mama and Papa."

The two young men remained part of the family for several months, until they could immigrate to America. Ricarda, who had contracted typhus, probably from them, died the following January, and Renate moved to England a few years later.

Adolf Weissmark was able to rebuild his life in America, where he married Stefa Jacobowitz, also a Holocaust survivor. The couple raised their daughter, Mona, in Forest Hills, N.Y. Mona Weissmark, now 49, is an associate professor of psychology and founder of the Mansfield Institute for Social Justice at Roosevelt University. She is known for her groundbreaking social experiment that set up meetings between children of Holocaust survivors and children of Nazis.

Hearing the other side

The purpose of bringing two such disparate sides together "is not to forget or forgive the past but create a new future," says Weissmark, author of "Justice Matters: Legacies of the Holocaust and World War II" (Oxford University Press, \$27.50), which chronicles the interactions between the children of Holocaust survivors and children of Nazis.

The book shows how hatred and ethnic resentment are passed from one generation to the next in the form of stories told about the parents' suffering. It also explores what happens when the children of victims and perpetrators put aside the notion they are the most aggrieved and "hear the other side," says Weissmark. Then the cycle of hatred might be slowed, if not halted, she says.

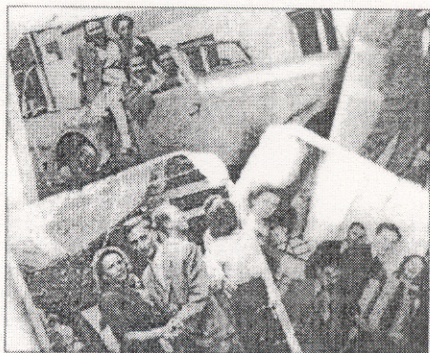
Although Weissmark had witnessed and analyzed this gradual willingness to hear the other side during her research, it was only recently she was able to apply those principles to her own life.

As a child, Weissmark had heard only terrible stories about her family history. Her mother had survived Auschwitz concentration camp; her father, Dachau and Lagenstein-Zwieberge—all other members of both families had been killed. Then, when she was about 15, her father told her another story—that of "a nice German pastor who saved my life." It was Julius Seebasz, Sister Renate's father. Sister Renate says she had been so moved by the two young men's rescue that it has 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."

Weissmark, on the other hand, buried the memory of the Seebasz family for more than 30 years.

"I ignored and radically belittled what Pastor Maher and his family did for my father because I grew up with a deep hatred of all Germans and was



Tribune photos by Charles

Mona Weissmark (above, with daughter, 8 years, 6) is grateful for Sister Renate (left), who helped save Weissmark's father (in photos, top) during World War II.



not prepared to make an exception," she says.

"Present in my parents' heads were the terrible loss, the murder and devastation—not those who helped him. When you experience such devastation, you cannot fit in this other category, you have an undifferentiated view of the other side: They're all bad," she says.

Giving up perceptions

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 wronged. This is not only true in individual victims, but in anybody who has invested by a point of view—even in matters when they've been wrong."

While writing "Justice Matters," the men the Seebasz's kindness resurfaced and Weiss re-examined her feelings. After months of searching—and Internet research by her band, Daniel Giocomo—Weissmark was able to trace Sister Renate to her convent in Derby.

Last April, Weissmark sent the nun a copy book, which is dedicated to the Seebasz fan October the two women talked on the phone first time. They haven't stopped since.

"It is a beautiful gift, a great enrichment life," says Sister Renate.

"It feels like connecting with a long-lost relative," Weissmark says. "It's hard to explain these conversations mean to me. She is a woman who saved my father's life."

The compassion of Pastor Seebasz and his family saved more than her father's life, though "It saved his belief and my belief in the goodness of humankind. It saved his soul and mine as well as my daughter because it is passed down to them."

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