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Healing the Pain of the Holocaust

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Nearly half a century after the German concentration camps were liberated in Europe, 11 children of Holocaust survivors and 11 children of Nazis are gathering at Harvard this weekend to seek ways of healing the pain they inherited from their parents' generation. Attendees come from throughout the United States and Germany and include people from many walks of life—academicians, businesspeople, psychiatrists, and others whose common bond is their parents' involvement in the Holocaust.

The historic four-day conference, sponsored by the Medical School's Department of Psychiatry at Cambridge Hospital, is taking place at the Medical School's Boston location. It includes a series of intense "brainstorming sessions," facilitated group discussions, and informal creative workshops that delve into the thoughts and feelings of those attending. Dr. Daniel Giacomo, a psychiatrist and researcher at the Medical School, will facilitate the discussions as a "neutral observer" who is neither Jewish nor German in background.

Organizers Mona Weissmark, a lecturer and researcher on psychology in the Department of Psychiatry, and Dina Kuphal hope the conference will result in a "redressing" of the past and a plan for future cooperation that other polarized groups can copy to prevent more intergenerational divisions.

"Hitler never imagined that in the end, children of Nazis and children of survivors would be working together," said Kuphal.

The daughter of a Waffen-S.S. officer, Kuphal was born in 1946. She grew up near Hanover in postwar Germany, where Nazis and concentration camps were never mentioned. In history class, "we would talk a lot about the Vikings, the Romans . . . maybe

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Offspring of Nazis, Jews Meet To Heal the Past

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up to the First World War," she recalled. As a child, said Kuphal, "I didn't know what a Jew was."

She learned about the Holocaust gradually, piecing together fragments of information from the media and self-directed readings. The knowledge caused her great emotional conflict as a teenager in the early 1960s, when the Adolf Eichmann trials placed an international spotlight on the Nazi atrocities.

"A lot of people in my generation grew up with feelings of guilt, of shame," Kuphal said. "In a way, we took the guilt that our parents did not want to take on."

Her late father became angry and defensive when she questioned him on his wartime service. He refused to discuss the subject or acknowledge the wrongs done by the Germans. "What I wanted him to say was that this was really bad," said Kuphal. Father and daughter were never able to have a close relationship. The past always stood in the way. "I think it put a wedge between us that I don't think we were ever able to overcome," Kuphal said.

Weissmark was born an American, eight years after Kuphal, to parents who emigrated here after surviving the horror of concentration camps—her mother in Auschwitz and her father in Dachau, among others. Both of their extended families were murdered during the war.

"My parents were the kind that talked about it," said Weissmark. Yet she also learned slowly about the past. Americans, too, were reluctant to discuss how the Nazis had sought to exterminate Jews and other non-Aryans who stood in their way. "When I went to high school there was only a paragraph about the Holocaust in the history book," she recalled.

The Eichmann trials were a turning point for her as well. She remembers seeing her mother crying while watching them on television. "I began to understand that this was somehow related to the fact that I didn't have a family," said Weissmark.

A common drive to study the effects of the Holocaust on children of both sides, and to find a model for healing, has brought the two women together.

"It's something that has consumed me," said Kuphal, who lectures to students on intergenerational effects of the Third Reich. Several years ago she began to interview people from her generation in

with the Holocaust issues. She had a background in drama and thought about making a theater piece on the subject. "What I found was that . . . everybody was affected."

Weissmark, who is also an assistant professor at the University of Connecticut at Storrs, is chiefly interested in interpersonal behavior, and her own background drew her to her present course of study.

Weissmark met Kuphal when she interviewed her in the course of her research and asked her to join in the effort. They discovered that, although many psychosocial studies had been done on Holocaust survivors' children and children of Nazis, no one had researched their commonalities. They embarked on their joint research project along with Giacomo, targeting 10 people from each background to explore similarities in coping responses and interactional behavior.

Weissmark said they learned that "the whole process of coming from a Holocaust family is there are these common things." Subjects shared not only the difficult quest for information about the Holocaust, but also the dawning awareness of a horrible event that had happened in the past and the need to make some sense of it, to bring it to some kind of closure in this generation.

"There's an incredible sense of injustice that people feel," Weissmark said.

Kuphal said one of the most moving discussions she had was with Weissmark's mother, whom she met during the research project.

"It's important for people to realize that children of Nazis are not Nazis," Weissmark said.

The three researchers have written an article, "Psychosocial Themes in the Lives of Children of Survivors and Nazis," which is under review by the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. The other product of their efforts is the conference. Publicized chiefly through



Photo by Joe Wrinn

Mona Weissmark (left) and Ilona Kuphal

academic circles in the United States and Germany and word of mouth within the groups they were researching, it attracted such an overwhelming response that organizers regrettably had to turn away potential enrollees in order to keep discussion group sizes manageable.

The conference has been publicized on a WBUR Radio news segment and is scheduled to be the subject of discussion on WGBH-TV's *The Group* on Sept. 8 at 7:30 p.m. Weissmark said that CNN, NBC News and ABC News are considering covering aspects of the conference. A press conference is scheduled for Sept. 6 from noon to 1 at Room 448 in the Harvard Medical Education Center, 260 Longwood Ave.

Much of the project's funding has come from children of both Nazis and Holocaust survivors, according to Weissmark and Kuphal. No support has come so far from private foundations, Jewish organizations or the German government, though the organizers continue to seek funds from those sources.

They hope to schedule a second conference next year, this time on German soil. The location they would like to secure is a historically significant one—the Wannsee Museum in Berlin, where the Nazis met to plan the Holocaust.

A continuing education workshop might also emerge at Harvard, using videotapes of conference discussions as a resource.