

Revisiting the Past to Transform It

Children of Holocaust Survivors, Children of Nazis

by Michael Jonathan Grinfeld

A technology-laden 20th century produced its share of mechanized slaughter, but the standard by which history will judge this darker side of the human experience resides firmly in the annals of World War II. Though 50 years have passed, remembrances of the Holocaust that resulted in the deaths of 12 million people still evoke feelings of pain and anguish that have barely subsided over time.

This legacy, passed down from the generation that experienced it to the generation that now remembers it, has become the centerpiece of research and extraordinary meetings between children of concentration camp survivors and children of Nazis conducted and organized by Mona Weissmark, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Connecticut and lecturer at Harvard Medical School, Daniel Giacomo, M.D., a psychiatrist and also a lecturer at Harvard, and Hona Kuphal, B.A., a businesswoman and lecturer on intergenerational issues involving the Third Reich.

Thus far, two meetings between the descendants of Holocaust survivors (both Jewish and non-Jewish) and Nazis have taken place—one at Harvard in September 1992, the other in February at a facility outside Stuttgart, Germany, where participants from the United States, Germany and other countries spent four days coming to terms with the past and with each other.

Both Weissmark and Kuphal, who originally conceived of the idea to bring the groups together, come to the project with personal

histories that motivated their work. Weissmark's mother was a survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camp, while her father spent the war behind the barbed wire at Dachau. She met Kuphal, the daughter of a lieutenant in the Third Reich's Waffen-SS, in 1991 while conducting research interviews.

As they talked, they discerned common feelings and experiences that established,

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somewhat to their surprise, a link rather than a division between them. From that point, they began to work on creating the model that would guide meetings between the two groups.

"Our study was the first to explore the commonalities between children of survivors and children of Nazis," Weissmark said. "It is a controversial study because the idea that descendants of victims and perpetrators may share certain similarities is a taboo topic."

For many, the idea of exploring the connection between the two groups raised questions about whether the concept in some way diminished the pain of those who suffered. Would a meeting between the children raise issues of betrayal, somehow trivializing a parent's concentration camp experience or unnecessarily revealing a parent's Nazi past?

To meet these concerns, organizers were careful to structure the conferences based upon a model that would foster active, joint participation between the groups. Several assumptions about how the parents' emotions were passed down to the children guided the development of this model, Weissmark said.

"We assume that the participants who are coming to the conference, based on the inter-

views we have done beforehand, come with very strong feelings of injustice," Weissmark said. "[For] children of survivors, they have very strong feelings of resentment, of anger and of betrayal, and for children of Nazis, they have strong feelings of guilt and shame."

The researchers also assume that those feelings can escalate or perpetuate conflict unless they are resolved, but recognize that merely bringing the two groups together to communicate and understand each other is inadequate.

"We don't assume that if you just bring them together and they just communicate and understand that everything will be fine," Weissmark said. "We structure the conference to create an environment where the participants will really have to be involved with

The Future

Meet

one another. :)

It is Giacomo, acting as a neutral facilitator—neither the child of a survivor or a Nazi—who works with the participants toward the ultimate goal of the conferences.

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The purpose implicit in the model, therefore, "aims at achieving not a reconciliation of the past, but the creation of a new future—a transformation of the relationship," according to the researchers.

Through facilitated meetings, brainstorming sessions and informal gatherings, participants engage in a process of rebalancing the past injustices.

"Feelings about the 'other side' are transmitted down the generations," Weissmark said. "This is especially true when an injustice occurred that was not rebalanced."

Why do people have to restore this balance? In maintaining the feud, according to Giacomo, people lose part of themselves, beginning to behave in ways they assumed only their enemy would behave. Although this is ignored during the conflict, there is a natural rebalancing that can occur once the conflict is over that is extremely relieving and permits individuals to restore more humane values to their lives.

For Giacomo, the level of emotion this

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process releases is not surprising, considering the experiences the participants had as children of survivors or Nazis—one group recollecting their parents' terror, the other recalling the extreme silence about past deeds.

What did surprise him, however, was the power and extent of these feelings. Among the participants, the depth of emotions they felt sometimes transcended the ability of language to describe them.

"When we speak together about the repercussions of hatred and what it's done in our lives... I could not have done that a year ago because I could not have believed that I could be believable to children of survivors," said Natalie Fasolt. "It's a very strange process."

She immigrated to the United States from Germany in 1978 at the age of 26, the daughter of a German soldier who spent much of the war in Finland along the Russian front. Now an artist living in New York, she attended both conferences, recalling that neither of her parents would ever speak about World War II.

"The minute we tried to talk to our parents, they felt attacked and accused because I think they carry their own inner accusations with them and project them," Fasolt said. She first learned about the Holocaust after coming to the U.S. but when she desperately needed to speak to someone she felt isolated and alone.

"I had a friend who said, 'you Germans started the war, you lost it, I really don't give a damn what Germans are feeling right now.' I felt like I was not allowed to have any feelings about this," Fasolt said.

But attending the conferences has made a major difference in her life and typifies the type of transformation that can occur.

"I had felt like there was a place in my heart that was inaccessible, where I could never connect," Fasolt explained. "And now, I have a much stronger sense of being grounded in the world somehow. I feel like a lot of the shame has been lifted, and because of that it's much easier for me to believe in my own

Wilma Busse felt a different form of isolation. Her mother, a Polish Catholic, spent the war in a Nazi labor camp, and her uncle died at Buchenwald. To this day, Busse's mother has refused to discuss her Holocaust experiences with anyone.

"It seems to be more of a Jewish tradition to bear witness to what happened in the Holocaust and to tell your children," she observed.

Busse faced another form of isolation when she tried to find a group of survivors' children to whom she might express her feelings. Comprised of Jews, they were unwilling to admit her because individuals of Polish background were perceived to be traditionally anti-Semitic.

Attending the second conference in Germany, therefore, was not only the first time Busse was able to speak to children of Nazis, but also the first time she was able to interact with a group of survivors' descendants.

"While I was at the meetings and talking to the people, the connection and the ability to transform some of the pain and the rage that I think I carried over from my mother turned into acceptance and a desire to act from a state of tolerance and love," she said.

"There is not a clear victim or victimizer among this group," said Rosalie Gerut, whose mother and father survived Auschwitz and Dachau, respectively. "[The children of Nazis] were victims because they endured silence and then they endured having the identity of being a person of a culture that made others move away from them and not see them as people."

She also confirmed that both sides share, to a degree, the common legacy that conference organizers Weissmark and Kuphal felt in their first discussions.

"I looked at [the victimization of the descendants of Nazis] and I said 'now you know what it's like to be a Jew at that time,' when people moved away and didn't want to associate. In some ways we have shared very deep themes."

Suzanne Schecker never met her father, a member of the SS during the war. She immigrated to the United States in 1950 when she was 5, her mother having previously divorced her father. Nevertheless, her heritage was a "painful and difficult legacy," especially growing up in New York with many Jewish friends.

"It's difficult when you have Jewish friends, and you have my background, and there's always 6 million Jews between us."

For Schecker, who attended the second conference in Germany, the opportunity to interact with survivors' children provided her with a choice.

"I feel like I can either choose to live with this shame and collective guilt or I can choose to do something useful with it," she said. "I realized that hurting myself or feeling bad doesn't bring anyone's family back. I feel a responsibility to do something with this legacy that might be helpful."

Lois Berkowitz and her husband, Alan, both children of survivors, attended the conference in Germany together.

Her father, contrary to other parents, had shared his experiences at Auschwitz, but she came away from the conference recognizing that she had "tuned him out."

"I thought I was really interested and I used to pursue it on an intellectual level," Lois Berkowitz said, "but as far as a personal level goes I don't remember anything he told me."

This insight now makes her feel "incredibly close to him." Alan Berkowitz also experienced a heightened sense of closeness; in his case it was with his wife.

"It drew us closer together," he said. "It was so intense, just knowing the other was

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there made things a lot better."

The researchers intend to conduct additional conferences, and hope that the concepts that are evolving will ultimately be useful in resolving other intergenerational conflicts like those in Ireland, the Middle East, and the former Yugoslavia. They also want to conduct meetings between adolescents, to see if it is possible to break the cycle of hatred that divides various groups of people.

Acknowledging that techniques used in their conferences would probably not be effective to quell present conflict, they hope that interceding with young people could prevent future ones.

"In present conflict, emotions are running so high that [people] become fanatic and can only see their cause, and that's what keeps the conflict going," Giacomo said. He hopes that they will be able to convince adolescents to "reinterpret their parent's history and live their own." □