

Letter from Germany

A Nazi in the Family Closet?

Hans Schindler

The reflections in this letter are based on a range of evidence:

- With a Jewish colleague, I organised two seminars (in Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald) with children and grandchildren of families of both victims and perpetrators.
- As therapy trainer I have assisted more than 400 family reconstructions during the last 15 years. In the beginning I mostly met with the children (today more often with the grandchildren) of individuals who were once supporters of the National Socialist regime, or even actual perpetrators of its atrocities.
- A number of books published in recent years, in which children, grandchildren and brothers talk about family members who were linked with the Nazi party.

From these sources, a number of themes have emerged.

Family Loyalty

Many family therapy trainees report that during the preparation of their family reconstruction, parents and grandparents do not like to give a detailed account of the Nazi era, but evade the subject. The trainees themselves have problems mentioning those subjects, because they don't know what they should ask. The silence and concealment, the avoidance of asking and the evasion of research have a long tradition in German families since 1945. Many times I have personally experienced how hard it is to elicit curiosity among our trainees for this project. Sometimes I have the feeling that they only pretend to be curious. Welzer, Moller and Tschuggnall have proved impressively in 40 documented interviews with families and 142 individuals, how strongly family loyalties bind the following generations:

Among the interviews are two instances where contemporaries talk about murders they committed, and there are reports of executions, but this does not leave any traces in the individual interviews with children and grandchildren — as if they had never ever heard of these events. But they seize on any possible indication that their grandparents acted 'honourably', and they try to invent versions of the past, wherein the grandparents always appear as people of integrity (2002: 11).

Paradoxically, it is not so much what is *not* known, but what later generations *do* know about crimes during the National Socialist era

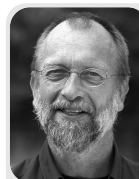
which creates the need within children and grandchildren to place their parents and grandparents in the universe of the Nazi horror in such a way that no shadow will be cast upon them (2002: 13).

Even Claudia Brunner (Brunner & Seltmann, 2004) who wrote a very thorough biography of her great-uncle Alois Brunner, Eichmann's right-hand man in planning and organising the extermination of the Jews, talks about family loyalty. On the one hand she broke a family taboo when she 'concerned herself with the National Socialist past of her own family' (11), on the other hand she kept secret the correspondence between this great-uncle, who lived undisturbed until recently in Damascus, and her father, and represses the fact that she herself wrote once a letter to him (79).

Denial and Minimisation

The following dialogue that occurred during one family reconstruction session might be considered a good example of denial: the grandmother's husband was the head of the SD (the Nazi secret service) in Bremen, later on in Hamburg and then in Norway. The grandmother was his secretary in Bremen. The trainee was asked, 'What did your grandmother do professionally?' The answer was, 'She had a job [pause] with the Administration'.

Probably there exists a 'part of' the granddaughter (Schwartz, 1995; Schindler, 2002b), which knows that the grandmother was indirectly involved in crimes, even if only as a secretary, and another part, which wants to deny this.



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The second part prevails when she gives her evasive reply. This possibility was discussed during the family reconstruction. Later, documents were ‘discovered’ by this family, which showed more of the guilty involvement of the grandmother’s husband (he was not the biological father of the mother) and of the grandmother herself.

Another example for denial and minimisation can be found (to my way of thinking) in the book by Uwe Timm (2003) *Am Beispiel meines Bruders (My Brother, for Example)*. Timm explains that only after the death of his parents and his older sister was he able to write this book, because he did not want to hurt his mother. Timm tells the family history in combination with the short biography of his brother (sixteen years older), who enlisted voluntarily with the *Waffen-SS* and died of his wounds in 1943 during the war with the Soviet Union. Timm draws on his brother’s letters and diary, and quotes excerpts from his father’s letters, and remarks made by his parents. Yet he refuses to give his own ideas as to why the brother volunteered to fight, and actually chose the SS. I believe that he plays down a family dynamic which he personally experienced.

I had a similar experience while reading *Requiem für einen Gestapo-Mann, Hommage an meinen Vater (Requiem for a Gestapo Officer, Homage to my Father)* by Eitel Riefenstahl (1999). Riefenstahl’s starting point is his father’s so-called *Persilscheine* (‘squeaky clean confessions’), which were intended to exonerate the father during ‘re-education’ after the war. In a faintly ironic dialogue with his long-dead father, Riefenstahl tells about the latter’s life. In all that refers to the Gestapo, Riefenstahl avoids finding out for himself, remains superficial, and concludes with a blanket excuse:

My father was worn down and inwardly broken by his fight for a little humanity within the murderous apparatus of the Gestapo. After the end of the war and a humiliating internment he then had to request confirmation of his character traits as part of the so-called ‘denazification’. This was too much for his psyche (20).

Here the Gestapo officer becomes the victim. Riefenstahl is a professional journalist, perfectly capable of doing his own research, as is proved in the last part of his book when he talks about his work as a journalist in South America. When he avoids doing the same in relation to his father’s involvement in the murderous and oppressive system of the Gestapo, this can only mean he has opted for denial and minimising his father’s complicity.

Distancing

During family reconstructions I often heard statements like the following:

‘My grandfather was a member of the SS, but we had almost no contact with him’.

‘My father’s uncle was a member of the Party, but I only met him at family celebrations.’

‘My mother’s father was a real Nazi, but he was already dead when I was born. My mother must have suffered under him.’

In family situations like those, it is easy to distance oneself and to preserve one’s sense of integrity. Distancing oneself seems to be easier if those family members who were in close contact with the Party were shown (or are shown) to be unsympathetic people or ‘cut off’ from the family. By analysing interviews with children of committed Nazis, I arrived at the conclusion that:

They create a distance from their fathers by categorising them as ‘bad fathers’. In that way, they also have become victims of the father, in a sense adding themselves to number of their father’s victims or creating somehow a certain proximity to those other victims (Schindler, 2002a: 23).

An impressive example of such distancing is the interview that Josef Mengele’s son (born 1944) gave to Gerald L. Posner and John Ware (1998). The son talks about his difficult search for his father (Auschwitz’s ‘Angel of Death’) whom he met only after 1945 in the guise of an ‘uncle’.

Fritz Starke (2003) tells about life with his father, a notorious SS dentist. By reading his memoir, the readers can share the author’s life as a child, when he and his siblings, and also the dogs, were systematically tortured. The son summarises:

In 1945, Germany was liberated from Nazism; in our family everything stayed as before. [Example:] The children had five seconds to sit down at the table, the chair’s back had to be parallel to the table, the hands at right angles to the table’s edge and right and left from the plate, the palm placed right on the edge — and to stay quiet. If one of the children failed to be ready within the scheduled time, it had to eat standing, back to the wall (42).

When questioned, the children had to add the words, ‘dear father’ to every answer: ‘Where have you come from?’ ‘From school, dear father’ (57).

Starke could distance himself emotionally only when he crossed the frontier into the then East Germany, and was informed by an East German major about the SS-past of his father. Only then he could start his own research.

Three years later a research assignment made it possible to look into the personal file of SS-dentist Dr. Dietrich Kraft. The major had told the truth (116).

At university Starke chose theology as a subject.

Ever since his school days he had believed that only as a pastor he could become someone completely different to his father. His college teachers had taught him that he carried the legacy of his father’s character within him (118).

He listened to the political lectures given by Professor W. Abendroth, and confronted his father with his new found knowledge. Afterwards he decided to become a teacher. Finally he discovered that not only his father but also his mother had clung to the Nazi’s dream of a liberated East. On her deathbed, she told him: ‘If we had won, you would long

ago have been an *Obergruppenführer* [SS Lieutenant General] and not just a *Gruppenführer* [SS Major General] and would have been in charge of a camp in the East' (126).

It is uncertain whether Helga Schneider's *Lass mich gehen* (*Let Me Go*) (2001) is autobiographical, or just a very realistic novel. If it is autobiographical, then a 60-year old daughter talks about her second and final visit with her mother, who left her family in 1941 to work with the SS in a concentration camp. The daughter is searching for the mother's emotions and at the same time for her own relationship with this woman. She hopes for the mother's insight, but is unable to find it. Her conclusion: 'I cannot hate you — I can only not love you' (174).

This formula proves how difficult it is to separate oneself from the family member in question, even when the emotional links are weak and the main feeling is strangeness. The daughter seems to get her energy from the search for emotional belonging. Her whole generation is still influenced by the Nazis' vague 'racial biology': 'Could it be that I carry in me, in my genes, something of this woman? I shudder at the thought' (153).

Understanding and Differentiation

During a family reconstruction I remember the following statement: 'My great-aunt was the "Angel of Death" of Bergen-Belsen. I wanted to know the history of her life.' A female therapist looks for, and finds, documentation of her family history. She instigates a confrontation with members of her family, their horror and their guilt. She searches for the meaning of all of this for herself, for her own responsibility. Many months she struggles with it, concluding only, 'I am still looking.'

During our first seminar for the children of victims and perpetrators, one woman tried to express her need with the words: 'I want to find the father behind the soldier. I want to understand how he managed with his physical disability, after having previously believed the Nazi ideology about 'worthless life'. Her research and family sculpture originated a process of approach to the 'father's inner struggle between ideology and parental love'. Her goal was to get emotionally closer to her father, while keeping her distance from the other parts of his personality, without playing anything down, and to search for personal responsibility.

In 2002, Herrad Schenk wrote: *Wie in einem uferlosen Strom. Das Leben meiner Eltern* (*A River Without Banks: My Parents' Life*), an impressive narrative of her father's and mother's lives, the history of their development and where it became stuck. Both parents were absolutely resolute in their Nazi convictions, although they came from different social levels. From 1940 until 1944 they lived in Galicia — her father worked with the SD — right in the middle of the genocide of the Jews. After the war both parents claimed to have been more or less ignorant of this fact. The father escaped denazification by living many years abroad, taking unskilled jobs. The mother lived with her five daughters at her mother's on very little money. The author, born in 1948, tries to

reconstruct and comprehend the lives of her parents, their ideals, their motives, and their inner and exterior constraints.

This book is very moving because the author's inner torment is very clear.

He [the author's father] lived in the conviction of having acted quite honourably towards the Ukrainian and Polish people, at all events, more humanely than most of the German occupying forces (153).

But she cannot accept his claim not to have participated in the genocide of the Jews. She studies the transcripts of his interrogation by the state attorney in 1965 about the murder of the Jews in Galicia. He concedes that before this interrogation, 'he thought about it'.

This was a movement towards acknowledgement of moral guilt. In his extreme defensiveness before the interrogation he could not achieve more. He questions himself incessantly, his thoughts hurt him, especially during the nights, they consume him while sitting sleepless in the sitting room sorting his notes (333).

Stating finally, 'I wished I could believe him...' she has arrived at her own judgment: that she cannot believe him, that she is convinced of his guilt. She has done her research and she has questioned historians. At the end of the book she talks to her father and says to him what he taught her himself: 'What counts in life is not good intentions, but what effect your actions have' (362). She judges him guilty.

Similarly moving is the book by Wibke Bruns (2004) *Meines Vaters Land. Geschichte einer deutschen Familie* (*My Father's Land. History of a German Family*). The 63-year-old daughter wants to know more about her father, who was executed as a 'conspirator' following the failed assassination attempt on Hitler on the July 20, 1944. Her parents already being separated at that time, she as a daughter grows up without much information about this father. But when she sees him in a film scene during the trial she wants to know more. She is looking for his involvement in the National Socialist system, for the involvement of her mother, and to sort out his responsibility.

When did he understand the whirl of events he was a part of? When did the knowledge grow — if it did — of the terrible injustice of the Third Reich? When did you perceive that you were cheated? (17).

Referring to the extermination of the Jews:

I have to work on the assumption that he knew much, even when his work was mostly connected with the military. I want to believe that my mother did not realise the extent of what was going on, but she would only have to look out of the window. In 1942, the Jews of Halberstadt have already been transported to the concentration camps. Neither she nor he mention this anywhere, nor the introduction of the Star of David, (which every Jew has to wear). Else (the mother) writes freely about anything and everything in the children's diary. But even after the war, when she paints the destruction of Germany in gloomy colours, she doesn't talk about those things' (337).

Even if HG [her father] and Else and all the others had been in agreement with what was happening around them — which I don't want to believe — they do not mention it, although they write about everything else. I have no answer (338).

The motive for the conspirators of the July 20 was not the crimes against humanity which had been committed in the name of Germany. Rather, 'German greatness, German honour was in question, the goddamned flag, which they saw besmirched' (18).

Conclusion

These typical examples clarify how difficult it still is today to come to terms with the guilt of family members and their Nazi past. But it is worthwhile to sift through and piece together the family history. Emotional taboo zones become accessible, and it is possible to feel the sorrow. In coming to terms with the past, our own identity finds a broader and more secure basis. For readers of biography, the most significant texts are those where the author's inner struggle with contradicting emotions becomes visible to the reader, and where readers can follow the process of coping with, and coming to terms with, this emotional legacy.

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Editors and their Sheds

“... it had taken many years of rigorously scientific work before she acquired the confidence to admit that she ever used techniques and abilities not measurable by science; that to some people they came naturally”

(Jessica Mann: *The Voice from the Grave*, London, Constable, 2002: 124.)

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