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HEIRS TO THE HOLOCAUST

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BOSTON — Lucila Nerenberg snatched a napkin off the floor where she had dropped it, wadded it into a ball and hurled it toward a trash can with such force that the Germans milling nearby jumped aside.

She had scared the enemy. She felt happy, satisfied, even exhilarated, because, in her own tiny way, Lucila had struck back at the Nazis and their Holocaust. Good!

Later, Lucila, a 30-year-old psychiatrist from Ann Arbor, regretted her action. How could she have been so mean, so insensitive? She hadn't struck back at the Nazis at all. She had merely startled a few of their sons and daughters, already vulnerable, fragile people. Men and women already tormented by their parents' wretched pasts. Men and women so guilt-ridden they had gathered — many traveling all the way from Germany — to meet with her and with other children of Holocaust survivors.

They were brought together for four days at the Harvard Medical School in Boston by a Harvard psychologist whose Jewish parents had survived the Holocaust and a Cambridge, Mass., businesswoman whose German father had been a Nazi.

Twenty-two people — 11 children of survivors and 11 children of Nazis — sat in impersonal conference rooms and shared with one another feelings many of them couldn't share with their own families.

For Lucila, it would be easier if she hated the Germans.

But how could she?

How could she hate Helga Muller, 49, the timid homemaker from Munich who had discovered just five years ago that her father had been a brutal Gestapo chief?

CHILDREN OF SURVIVORS AND CHILDREN OF NAZIS TRY TO HEAL THE SCARS

Helga was so shaken when she learned of her father's Nazi involvement that she considered killing herself; only the thought of her own children finding her mangled body kept her from ramming her car into a tree.

So horrified, she traveled to Russia to inspect and cry at the place where her father and others like him had ordered the deaths of "undesirables" targeted by the Nazis — Jews, gays, Gypsies, Poles.

So terrified, she refused for a long time to wear the silver leaf-patterned necklace her mother had passed on to her; she feared her father had stolen it from one of his victims.

Recently, Helga has begun wearing the necklace, to remember the 12 million people killed in the Holocaust — and to prove, to herself as much as to anyone, that her father's evil "is not repeated in the children."

The children.

Lucila had come to the meeting because she was angry and scared.

Helga had come because she was sorry and scared.

But they both ache. They are both victims.

Remarkable relationships

That Lucila and Helga and the others spent four draining days trying to understand one another's pain is nothing less than remarkable.

That the children of Holocaust survivors and the children of Nazis talked, grew to care about one another and, in at least one case, discussed visiting one another's homes. That they started a newsletter. That they planned another meeting next year, in Germany.

In a bizarre way, the relationships make sense.

Lucila, Helga, everyone in the group is searching — for understanding, for answers, for peace. Everyone in the group has been injured, by histories of betrayal and feelings of anger. By worries that in a world so full of hate — a world where even today "ethnic cleansing" is tolerated in Yugoslavia, where even today neo-Nazis attack refugees in Germany — that a tragedy like the Holocaust could happen again. They are haunted by questions, confusion and distrust.

And loss, especially loss. So much loss.

■ One daughter was only 6 when she was hidden by another family so she would not be taken, as her parents were, by Nazi soldiers. Her father survived the Holocaust and returned for her, but her mother died in a concentration camp.

■ Another daughter was an adult when the memory of her father became a casualty of the war.

She'd always smiled when she remembered the way he'd doted on her, allowing her to skip the daily cod liver oil her teacher prescribed for all the students at school. She stopped smiling when she learned that her father was a Nazi. That's when the questions and doubt took over. Was he a good man who had been caught up in a misguided cause and unwittingly brought others who respected him into the party? Or was he inherently evil, beyond redemption?

■ A son still doesn't know whether to believe his Nazi father. The father, a messenger during the war, insists he didn't know millions of people were being put to death. But how could he not have known? his son asks. How is that possible?

■ A daughter is tortured by the irony of her parents' marriage. Her Polish father was imprisoned in a camp where he endured beatings and back-breaking work. His assignment: to help build a crematorium. Meanwhile, her mother, a ballerina, spent the war dancing to entertain Nazi officers.

■ One daughter worried she was betraying her father, a concentration camp survivor, by meeting the children of his tormentors. His past had been so awful: he had tried so hard to shield her from it.

As a child, she had asked her father why he had numbers tattooed on his arm. He'd told her that he once met a woman he loved so much that he had her phone number put on his arm so he would remember it forever and ever.

Did sitting down with the children of Nazis mean she had forgiven their parents? She wasn't ready to do that.

Light to see by

In order to live in the present, these people must address their common history. To eliminate hatred, they must face their fears. To understand their differences, they must accept their similarities.

Everyone everywhere — men and women, blacks and whites, Arabs and Jews, children of Holocaust survivors and children of Nazis — has something in common with everyone else. But it isn't always easy to see.

So on a rainy Thursday, the first day of the Boston meeting, the organizers — Ilona Kuphal, the daughter of an SS officer, and Mona Weissmark, a psychologist whose parents survived concentration camps — gave white candles to the children of Nazis and to the children of Holocaust survivors.

Someone lit a candle and passed it around the room so everyone, seated in the circle, could use its flame to light their own.

A symbol. To recognize their connection.

For a time, everyone stared into his or her flame, thinking about the horrors of the Holocaust.

Then they blew out their candles. Another symbol, signifying that nothing can change the past.

Some people cried. Jews comforted Germans. Children of Nazis reached out to children of Holocaust survivors.

"It's shocking," Weissmark said. "We're supposed to be enemies.

"Hitler never imagined that in the end, the children of the Third Reich and the children of the Jews and other non-Jewish survivors would feel connected. We sort of really messed up his plans.

"It's an irony. But on the other hand, we believe it's a very hopeful irony."

Another irony: That so many of the survivors' children and the Nazis' children have careers and interests that involve helping people and righting wrongs. One man, whose parents survived the Holocaust, works with AIDS patients. The woman whose Nazi father saved her from the cod liver oil is a peace activist. Lucila is a psychiatrist who works with sexually abused children and with other trauma victims. Helga volunteers for an environmental group.

Most members of both groups, Weissmark explained, "are very sensitive to any kind of injustice.

"You discover your mother was in a concentration camp, or you discover your father participated — not necessarily in a concentration camp, but participated, was involved in something. That discovery becomes like a milestone," Weissmark said. "You ... you have this incredible emotional response to it."

Her father's name

For a long time, Helga Muller had blocked out much of her childhood, remembering mostly the happy times: how she and her brothers and sisters "played like squirrels" in the big trees surrounding their home in the German countryside.

About her father, Helga recalls that at mealtimes, he would sit quietly, thinking of something far away, something she knew nothing about, before he could begin eating.

"Shhhhh," her mother would say during those times, "don't disturb your father."

Helga remembers little else.

She grew up. Got married. Had two children. But now she worries enough about being recognized that she fibbed to a reporter about her children's sex and was purposely vague about her hometown. Helga doesn't want to be too visible because she worries that her brothers and sisters will be angry with her for daring to admit their father's past.

"I'm the bad one here in Germany," Helga said. "I'm going into a very, very bad story of my family."

In the mid-'80s, Helga fell into a long depression. She had horrible, grisly nightmares. She dreamed of bodies lying in a river. She dreamed about a building with no roof or walls, with human skulls planted in its foundation.

Helga knew her father, who died in a motorcycle accident when she was 13, had been a member of the SS. A family friend had accidentally told her brother. But the news hadn't meant anything to her. It was similar to what thousands of Germans knew about their parents.

Still, the nightmares continued. And Helga needed to do something about them.

"All I heard from my mother was 'You are crazy.' But inside, I knew what happened."

Helga confirmed her suspicions at a military archive.

Even though her father had never been tried or convicted of war crimes, she found his name listed with others who had committed horrible acts, things like taking children away from their mothers, sticking needles through prisoners' tongues, killing so-called undesirables.

Helga still has trouble discussing the details.

She absentmindedly picked up the paper wrapper from a drinking straw and tied it into a knot when asked for more information about her father. "I can't tell you my father's name," she said. "I cannot."

After the discovery, Helga wanted to die.

She sank into a depression that was deeper, darker and emptier than anything she'd been trapped inside before. "I think I was somehow blind," she said. "I wasn't living."

She was afraid to leave her house, fearing that the children whose parents were imprisoned during the Holocaust would chase her down and kill her.

with children of survivors

such a horrible thing. Each of us has this sadism inside, but to bring it out, that's another thing."

Helga expected the survivors' children gathered in Boston to hate her.

Her mother's story

Lucila Nerenberg wasn't sure what to expect from the children of Nazis, but she knew she wanted to be strong, to look strong, to feel strong. "I found myself training as if I were going into a boxing match."

In the days before her trip to Boston, Lucila had doubled her exercise routine, riding her bike 16 miles along a downtown Ann Arbor route.

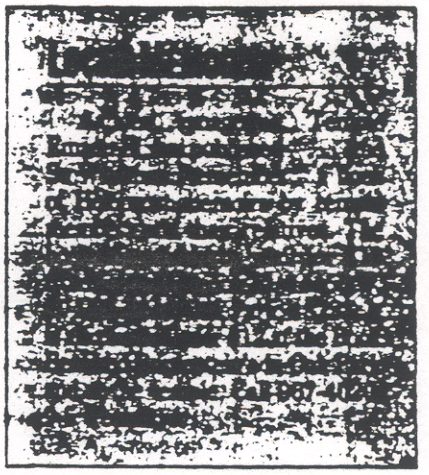
She packed her suitcase with care, making sure to include dresses with shoulder pads so she would look more imposing. "I wanted to frighten them," she said of the Germans. "I wanted them to be frightened of *me*."

Lucila had known little about her mother's experience during the Holocaust. Her mother had talked only about being lucky, about living in a Romanian farmhouse, about being hidden by kind nuns.

Yet Lucila's mother repeatedly warned her that being outspoken about politics or anything else could be dangerous. That being visibly religious could be bad.

A year ago, as part of her job as a psychiatrist, Lucila attended a conference on death and dying. She realized she had an enormous fear of death.

And she wondered why.



Growing up in New York state, Lucila was a serious, intense, studious child. When the family later moved to Argentina, she did well in school, even though every day, she had to walk by soldiers armed with machine guns on her way to class. Even though, with a military government and a shoot-out in her own apartment building, being distracted from her studies would have been understandable.

As an adult, Lucila still expects the worst. Her death, she is certain, will be a violent one.

"If I read a story in the newspaper or TV or hear about a violent crime or a terrible accident, it just seems so alive and around the corner from me and anyone I care about. It seems more probable that I and the people I care about will die a horrible, violent death.

"It's like I'm expecting it."

Lucila wrote to her mother, explaining her feelings.

Her mother cried as she realized that she had passed along her own fears and anxieties to Lucila.

Lucila began asking more questions.

And gradually, she learned her mother's story.

"Her childhood was spent waiting to die," Lucila said. "They had a lot of friends who died, and there were bodies in the streets and people screaming, 'Death to the Jews!' outside. The synagogue next door was burned down, and she said that they knew they were not going to be just killed, but they were going to be *exterminated*."

Her mother's family arrived home after a bomb raid and found a cousin in the kitchen of their house sobbing and screaming. Her leg was bloody.

The cousin, her husband and her children had been eating dinner when the raid began. They ran to a bomb shelter, but there wasn't enough room for everyone inside. The cousin got separated from the rest. A bomb fell on the shelter. Her husband and children were killed.

Lucila's mother's father was imprisoned in a concentration camp. When he returned to home, he was barely recognizable, a virtual skeleton.

Lucila's mother hid in ditches to avoid bomb blasts. She would shield her eyes and turn her head so she wouldn't have to look at the bodies that lay in the streets.

Lucila's mother's family spent part of the war pretending to be Gentiles and hiding in the Romanian farmhouse her mother had spoken of fondly.

"The role of my mother is like a brave soldier," Lucila said. "To always be strong. To always be prepared for the worst. I think my mom passed a lot of these feelings to me.

"I just expect the normal course of life is waiting for the terrible thing to happen. I think I did get that from my mother."

Not to blame

So much comes from the parents — Helga's guilt and sorrow, Lucila's anger and fear. And yet the children are not to blame.

"I thought of them as their parents, and, you know, they're not their parents," Lucila said, a few days after she left Boston. "They're carrying around tremendous shame and guilt.

"I think at the end, you can say we all really did care about each other, which doesn't mean everything is OK.

"You can't make everything OK."