

Extract from NO ENEMY TO CONQUER
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Germany: Meeting the “Monsters of My Dreams”

Zella and Helga are best friends. Two middle-aged women, traveling together, talking about children and grandchildren and the pills they take for migraines; all very normal. But should they be doing this? Some have difficulty accepting their friendship.

They are cofounders of an organization called “One by One, Inc.” that takes its name from a book about the Holocaust by Judith Miller. Miller wrote: “We must remind ourselves that the Holocaust was not six million. It was one, plus one, plus one. . . . Only in understanding that civilized people must defend the one, by one, by one . . . can the Holocaust, the incomprehensible, be given meaning.”

Members of One by One are children of victims of Nazi atrocities, who grew up in the shadow of their parents’ suffering and trauma, and descendants of the Nazi era, whose parents or grandparents were perpetrators or bystanders in one of the most evil chapters of human history. They seek out the humanity in each other as they listen with compassion to one another’s stories of pain, guilt, anguish, loss, and fear. As the stories resound within them, the women say, the burdens are lightened and the impact of their legacies transformed, offering hope to future generations.

The path of transformation is never easy, and the stories of Zella and Helga are testimony to that.

Zella Brown is the daughter of Wolf and Barbara Kaplansky, two Holocaust survivors. Seventy-five members of her family died in the Holocaust. Wolf survived thirteen concentration camps and felt that the only reason he had been spared was to bear witness to the truth.

Zella, her younger sister Judy, and their brother Ely grew up listening to “those relentless stories that defy description.” Wolf’s daily reprimand: “Don’t ever forget what Hitler did to the Jews,” resounded in her ears long after the stories faded into the night. Fearing the children would forget, he would follow this with the command, “Write it down so you don’t forget.”

Over the years, other Jewish children told her how lucky she was to have parents who spoke to her about their experiences. But at times, she wanted to blurt out, “You call this ‘lucky’ when every waking hour you try desperately to erase the image of that yellowed photo of the naked dead bodies piled high like cords of wood. ‘*Kikh, dos is vos zey ongemakht tsu di Yidden* (“Look, this is what they did to the Jews”).’” As Wolf spoke these words, he would place the picture inches from her face to make sure she would “never forget.”

She wrote it down and has remembered, but at a cost. It took years of therapy, twelve-step recovery programs, and her newfound Buddhist practice to unburden the heavy load. She and sister Judy joined a Boston-based group of child survivors called “One Generation After.” One day, a peculiar ad in its monthly newsletter caught their attention: “Descendants of Holocaust survivors wanted for meeting with descendants of Nazis.” With her comfortable, middle-class life unraveling because of divorce, the last place she expected to find herself would be in a room full of Germans,

whom she called “the monsters of my dreams.” Her sister, however, responded to the ad for them both.

So on a beautiful fall day in Boston in September 1992, Zella, who held all Germans responsible for killing her grandparents, aunts, and uncles and for the mental and physical abuse of her parents, and who had done everything she could to avoid meeting them, suddenly found herself sitting with eleven of them. “Suddenly, I found myself facing the enemy, the descendants of the Third Reich, and I was shocked to find that they, too, suffered from Hitler’s legacy.”

Meanwhile, Helga Mueller, married with two sons and living near Munich, faced a different challenge. She had been born in 1943 in the midst of the war. Her father had been “a good man,” an ordinary foot soldier of the Reich, “who had saved lives.” At least that was the family lore.

Later in life, dogged by serious psychological problems, she went into psychoanalysis. She was haunted by nightmares filled with images of corpses and skeletons, and her therapist asked her to find out about her father’s work in World War II. After a laborious search, she discovered first he had been in an SS unit in White Russia in 1942 and 1943 and then that he actually had been the Gestapo chief in White Russia, responsible for the deaths of forty thousand men, women, Jews, Russians, old people, and children—personally participating in murder.

This discovery, in April 1989, shattered her. “I sank into a deep hole.” Frightened of death, she locked herself into her room. For weeks she wouldn’t dare go out of the house. She felt that the descendants of her father’s victims were pursuing her. Her whole life, she had felt guilt; now she

knew why. She felt she was being suffocated by the horrors she had discovered. After what seemed an eternity to her, and the return to a “more normal” life, she needed to find out how to live with this newfound awareness. “When you get divorced, you can get a book on how to do it; and when someone dies, you can get a book on how to deal with it. But there’s no book to get on how to deal with a father who is a mass murderer.”

Up to this point, she had always shut out World War II from her life. Now, she began to read everything she could lay her hands on about the Holocaust. By fanatically immersing herself in the subject, she felt she was repenting for her father’s guilt. She even went to White Russia, now Belarus, where her father had committed his crimes. She felt a growing desire to meet descendants of the victims. “I hoped they would spit on me and clearly express their contempt, that it would lessen my pain if they thrashed me and walked all over me. I wanted to reduce the pain that I, as a daughter of this man, deserved.”

While doing research about her father, she found out about a planned study project whereby children of survivors and of perpetrators would have an opportunity to encounter each other. Asked to be one of the eleven German descendants, she prepared to travel to Boston in September of 1992.

As she got ready to encounter her “enemies,” she developed an irrational fear of those she was to meet. “I came to Boston alone and lost, stuffed with fear but also with an inner emptiness. It really was like a lamb for the slaughter. I stood in front of the door of the house where the meeting was to take place. My legs were leaden. I wanted to turn and run.” A woman asked her whether she had

come for the research project; together they found their way to the meeting room.

She saw some strangers. A voice called out, “Honey, can you help me cut some bagels?” An elegant middle-aged woman handed her a plastic knife. “It was my first meeting with a Jew: Zella Brown.” Much later, they would laugh together about this first encounter with a plastic knife.

The session began. The twenty-three participants each told their stories. Helga knew little English and had never heard the word *Holocaust* before. “I only understood a fraction of what was talked about and noticed with alarm that my time to talk was getting closer.” When it came, she was tongue-tied. “I couldn’t get out a word. I didn’t know what to say. I was told I could speak in German, and it would be translated. I still couldn’t do it.” Zella took her hand and she began.

Zella says, “This is how I first met Helga. With fear in her eyes she told us that she hoped she would be safe among us and that she suffered right along with us. Bravely she shared with us how her relentless search for the truth had brought her to this conference. I suddenly felt a release of some kind, an opening of my heart that Helga’s display of honesty and raw emotions triggered. I had to tell her, ‘Helga, I’m here to say to Hitler, “You failed. You’re not going to succeed in getting me to hate Helga any more.”’ In my wildest dreams, I could never have anticipated her response to me: ‘You mean more to me than my mother—and she is still alive—because you said that.’”

“A miraculous bond took place during those five, emotionally draining days in Boston,” Zella told me. “The only word that genuinely describes what transpired is healing. Years of therapy were not

able to accomplish what this experience was able to do for me and others.”

In the next weeks, Zella and Helga continued to get acquainted through an exchange of letters, sharing their innermost thoughts. Six months later, Helga and Zella were invited to another dialogue, this one in Germany, in the Black Forest. Unlike the first one in Boston, all the old and new participants would be staying under one roof, and Zella and Helga were excited to be roommates.

Since 1993 Jewish and German members of One by One have met annually for week-long retreats to tell their stories and face the terrible legacy they share. They now number in the hundreds. “Many of us have a dark, heavy burden from this horrible past, and we need to heal from it and do something positive about it,” says One by One board member Rosalie Gerut, a cantor and musician whose parents survived Hitler’s death camps.

The members of One by One do not equate dialogue with forgiveness or understanding with excusing. Zella e-mailed me: “The subject of ‘forgiveness’ is dear to my heart given the long and tedious journey I have had to take as the daughter of two Holocaust survivors. But our organization has avoided the ‘forgiveness’ topic. For Helga and me, it has never come up. I don’t need to forgive her for something she didn’t commit. It was a dialogue process that brought us to a place of healing, friendship, and love. Some did have the need to apologize ‘for what their ancestors did,’ and when I heard such a statement, it was gratifying.”

Nor would they ever compare the suffering of the survivors’ side with that of the perpetrators. Listening does not blur the differences or what

separates them. But listening to descendants of survivors, they say, is an attempt to repair the threads of their common humanity that Nazi Germany sought to irrevocably break, and the dialogues are held in Germany because it is important to reclaim their right to be there in the home of their relatives and ancestors. It gives a chance for many Germans who have never met a Jew to meet one. The first challenge is for facilitators to help everyone feel “safe” so that “their story becomes our story,” and all suddenly realize that they could easily have experienced what he or she did if they were born in the other’s place.

Helga says that talking about her father’s crimes to those whose families suffered under the Nazis has helped her to deal with the guilt and shame that she thought she could never escape. Today, she is not guilty, she says, but she would be if she were to push away history as some Germans have done. “I will never forget the way my Jewish friend has helped me survive this horror. Discovering my father was a mass murderer has produced so much that is positive in the people I have met.” Zella finds it “especially heartwarming that, at least for our families, the cycle of hate will end with our children.”

In an early exchange of letters, Helga asked Zella, “Don’t you think we can both change the world?” Zella replied much later, “Yes, I do believe we can change the world. In fact, I think we already have.” She recalled the remarkable teens at Carver High School in Plymouth, Massachusetts, who had bonded with them after their talk and whose teachers begged them never to stop what they were doing; and the congregants from Temple Beth Abraham in nearby Canton who were moved

to tears when they told their stories during their Yom Ashoah commemoration. She referred to the grateful soldiers and their families at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, who had formed a receiving line to thank them individually for telling their stories so courageously; and to the time when the entire staff at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. gave them a standing ovation.

“But Helga,” Zella went on, “you will agree that the most memorable and most emotional experience for both of us was in my parents’ home in Holbrook, Maine, when my mother approached you as we were leaving: ‘Helga, I want you to know that I don’t hate you for what your father did. I am just so happy that you, together with my daughter, will tell the world the truth, because it pains me so when I hear people say that it did not happen.’ And then she hugged you, gave you a kiss on the cheek, and said, ‘Be sure to write, Helga.’”