



# **Grandpa Wasn't a Nazi: The Holocaust in German Family Remembrance**

**Harald Welzer**

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**Grandpa Wasn't a Nazi:**  
**The Holocaust**  
**in German Family Remembrance**

**Harald Welzer**

Harald Welzer is the director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Memory Research at the Institute for Cultural Studies in Essen and professor of social psychology at the University of Witten/Herdecke. His publications include *Verweilen beim Grauen. Essays zum wissenschaftlichen Umgang mit dem Holocaust [Dwelling on Horror: Essays on the Scholarly Treatment of the Holocaust]* (Tübingen: Edition Discord, 1997); *Opa war kein Nazi. Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis [Grandpa Wasn't a Nazi: National Socialism and the Holocaust in Family Memory]* with S. Moller and K. Tschuggnall (Frankfurt/M: Fischer, 2002); *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis. Eine Theorie der Erinnerung [Communicative Memory: A Theory of Remembrance]* (Munich: Beck, 2002).

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## Foreword

As Americans and Germans have grappled with the terrifying events of 1933-45, both have come to understand the importance of preserving memory of the Holocaust and incorporating the lessons of history in creating democratic and tolerant societies. Holocaust remembrance today in Germany takes many forms: formal educational curricula, television programs, books, debates in the media, commemorative events, and the recent opening of a major memorial in the heart of Berlin. Such a widespread educational effort has borne results. A 2005 AJC survey found that 77 percent of Germans questioned could correctly identify Auschwitz, Dachau, and Treblinka—higher than the percentages among American and British respondents—and 79 percent thought that teaching about the Nazi extermination of the Jews should be required in schools (about the same as responses in the United States and Britain).

How does one measure the success of Holocaust education? The research study summarized in this monograph by Prof. Harald Welzer, director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Memory Research at the Institute for Cultural Studies in Essen, suggests that what is learned cognitively is not always absorbed into the heart. Welzer interviewed forty Western and Eastern German families, both in a family setting and individually, to discover how they interpreted their objective knowledge of the history of the Third Reich in terms of their own family history. He found that the history transmitted through intergenerational conversation was quite different from the textbook history of the Holocaust period.

Almost all the younger Germans interviewed believed that their own grandparents had not been involved or had opposed the racist policies of Nazism. Even when grandparents admitted their participation in Nazi crimes, their offspring did not “hear” them or reinterpreted the stories in ways that turned their forebears into heroes. This process of “cumulative heroization” reflects the natural tendency to associate positive elements and block out negative ones for the people we love.

But there is danger lurking in this all-too-human phenomenon. First, the story passed down by successive generations increasingly whitewashes

and distorts history, so that not turning in one's family doctor, who was Jewish, as opposed to hiding him, or giving a glass of milk to passing refugees after the war was over, is portrayed as a heroic act of resistance. Second, by separating the evil of Nazism from the good qualities associated with beloved relatives, the respondents managed to distinguish between the "Nazis," who are "others," and the "Germans" who were themselves victims of Nazism.

All this suggests that, despite extensive, in-depth Holocaust education, both in formal settings and in the general culture, the phenomena of "my grandpa was not a Nazi" and of "politically correct talk" remain problematic. The good news, on the other hand, is that this study made a significant impact upon publication in Germany and entered into the public discourse about the residual effects of the war years. From this discussion, we hope will emerge a more probing appraisal of the past and a greater vigilance toward the future.

The American Jewish Committee has had a long and significant relationship with Germany since AJC's founding in 1906, mainly by American Jews of German origin. Shortly after World War II, AJC became the first Jewish organization to develop programs with Germany, working to promote democratization and to spur awareness of the Holocaust. Some twenty-five years ago, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and AJC initiated a series of exchanges between American Jews and Germans, building bridges by visiting each other's countries and engaging in intense dialogue. Since then, AJC has collaborated with other German political foundations as well. In 1998, AJC became the first American Jewish organization to open a permanent office in Berlin, the Lawrence and Lee Ramer Center for German-Jewish Relations.

The Berlin office brought this important study to our attention, and engaged Belinda Cooper to translate it into English. She performed her task with skill. In sharing Prof. Welzer's research with an English-speaking audience, we are attempting to make a wider public aware of the complex interplay of national and family historical memories. From this understanding, we can grapple more effectively with the complexities of the past while striving for a brighter future.

David A. Harris  
Executive Director, American Jewish Committee  
August 2005



## Grandpa Wasn't a Nazi: The Holocaust in German Family Remembrance<sup>1</sup>

In Germany, Holocaust education in all its forms is very popular and successful. Students learn about Nazism and the *Shoah* from school curricula, participate in commemorative programs, and make trips to Holocaust sites. Surveys show that young Germans are generally quite well informed about the historical events and can correctly define key terms such as “Auschwitz” and “SS.” Thus education on the history of the Third Reich might be considered a success—if one doesn't ask how the young targets of this educational campaign actually use the product. Knowledge and the assimilation of knowledge on a personal basis are two very different things.

For too long, the tacit assumption was that one needed only to transmit the right message for the lessons to be assimilated. There was little appreciation for the range of subtexts—fascinating, daunting, and anesthetizing—that accompany the transmission of history. As this study shows, young Germans acquire knowledge of history in general, and of Nazism and the Holocaust in particular, in a way very different from what their educators have intended.

A young person's awareness of history and his concepts about the past come from many sources: films, television, novels, comics, computer games, and family histories, among others. History lessons are but one source among many. Formal courses aim to pass on knowledge, but cannot compete with the emotional impact of images from the past offered by more immediate sources. Cognitive knowledge of history pales beside the emotional relationship to the past that come from one's own grandparents talking about their lives “before our time.” Surprisingly, research on historical consciousness has only recently delved into these other sources.<sup>2</sup>

Research on the effects of Holocaust education has only slowly broadened its scope. Until recently, the research consisted of objective studies of historical awareness<sup>3</sup> and qualitative studies of the ways in which young Germans dealt with the history of this unparalleled crime.<sup>4</sup> The questions asked more recently are not about knowledge of history alone, but about the use of such knowledge—for example, how history lessons on Nazism teach students the politically correct way to talk about the Third Reich,<sup>5</sup>

how immigrant children absorb history lessons that have little relevance for their group of origin,<sup>6</sup> or how trips to historical sites impart messages about the past.<sup>7</sup>

These new studies, while exploratory and limited in scope, suggest some distressing conclusions. The present multigenerational study observes the direct communication of concepts about the past in German families and finds a pronounced discrepancy between the official and the private cultures of remembrance in Germany. It documents a clear tendency on the part of grandchildren to rewrite their grandparents' histories into tales of anti-Nazi heroism and resistance. The pilot study on history teaching by Radtke et al. (2002) suggests that students learn one primary thing in classes on the Third Reich: how to talk in a politically correct way about the problematic past. Gudehus's investigation produces similar results, and Georgi's study comes to the remarkable conclusion that immigrant children use their study of the Nazi past as a ticket to seeing themselves as "true Germans."<sup>8</sup> Overall, the beneficiaries of these efforts in historical education have shown themselves stubborn and unpredictable, which is why further research on the outcome of history teaching appears both necessary and promising.

### **Design of the Study**

The research project, entitled "Transmitting Historical Awareness," dealt with family communication about the Nazi period in the Federal Republic of Germany. For the study, forty Western and Eastern German families were interviewed by researchers both in the context of a whole family discussion and in separate interviews with at least one member of the eyewitness, child, and grandchild generations in the family.<sup>9</sup> The design of the study was quite simple: The members of the eyewitness generation were asked about their biographical experience during the wartime period after 1933; then their children and grandchildren were asked what they had heard from their parents and grandparents about the same period. A family discussion was triggered with a brief video of amateur footage from the Third Reich period.

A total of 182 interviews and family discussions were conducted. The material was transcribed and evaluated through a combination of textual

analysis of individual transcripts and computer-based qualitative content analysis.

The following examples drawn from the interview material will illustrate how history is transmitted through conversation among the generations, how anti-Jewish stereotypes are similarly passed down, and how Germans interpret the roles of their parents or grandparents in the Third Reich. The conclusion will examine how this study entered into public discourse in Germany.

### **Making Sense of History: Changes in Transmission through the Generations**

*Johanna Kurz*<sup>10</sup> was born in 1927. Her father was in the SA (*Sturmabteilung*, the “brown shirts”) and the SS (*Schutzstaffel*, originally Hitler’s personal guard), both elite units within the German military, and her mother had been in the Nazi women’s organization for a short time, but quit “after two or three years.”

*Johanna Kurz:* I only know that we stared at those smoking ruins.... The synagogue wasn’t destroyed; it was just burned out. Everything was smoldering, and my mother almost went crazy. She said, “How can they do that?” It was like a church for her. But it wasn’t just in Hanover; on the contrary, it was everywhere, you know. And I remember that my mother said to my father, “I know you were involved; don’t talk to me ever again!”

*Interviewer:* But he wasn’t involved, or was he?

*Johanna Kurz:* I don’t know. I don’t think so, but I don’t know. I’d like—I can’t say, I don’t know.

*Interviewer:* So it was just an expressed threat?

*Johanna Kurz:* The two of them never came together again, and then the war broke out, and the marriage just went on the side, nothing violent. When he came home in 1947, he came back from prison, and in 1948 they divorced.

Earlier in the interview Johanna Kurz had revealed the fact of her father’s SA and SS membership. When she got to talking about the burning synagogue, however, the interviewer, born in 1971, could not believe that Ms. Kurz’s father was “involved.” The interviewer’s suggestive follow-up considerably shook Ms. Kurz’s confidence, and her uncertainty seems to have strengthened the interviewer in her views: The interviewer’s inter-

pretation that it “was just ... a threat” caused Ms. Kurz to answer (but at the same time not answer) by reporting the result. It was not just a threat; apparently, the conflict was severe enough that her parents “never came together again.”

The interviewer, who noted in her report of the interview that she had found Johanna Kurz extremely nice, apparently could not accept the possibility that Johanna's father was an actor in Kristallnacht. Despite her in-depth knowledge of the history of the Third Reich, the interviewer resisted the possibility that even a relative of the old lady she was interviewing could have been a fellow traveler, much less a perpetrator, of the persecution of Jews.

This example illustrates how quickly loyalty ties become generalized within the social situation of a conversation. The interviewer, with her hopeful follow-up question, was not only trying to absolve her dialogue partner of any suspicion of complicity in criminal activity, but was extending the cover to close relatives of the interviewee, whom she neither knew nor could have known. It was as if she had not at all absorbed what Ms. Kurz had just told her about her father's history. This phenomenon could often be found in family discussions—even, or maybe especially—when the explicit theme was murders committed by the storyteller.

*Rainer Hofer*, born in 1925, was a NAPOLA (an elite national socialist school) student and a member of the *Waffen-SS* and of the SS-unit “*Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*” (named for Hitler's personal bodyguard unit). He presented himself, both in the individual interview and the family discussion, as a reformed Nazi. Although he wrote in his diary, at the news of the Führer's death, “My best comrade has fallen,” in his retrospective telling, he was appalled by the Nazi crimes. Mr. Hofer, well-read and well-educated, made a career in postwar Germany as a manager and, in his own way, contributed to the rebuilding of the state. He speaks unself-consciously about joining the *Waffen-SS*, entering the *Leibstandarte*, participating in the Russian campaign, and, in 1943, being deployed as an SS man in the Ukraine. In this connection, the interviewer asks:

*Interviewer:* Are there any stories that you wouldn't tell your daughter or your grandchildren?

*Rainer Hofer:* No, I would be completely open. I don't need to tell them that I shot Jews [he bangs on the table] or that sort of thing; even if I had done it,

I would tell about it. Why? It's my daughter and I lived my life. I can't let any of it somehow sink into the Hades of the past.... There's nothing ... I wouldn't tell her, even if it touched on the honor of German soldiers. I remember once that we rode to an attack, and when we came back, attached to infantry, a couple of Russian soldiers were idiotic enough to surrender. Of course, they didn't live a moment longer [knocks on the table]. But that, of course, was one of those things: Where were they supposed to ride with us? In the tank? They could have had a hand grenade hidden somewhere [laughs].... If they had just laid low, nothing would have happened.

But I'd tell my daughter, even though it actually touched on the honor of German soldiers. I can't say there was anything that I wouldn't tell her or my granddaughter either. Why should I?

As if to prove his openness, Hofer describes to the interviewer a crime that might sully "the honor of German soldiers"—but without questioning the crime from today's perspective. On the contrary, Hofer provides a justification for the murder of the Russian prisoners, assuming that his calculus would be obvious, even to the interviewer. Anyway, this is all part of his life as he lived it—so why, asks Hofer rhetorically, shouldn't he talk about it?

As further evidence of Mr. Hofer's openness, the Hofer family archive even contains letters he sent home from the Eastern Front, one of which he alludes to in the interview:

*Rainer Hofer:* I'm horrified today about what I wrote then. What [laughs] I can't understand today.... We, of course, saw Russian women on the opposite side, in uniform, with weapons and armed and, imagine this, at [he knocks on the table] eighteen years old, I shot one down with my machine gun and wrote very proudly that "the head and the breast were just a bloody mess," or something like that. Today you wonder how you could have written something like that.

Note that he questions not how he could *do* the killing, but how he could write about it—a subjective assessment of the act. It should be pointed out that it was not usual for such documents to be kept in family archives and to be known to the children. Generally, a rather nebulous formulation is used—e.g., "something happened"—leaving listeners to draw from vaguely portrayed events a story that best allows them to live with the central conflict of German family history a half-century after the Third Reich: that is, the conflict between the awareness by members of the chil-

dren's and grandchildren's generations of the criminal nature of Nazism and the Holocaust, on the one hand, and the need to position their own parents or grandparents in a way that they were untouched by the horror.

This is not an easy task, especially when, as in the case of Rainer Hofer, the details of the crimes were written down. *Regina Seiler*, his daughter, knows the letters, but surprisingly, emphasizes repeatedly, in her individual interview and in the family discussion, how important it is for her to “figure out what people were thinking back then.”

*Regina Seiler:* I can't imagine that the German people, even my father, ... I really think they couldn't imagine that something like that could happen.

Although Ms. Seiler refers directly to the letter in her interview (“and in the war he wrote to his parents that they had just attacked a Russian village; he was sixteen or eighteen years old, I don't remember exactly, and I was so upset by how euphorically he talked about it”), she repeatedly speculates whether Germans could have “imagined” that something like a war of extermination and a Holocaust could happen.

What motivates this question, which so obviously ignores the fact that her father did not need to “imagine” crimes that he himself committed? The question of whether the father “could have imagined” functions to maneuver him out of the perpetrator group, into the much less suspect group of accidental witnesses or perhaps fellow travelers—since a person imagines only that for which he has no personal knowledge. Second, Ms. Seiler argues, very similarly to her father, within a framework of a dual structure of knowledge and ignorance: The crimes undoubtedly occurred, but no one could imagine them. Her own father took part in them, but the daughter does not acknowledge it.

How this dual structure functions in talking about the past is shown in the family discussion. There Mr. Hofer relates that in 1944, after his deployment to the Ukraine, he was in a tank division in France and heard from a *Sturmbannführer* “that in the East, in Russia, partisans in any case, but also other people, were killed by a shot to the neck and so forth. I remember [laughs] that we talked about this later among the comrades, and we thought, ‘He's crazy!’”

Having done the exact same thing half a year before, Mr. Hofer now states he couldn't believe others were doing this. It would be an underesti-

mation of the effect of this dual structure to say that Hofer is lying. The fact that he tells about both his own deeds and his disbelief at the deeds of others shows that he can integrate his own deeds subjectively into a meaningful context of rationality and morality, and, as such, he excludes them from the overall accusation of criminality.

Thus, perpetrators such as Mr. Hofer do not regard their actions as part of the Holocaust—and this self-perception provides an interpretative option readily embraced by the following generations. In the group discussion Ms. Seiler concentrates with quite penetrating questions on finding out from her father why no one could “imagine” what was happening—thereby protecting him from the knowledge that he and she herself actually share. In the Hofer family interaction, what is transmitted is not knowledge of the crime, but rather knowledge of how one can at the same time know and not know.

Contrary to the widespread notion that grandparents and parents do not tell their children and grandchildren problematic wartime stories—especially ones that highlight their participation in Nazi crimes—some of the interviewees do talk about their experiences during the war in ways that show them as perpetrators. This does not, however, lead their listeners to dismay, to conflicts, or even to embarrassing situations. It leads to nothing at all. It is as if such tales were not heard by the family members present. Apparently, ties of family loyalty prevent a father or grandfather from appearing to be someone who killed people a few decades earlier. The images formed about a beloved relative through socialization and time spent together are retroactively applied to the earlier period in the family member’s life as well, before his offspring, who are now listening and will later pass on the wartime stories, were born. The ignoring of perpetrator stories occurs accidentally, as if on automatic pilot—the tape recorder records the stories, but the family’s memory does not. In other words, wartime memories are preserved in the family’s lore as stories that can be reshaped to an idealized vision that succeeding generations have of the eyewitness who is telling them. And so they are remembered and retold.

Moving down the generations, stories become so altered that in the end they undergo a complete change of meaning. This reconfiguration generally functions to turn grandparents into people of constant moral

integrity, according to today's standards and normative appraisal. The reformulation of stories is undertaken precisely because, in interviews, most members of the children's and grandchildren's generations express no doubt at all that Nazism was a criminal system and the Holocaust an unparalleled crime. This assessment of the Nazi past—the standard fare of history lessons, the media, and the official German culture of commemoration—breaks down when questioning the role played by one's own grandparents during the period; it rather evokes the subjective need to assign one's grandfather or grandmother the role of the “good” German in everyday life under the Nazis.

Thus the paradoxical result of successful education about the Nazi past comes to this: The more comprehensive the knowledge about war crimes, persecution, and extermination, the stronger is the need to develop stories to reconcile the crimes of “the Nazis” or “the Germans” with the moral integrity of parents or grandparents.

This reconciliation can only be achieved through stories that show one's relatives as human beings who perhaps cautiously, but also courageously, defied contemporary norms and worked against the system, even if, based on their party membership and functions, they were anything but opponents of the system. The eyewitnesses appear in the retellings of their descendants to be inconspicuous resistance fighters, clever enough to blend in from the outside but, when push came to shove, ready to help victims of persecution, hide Jews, or carry out small acts of resistance.

These stories of “being against” the system are embedded in the idea that any nonconformist behavior, from “opening one's mouth” to “protecting Jews,” from continuing to “buy from Jews” to showing opposition to superiors, could potentially have brought the harshest consequences. Thus, from the perspective of their progeny, grandparents who acted courageously found themselves chronically in danger of career setbacks, family conflicts, concentration camp, or even death sentences as a result of their views and behavior.

Thus the seventeen-year-old grandson of the *Groothe family* defends his forebears:

*Lars Groothe:* I think in any case that most people thought that, for example, Jews ... are people.... But, as one individual you couldn't defend yourself.



As one person, you couldn't do anything. You could say, "I think it's bad," [but] you'd be locked up and probably shot.

This interpretation allows a synthesis between the image of a totalitarian system with its coercive methods and the reinterpreted grandparents' roles. It is the product of an intergenerational chain whereby, in many stories told by the eyewitness generation, their parents are described as people who were "against" the system. The rehabilitation of the great-grandparents' generation as anti-Nazi can go so far as to portray an "old fighter" and a "staunch Nazi" who was a Nazi *Ortsgruppenleiter* [local political leader] in 1931 as someone who was always ready to oppose the norms of Nazi society, for example, by continuing to shop "from Jews," by doing "business with the Jewish cattle trader," and finally, according to his great-grandson, "hiding" Jews.

### Cumulative Heroization

The term "cumulative heroization" describes the phenomenon of history becoming ameliorated from generation to generation. Cumulative heroization appeared in twenty-six of the forty families interviewed—that is, in two-thirds of all cases. Heroizing stories made up roughly 15 percent of all stories told in the interviews and family discussions; stories of forebears' victimization accounted for around 50 percent; thus two-thirds of all the stories were about family members from the eyewitness generation (or their relatives) who were either victims of the Nazi past and/or heroes of everyday resistance.

Like her sixty-five-year-old son *Bernd Hoffmann*, ninety-one-year-old *Elli Krug* insists in the individual interview and in the family discussion that she did not know what a concentration camp was until the end of the war, even though she lived near Bergen-Belsen. After the war, however, former inmates of the camp passed through her village, and Mrs. Krug was forced by the British occupiers to make her home available to them—a situation that clearly displeased her.

*Elli Krug:* The Jews were the worst afterwards. They really harassed us.... They sat there and made us serve them, and then they didn't want.... We had this big hayloft [where] they slept overnight. ... The Jews and Russians, I always made sure that I didn't get them. They were really disgusting, you

know? I always stood down the street, in front of the gate, and when they said, "Quarters," I said, "No, everything's full!" If the Jews ... came, I said, "It's all full of Russians, you can come in with me!" ... And when the Russians came, then I said the same thing, that there were Jews here.

Mrs. Krug still recalls how she was able to avoid giving shelter to "Jews" and "Russians" through a trick, while the characteristics she attributes to them ("the worst," "disgusting") indicate a clear anti-Semitic or racist attitude, even today. The fact that she is speaking about accommodating prisoners who had survived the nearby Bergen-Belsen concentration camp is not an issue for her at all. The main theme of her story is the burden that she took on by providing shelter and her clever technique for keeping the "Jews" and the "Russians" out of her yard.

Her son also relates that people did not know about the camps until the end of the war, but he tells a story he heard from his deceased wife. She had worked on an estate near Bergen-Belsen and heard that the owner hid escapees from the camp. Bernd Hoffmann called this person "the grandma."

*Bernd Hoffmann:* She [his wife] was on a farm in Belsen for a year. They came right by there. The grandma hid some of them, and they sat in a wooden box. Then [the SS-men] went around, searching everywhere.... They would have shot the grandma immediately. She put a hot pot with boiling potatoes on top of the wooden box so they wouldn't get them.

The twenty-six-year-old granddaughter, *Silvia Hoffmann*, now tells her version of what her own grandmother did:

*Silvia Hoffmann:* Once she told a story I thought was really interesting: Our village was on the road to Bergen-Belsen, and she hid someone who escaped from one of those transports, in a really interesting way, in some grain box with straws sticking out—she really hid them. Then people came and looked in her farmyard and she kept quiet. That's a little thing that I really give her a lot of credit for.

Her story pieces together elements that were mentioned in her grandmother's and her father's separate stories: The "road to Bergen-Belsen," a stout-hearted woman, the box, even the haystack, in the form of a straw, have all left a mark on the granddaughter's story. But the narrative matrix in which the actors now appear produces a new story: The estate-owner grandmother is adopted, wooden boxes and all, and the hay becomes a

dramatic element in a tale of how her own grandmother tricked the persecutors. Thus, the granddaughter creates an image for herself of a good grandmother, based on elements present in neither her grandmother's nor her father's stories.

Cumulative heroization occurs rapidly and simply. A generalized image of a respected grandmother or grandfather provides a framework in which any point of reference suggested by family stories can be expanded into a "good story." As in the case of Silvia Hoffmann, this can result in a stripping away of the problematic implications of the true tale; plots become rearranged to reshape the nuanced, ambivalent, often troubling tales by the eyewitnesses into a morally clear attitude on the part of the protagonists—a clearly positive one. The tendency to heroize the grandparents' generation shows the never-to-be-underestimated strong effects of ties of loyalty to loved ones on historical awareness and the retrospective construction of the past.

In the telling the *Grubitsch* family history, *Sieglinde Grubitsch*, born in 1907, relates:

*Sieglinde Grubitsch*: But our Dr. Weinberg was a Jew, and his wife was a teacher; we protected them; they could live until the end.

This strong statement implies that the grandparents saved the Weinberg family from deportation (without, however, specifying what "protection" consisted of and what was meant by the family "could live until the end."<sup>11</sup>) The grandson, *Erich Grubitsch, Jr.*, born in 1962, asks a follow-up question: "How did you protect them?" Whether his question resonated with skepticism or merely asked for more detail is not clear. The answer:

*Sieglinde Grubitsch*: Well, because we never bothered them. We never felt bothered by them, and they didn't disturb us. We didn't, like those patriots, say, "There are Jews here; we don't want anything to do with them." Or, "Take them away!"

Compared with the statement about "protecting" the Jewish family, this explanation is sobering in its narrowness. Sieglinde Grubitsch reports only not "bothering" the Jewish family—a remarkable comment, since earlier she had spoken empathically of "our Dr. Weinberg." The "protection" extended to the Weinberg family, it turns out, consisted merely of not denouncing them, as "the patriots" might have done. The Grubitsch fami-

ly didn't do anything—and this, from her perspective, was worth mentioning, if not calling an act of resistance.

In the individual interview, Erich Grubitsch, Jr., defends this interpretation:

*Erich Grubitsch, Jr.:* It was a totalitarian regime. Who knows what we would have done? ... On the other hand, they supposedly rescued a couple of Jews. That has to be acknowledged. OK, we can't understand everything today—but at least they tried, or actually managed to do it.

This assessment seizes on the often-repeated belief that it is not possible to judge behavior under totalitarianism from today's perspective. The grandson's formulation that his grandparents "supposedly" rescued "a couple of Jews" retains some skepticism, but the triggering statement, which claimed nothing more than the failure to denounce, now leads to an acknowledgment that "at least they tried, or actually managed to do it." Once again, the desire to find moral integrity—or, even better, oppositional behavior—on the part of the grandparents leads the offspring to ignore the actual content of the original tale. After all, not feeling "bothered" by the presence of a Jewish family—especially when the father was the Grubitsches' family doctor—is hardly something to be especially proud of. Ignoring the problematic aspects, the grandchild leaves open the question of whether the grandparents actually "saved" the doctor's family or just "tried" to. In either case, they would have done something that deserves acknowledgment by present-day normative standards.

A very similar statement by granddaughter *Tina Kunze* (born in 1980) occurs in conversation with the *Ross* family:

*Tina Kunze:* ...that's why grandpa might have hidden the two Jews, like Mama said before.

In the individual interview with Tina Kunze's father, this episode was related as follows:

*Gerhard Kunze:* Once a train went by with prisoners, and people stayed at the farm once for a short time, people who didn't know where else to go, but there was always great danger connected with that.

In the story as transmitted by *Gerhard Kunze* (born in 1951), those who did the acting were "people" who "stayed" at the grandparents' farm. The context of persecution and deportation is established by mention of

the “train with prisoners,” “people who didn’t know where else to go,” and the “great danger connected with that.” The latter suggests, in a subtle transformation, that the actions of the people had endangered the grandparents. The father’s version of the story is more ambiguous than the granddaughter’s much more decisive variant, in which the active ones are the grandparents who “maybe hid two Jews.”

The eyewitness *Margarethe Ross*, born in 1919, recounts the following:

*Margarethe Ross*: What can I tell you? At night someone knocked at our door, and there were two concentration camp women ... the war was probably already over ... and they knocked at my mother’s door. My mother took them in, and I think gave them a glass of milk first, and let them sleep in the house.

The eyewitness account reveals that it was not Tina Kunze’s “grandpa” but her great-grandmother who was involved, and that the story of the two Jews she “might have hidden” happened at the end of the war. They were probably displaced persons to whom her great-grandmother offered shelter. The episode—in the granddaughter’s view a courageous act of “hiding” and in the father’s view entailing “great danger”—is revealed here, in Margarethe Ross’s tale, to be an extension of help involving no danger whatsoever. Without belittling the great-grandmother’s act of kindness, one can say that it has been heroized through successive generations.

Similar exaggeration through retelling is found everywhere in our material, sometimes as complex stories, sometimes as small references or fragments of tales. All enjoy the same trajectory: Harmless, often questionable, and sometimes even scandalous acts recounted by the eyewitnesses are mediated more abstractly through the second generation, with details changed and opened to interpretation; these accounts are then clarified in the grandchildren’s generation into a finding that the grandparents “helped,” “hid,” or “saved,” even if it was dangerous for them.

The stress on danger functions as a backdrop to the passing on of family history: The dangerous situation highlights more emphatically the courageous behavior of the forebears. The invention of ethically motivated behavior by the grandparents harmonizes with the image the grandchildren already have of them, while reinforcing their knowledge of the absolute tyranny of the Third Reich, which could turn anyone—even one’s

own grandparents—into victims. The grandchildren attempt to preserve this benign image of their relatives at any price.

The *Even* family, too, has passed down a heroic story that goes back to the great-grandfather, who is portrayed as a notorious opponent of the Nazi system. *Elsa Even*, born 1922, says:

*Elsa Even:* My father was a total opponent.... Already in 1934 he said, "This is leading to war."... And when the war started, he said, "One year, then we won't win! They're going much, much too fast through all of Europe; they'll collapse."

In the family discussion, her father's critical attitude, which applied, at least in this excerpt, not to Nazism per se but to the war, was addressed again by Ms. Even:

*Elsa Even:* But what my father said every day, I heard so many things; I didn't tell anyone.

Her husband, *Albert Even*, adds:

*Albert Even:* Well, that was extreme. He was really lucky.

*Elsa Even:* That they didn't take him away.

Their daughter *Claudia Even*, born in 1949, later in the family discussion, notes: "Grandpa was arrested again. Because he didn't, because he said something that the government.... He was arrested for two or three days."

To this her father adds: "Yes, he was once. Yes, he had talked a little bit too loud, and someone heard him, and the police came and took him away."

But a little later Albert Even relates that the arrest was occasioned by the violation of blackout rules, not criticism of the system, and payment of a fine of 25 marks averted any further consequences. That this version completely contradicts the story told only a few minutes earlier creates no stir in the family discussion nor occasions any retrospective correction.

In the individual interview, Claudia Even speaks about her grandfather as "incredibly critical" and "overly critical." She suggests, "I think my mother didn't have an easy time because of that." While Claudia Even implies the her father's critical remarks created a context of permanent danger to the family, her son *Thomas Even*, born in 1969, picks up that

his relatives, fortunately, were far from being “yes-men,” and states what this means to him:

*Thomas Eeven:* Ultimately it’s positive, of course. One would have wished that there were more aware Germans at the time. It makes me personally happy ... that in my family ... there were people who didn’t just staunchly yell “*Heil* Hitler.”

This deeply held conviction on the part of the grandson that he came from a family that had always, even in the great-grandparents’ generation, been against Nazism led to an absurd interchange in the family discussion, when the grandfather, Albert Eeven, asked his grandchildren to ask him critical questions:

*Albert Eeven:* Why don’t you ask, “Grandpa, why did you go along with it all? Why didn’t you do that?” Why don’t you ask that question?

*Thomas Eeven:* Oh, Grandpa!

Instead of asking Albert Eeven the question he’d like to hear—perhaps because he wonders about it himself, perhaps because he would like the opportunity to justify himself—his daughter Claudia and his grandson Thomas lecture him as to why his question makes no sense. Claudia argues from socialization theory, while the grandson finds other excuses:

*Claudia Eeven:* But you didn’t protest because you had it drilled into you: obey and “everything has its system.” I mean, you can’t compare that with education today!

*Thomas Eeven:* Grandpa, that’s the simplest question you can ask.... The answers have so many levels and the stories that you’ve told are so varied that I can’t ask a question like that. I know too much about it already for that.

Albert Eeven has nothing to say to this and is silent. As absurd as this dialogue seems—the eyewitness wants to be critically questioned and his descendants refuse, explaining why it is not necessary—it illustrates clearly how knowledge of the Nazi past creates paradoxical effects in the family: To Claudia Eevens, information about the authoritarian educational style of that time—the “drill” and indoctrination—appears sufficient to explain why her father “went along with it all.” Thomas Eeven believes that he has so much knowledge of Nazi history that simple questions and answers seem improper to him: “I know too much about it already.” Knowledge functions to make its possessors not want to know any more—particularly

about family history and its connection to Nazism. This is a paradoxical consequence of comprehensive education about the Nazi past and the crimes connected with it. The deeper the knowledge of history, the greater the subjectively felt need to protect one's own family from this knowledge—thus removing them from the historical context about which one knows so much.

That an eyewitness attempts to be critically questioned is itself part of the educational process and the culture of commemoration established over the last two decades. The grandfather is never asked the question, however, because the family discourse offers enough points of reference to create the image of a transgenerational anti-Nazi family, which will now be preserved into the future. This image seems all the more reassuring and in contrast to the prevailing norms against the background of knowledge of the horror of the period. As Thomas Eeven suggests in the separate interview: "Of course, one would have wished that there were more aware Germans at the time"—like his grandparents and great-grandparents, that is.

### **The Effects of Heroization**

What conclusions can we draw from the tendency toward cumulative heroization? One finding, not unimportant to the pedagogy of history, is that education that delivers a comprehensive historical knowledge of Nazi crimes paradoxically evokes a need to remove one's relatives from this framework of knowledge. This result need not be assessed only negatively. Out of the revised history of heroism, resistance, and civil courage on the part of the grandparents, one can derive the practical conclusion that individual resistance is possible and sensible, even in a totalitarian context—that it is, emphatically, a question of individual responsibility. To this extent, the stories of oppositional grandparents and great-grandparents, regardless of their truth, can serve as examples motivating people to act courageously when others around them are threatened or persecuted. In addition, it is clear that a majority of the grandchildren look favorably on those who opposed the Nazis—only four of the forty-four grandchildren interviewed indicated any admiration for or affirmation of "the Nazis."



Cumulative heroization, however, has a very different significance for the historical image of Nazism and the Holocaust. It represents a restoration of the belief, thought to be long uprooted, that “the Nazis” and “the Germans” were two different groups; thus it follows that “the Germans” can be seen to have been seduced, abused, and robbed of their youth, and they can see themselves as victims of Nazism. That this historical model apparently holds a secure place in the cultural memory of the Federal Republic is demonstrated by the renaissance of historical dramas based on the home-front perspective, such as the German public television channel ZDF series “Hitler’s Helpers” and “Hitler’s Children.” While the Holocaust has been commemorated in the framework of international conferences such as the 2000 Stockholm Holocaust Conference, and anniversaries of liberation have established a liturgical rhetoric of confession and responsibility, the historical and political contexts that gave rise to Nazism seem to be disappearing from German historical awareness.

What is becoming lost is the awareness that it was possible, in a civilized twentieth-century society, with the active participation of the overwhelming majority of a well-educated population, to exclude a part of this same population from the universe of obligations,<sup>12</sup> to see them as harmful and “worthless,” to look on while they were deported, and to accept their extermination. This is not to speak of the actual perpetrators (some of whom appear in our interviews) whose willingness to murder and largely unproblematic reintegration into postwar West German society recedes from the collective memory.

The phenomenon of cumulative heroization shows how deep, emotionally based views of the roles of close relatives affect an individual’s awareness of history, and how detached cognitive knowledge of history can be. The subjective synthesis consists of removing one’s own ancestors from one’s knowledge of history by heroizing them—thus bringing the “evil” of Nazi rule and the “good” of one’s own grandparents and great-grandparents into peaceful coexistence.

### How the Jews Are Remembered: “These People Had Money”

How do the formally learned concepts and interpretive patterns affect current family discourse about the Third Reich? What is considered self-evident in family discourse about the Nazi period differs in many ways from the picture of the Third Reich portrayed in encyclopedias and history books, and from what would seem, from the public debate on the past, to be anchored in cultural memory. This difference can be observed through a comparison of families in East Germany and West Germany. Although the official view of history in the former East Germany was clearly distinct from that in West Germany,<sup>13</sup> the East German families interviewed rarely used different interpretive patterns and concepts in talking about the Third Reich from those of their West German counterparts. Regardless of which encyclopedias or history books were found on the family bookshelves, within the family discourse, there were many similarities.

For example, many members of the eyewitness generation still speak about “the Jews” today in alarmingly anti-Semitic and racist terms. They make it clear that the discourse established over the last two decades on the Holocaust and Nazi crimes has left few traces on the eyewitness generation, at least in this respect: “Jews” are, in any case, not Germans; the crimes committed against them were committed against “others,” strangers; and it was partly as a result of their own behavior that they became objects of hatred, exclusion, persecution, and extermination. From the interview process, it becomes clear that stereotypical images enter into contemporary perceptions, which can be traced directly to Nazi propaganda and to later published film documents from the extermination campaign in the East. For example, *Lore Renz*, born in 1916, remembers seeing a “troop of old Jews.”

*Lore Renz:* They were banded together there.... Some of them had these beards, long beards, and ... I never forgot ... how these old men were standing there. They had on big black hats, like the Jews have, you know.

*Helene Stein*, born in 1924, relates:

*Helene Stein:* And when you saw them running like that, with those long beards, the smock and so forth, as a child, you were a little afraid, and you thought, “What kind of people are these?”

Ms. Stein recalls that in 1945 she saw a train of concentration camp prisoners:

*Helene Stein:* There were a lot of Jews among them, you can always tell, you know. And also foreigners.

*Interviewer:* How could you tell?

*Helene Stein:* Well,... You can recognize Jews, real Jews, with the nose and especially they all had beards, because they can't shave and so forth. They looked terrible. And they shot us hate-filled looks.

*Margarethe Haase*, born in 1920, tells how in the 1920s her father sometimes opened the paper in the morning and said, "That Cohn has him on his conscience, too." Her father's commentary was incomprehensible to her at first, but later she understood its meaning: "Later I understood how he [Cohn] always lent a lot of money at usurious interest."

The anti-Semitic stereotypes of the rich, usurious Jew as well as that of "cowardly, submissive Jews" appear in the eyewitness generation's stories:

*Margarethe Haase:* These children, the Jew children, were somehow different from us.... I can't tell you how. One of the boys, for example, was such a coward.... He was always afraid, [saying] "Please don't, please don't," and so submissive.

Ms. Haase repeats the boy's fearful pleading without the slightest hesitation. That his desperate pleas might have been occasioned by an attack and that he might have had cause to be afraid is not mentioned. Her description even today lacks empathy; no awareness of injustice can be read into her words.

Anti-Semitic interpretive patterns also come up in the children's generation, though in a more complex form that incorporates the postwar period's discourse on the past and philo-Semitic stereotypes.

*Ella Drake:* Those two very beautiful people were ... they had something a bit Semitic about them. Like Jewish.

*Erich Grubitsch*, born in 1937, developed a complex argument that identifies "the Jews" as a distinct group of people with specific characteristics who must on the one hand be protected from anti-Semitic prejudices, but on the other hand must be protected from themselves:

*Erich Grubitsch:* You know, sometimes this characteristic appears that can verge on arrogance.... Maybe that's because the Jews sometimes perceive discrimination that isn't even there. And then they play off almost a cynical arrogance.... This pride, that they sometimes reproach themselves for, ... must have a protective function.... I ask myself why it's expressed that way, or why it's shown as if they were better. That's the danger of creating anti-Semitism, that at that moment they reveal pride. I don't want to talk about the chosen people, but that they reveal that.

The most comprehensive and frequently voiced stereotype, across the generations, is that of the “rich Jew,” which appears often in interviews and family discussions. For example, *Peter Schütz*, born in 1954, tells us that “the Jews were among the richest, that was always true.” It is the eyewitnesses who relate that in the 1930s Jews were either in academic professions (especially doctors) or worked as traders and businesspeople, lived in “rich areas,” and enjoyed considerable economic influence. When the eyewitnesses talk about being personally acquainted with Jews, they generally do not describe a person, but mention his profession or social status. Even when this involves schoolmates, who (as most put it) “suddenly” stopped coming to class, they often refer as a matter of course to their father's professions or assert that they were “rich people.” Thus *Lore Renz*, born in 1916, tells of the “last Jewess” in her class:

*Lore Renz:* Lilly Schneider, her father was a doctor at the public health office in Hanover; they lived in Kleefeld. That's where all the wealthy people lived, Kleefeld, Kirchrode, all the Jews lived mainly there.... But they were able to emigrate, you know.

In this respect, the eyewitness portrayals differ little from one another. In most eyewitness retellings, a reference to the person's or family's financial situation ends with a report of their flight before the start of World War II. The older generation reports are also similar in another respect: In none of their stories do they mention the discrimination—loss of positions, property, etc.—that preceded that flight. The flight is simply referred to as though it requires no explanation. Furthermore, “flight” is not the word the eyewitnesses use; they talk about how the Jews “emigrated” or “took off,” were “gone” or “made a run for it” (*aus dem Staub gemacht*).

Again and again, “money” appears in this context: The Jews who had the clothing store on Danzigerstrasse and with whom her father had

worked, reported *Wilhelmine Brinkmann*, “took off” “to America ... because they had money.... These people had money.”

The stereotype of the “rich Jew” who “emigrated” before the war, generally to America, is found much more frequently in eyewitness accounts than in the stories told by their children. But when the members of the next generation recall their parents’ stories, the concept reappears. Thus *Kurt Jung* recalls that his parents “knew a lot of Jewish families”:

*Kurt Jung*: ... who were businesspeople in Hanover, who showed up again in time; many of them emigrated to America before the war started and then came back, big businesspeople.

Not only is the concept of the “rich Jews” taken up by the children’s generation. With the same continuity, some members of the children’s generation also use the Nazi categories of “half” or “quarter Jews.” These terms are generally incorporated incidentally into their stories, without reference to the origin or function of that categorization. As a matter of course, those interviewed distinguish between “the Jews” and “the Germans.” Thus *Birgit Roth*, born in 1939, says:

*Birgit Roth*: I don’t know why they wanted to throw the Jews out; Jews were actually the best businesspeople; they had the biggest share here in Germany. Everywhere big businesses, and the Germans worked there.

In this interview, Ms. Roth is not openly anti-Semitic; rather, she attempts, with statements like “Jews were the best businesspeople,” to explain what she is unable to understand at the start. Not only does the question “why they wanted to throw the Jews out” ignore that at issue is mass murder, not expulsion, but “the Germans” appear only as the employees of Jewish businesspeople, while “they” who wanted “to throw the Jews out” remains an open question. The basic distinction between “Jews” and “Aryans” is maintained through the distinction between “the Jews” and “the Germans.” What the speaker intends to be a statement critical of the Nazi period conveys the very same anti-Semitic stereotypes and Nazi categories: Jews were successful (read “rich”) entrepreneurs, and Jews are not considered German.

As self-evidently as “rich Jews” appear in interviews with eyewitnesses and members of the children’s generation, the concept no longer appears in the grandchildren’s generation. Thus the grandchildren of Lore Renz

remember that their grandmother told them about Jewish classmates, but their grandmother's automatic reference to the family's socio-economic status is gone. To the interviewer's question about what stories her grandmother had told her from the Nazi period, *Nina Jung*, born in 1975, answers:

*Nina Jung*: For example, that suddenly the young girl ... disappeared from class.

Nina Jung is the only one of the interviewed grandchildren who remembers a story told by her grandmother that does not involve helping Jews, hiding them, or rescuing them in some way, or some form of resistance to their persecution. In all other cases, it is their own grandmother or grandfather who treated persecuted Jews humanely, attempted to protect them from persecution, or, in one case, were against "people being thrown in a pit like that ... and then just buried" and so the grandfather "deserted." The image of the good grandparents is so dominant that no other story told about the Jews by the eyewitnesses is registered by the grandchildren or retold.

### How "the Nazis" Are Remembered: As Others

When "the Nazis" are spoken of in our interviews, the term mostly functions to distance the speakers or their families from the historical events of the Third Reich. It is true that there are cases where interviewees describe their own family members as "Nazis" or "National Socialists." *Max Wieck*, for example, speaks of some of his family as "fervent National Socialists," and *Franz Schmitt* emphasizes that one side of his family were "all pure Nazis." In both cases, however, the storyteller, in the same breath, introduces the people important for his concept of himself—his grandfather or father—as "opponents" of the Nazis. Mr. Wieck presents his grandfather as "a founder of the SPD [Social Democratic Party]," and Mr. Schmitt speaks of "my father ... the only Communist." Thus family members most significant for their own history are portrayed as "not Nazis." "The Nazis" are others—countertypes to their grandfathers and fathers.

When family members with whom the storyteller identifies are described as Nazis, there is almost always an immediate justification. They

were forced to join the Nazi Party; they couldn't act otherwise because of their economic situation; they did it because everyone did. The only exceptions are if the interviewee still identifies positively with the Third Reich. In our sample, this was true only of *Mrs. Haase*, born in 1920, who thinks the Third Reich was "a good period," and describes her father emphatically as a "staunch National Socialist."

The extent to which a person's image can change through the generations can be illustrated by the *Grubitsch* family. Like Mrs. Haase, Mrs. Grubitsch describes her husband as an early "fervent Nazi." Unlike Mrs. Haase, however, she notes right away that he was "in the party" because otherwise "he wouldn't have gotten a job." Economic motives thus justify her husband's party membership. Mrs. Grubitsch's son paints a somewhat different picture. To him, his father was exactly the opposite of fervent: "I know that my father did it with a certain amount of reluctance.... He wore a badge on his lapel, but you couldn't always see it on all his suits." The portrayals by the eyewitness and her son express ambivalence, each in its own way. The picture painted by the grandson no longer does: He is sure that his grandfathers were "not Nazis," and "my grandpa wasn't a party member, on my father's side, not on my mother's side either." Thus from generation to generation, "the Nazis" become more the "other," while the distance of one's own ancestors from the horrific events becomes ever greater.

Historians have considered the question of how the "*Volksgenossen*" (the "common citizens") reacted to the persecution of the Jews—what they knew, could have known, or wanted to know of their extermination.<sup>14</sup> The reconstructed reality of the Third Reich differs greatly from the answers given by the eyewitnesses to the question of what they knew or could have known at the time. But even the eyewitnesses seem to be aware of this. Few of them act as self-righteously as *Rainer Hofer*, born in 1925, who becomes indignant in the group discussion about the fact that "it is always disputed" that people didn't know at the time that concentration and extermination camps existed. But there are also explicit references to different opinions in the statements of other eyewitnesses. *Mathilde Beck*, born in 1924 says in the group discussion:

*Mathilde Beck*: All that about the concentration camps. People say so often, "But you must have known." It was all kept so secret.

### "Empty Talking"

In the interviews, there were 106 occurrences of the phrase "people didn't know." More than a third of the eyewitnesses insist that they did not know there were concentration camps.<sup>15</sup> However, most of these statements use an interpretive pattern similar in vagueness to Mrs. Beck's ("All that about the concentration camps"), pointing to a phenomenon that occurred frequently during the discussions, which could be described as "empty talking." That is, actors and the contexts of events are not named, but are called "that," "they" [*sie*, "*se*," *die*], or "that stuff" [*das da*]. This "empty talking" as a form of speech typifies the intergenerational discussion about the Third Reich. Actors, generally the perpetrators, remain shapeless, while historical events are described in outline form, so what is being talked about remains unclear, the events seemingly harmless.

"About the Jews," says *Paula Ubaczek*, born in 1921, "I only found out about it when the war was over, when the concentration camps were opened; that's when we found out." The imprecision of the language, describing developments associatively and indirectly, characterizes the "empty talking"; it remains up to the listener to fill in the blanks as to what the speaker is actually talking about. She was indignant, says Ms. *Wilhelmine Brinkmann*, born in 1915, "when all that came out," and Ms. *Elisabeth Schulze*, born in 1920, reports:

*Elisabeth Schulze*: We had no idea what the others were suffering. We only read that here, when the newspaper came again. And when we got a radio, we heard it then, but otherwise we didn't know anything ... all the things that were going on.

From the point of view of transmission of history, "empty speaking" perhaps conveys something else: that certain contexts of history are sufficiently discussed even if left imprecise. "That stuff" and "it" signify contexts about which it makes no sense to speak more clearly: "Certainly, it shouldn't be forgotten so quickly; we have to talk about it sometimes, so that it doesn't come again," said *Elli Krug*.



To sum up, the anti-Semitic colored notion of the “rich Jew” and the interpretive pattern that “Jews” and “Germans” represent two separate groups of people are ideas that transcend the generations. Their disturbing resilience can be seen as a posthumous victory for the Nazi policies of persecution and extermination. In addition, the “empty talking” in communication between generations is a mechanism that allows blank spaces to be filled with whatever content and ideas best satisfy the needs of the audience, allowing the listener to ascribe to the speaker whatever meanings he would most like to impute to them.

### **A Broadly Representative Survey**

The intergenerational survey presented here was an in-depth study that necessarily encompassed a small number of cases, to illuminate the underlying patterns of how families communicate about the past. The selective sampling included only families that had an interest in the subject and whose members were willing to speak about it together—which is hardly the case in all German families. To test whether our findings could be generalized, we reformulated the research questions for a larger representative survey, carried out in June 2002 by the Emnid Institute in Bielefeld.

The phenomenon of cumulative heroization could not be reproduced within the representative popular survey, since the people questioned were randomly chosen and not family members. But it was possible to ask those surveyed how they saw the role, attitudes, and behavior of their own relatives during the Third Reich. We posed this question on several levels: first, by asking what their parents and grandparents, in their view, thought about Nazism; and second, by querying about the individual attitudes and behavioral patterns of their relatives for a range of items—always from the point of view of the respondent, of course.

The results were even more astonishing than those of the in-depth study. Roughly half the population surveyed is of the opinion that their relatives viewed Nazism negatively or even very negatively; a mere 4 percent believe their relatives' attitude was “more positive,” and only 2 percent believe that their relatives had a “very positive” attitude. Among people with upper high school (*Abitur*) and college diplomas, these results were even more pronounced—56 percent ascribing negative attitudes toward

Nazism to their relatives.

Another question probed the attitudes, experiences, and behaviors of parents and grandparents, as known to the survey participants from family discussions. Only 3 percent of the respondents believed that their relatives had been “anti-Jewish,” and only 1 percent thought it was possible that they “were directly involved in crimes.” Twenty-six percent of those surveyed were convinced that their relatives “helped people who were persecuted,” and 35 percent “didn’t go along with everything as much as possible.” In contrast, 65 percent of participants believe their parents and grandparents “suffered a lot in the war,” and 63 percent stated that their relatives had “experienced community” during the Third Reich. These results, too, were even more pronounced among those with an upper high school (*Abitur*) or college diploma: Thirty percent believed that their relatives “helped people who were persecuted,” and 71 percent were convinced that their parents and grandparents “suffered a lot in the war.”

The results of the broader survey make it clear that the overwhelming majority believes their own family members were not Nazis. Anti-Semites and perpetrators appear to be practically nonexistent in German families. That a higher frequency of these experiences, attitudes, and behaviors correlates with a high level of education underscores the findings of our in-depth study that education about Nazi crimes and the Holocaust has the paradoxical effect of inclining people to turn their parents and grandparents into opponents of the regime, helpers, or casual or even explicit resisters.

Some findings of the larger sample also point toward “cumulative heroization”: Thus 14 percent of the youngest participants (fourteen-to-twenty-nine years of age) said that their grandparents “offered resistance” (compared to 13 percent overall), and only 4 percent believed that they were “staunch Nazis” (compared to 6 percent overall). However, in the youngest group, 6 percent believed that their grandparents “were anti-Jewish,” and 3 percent believed it was possible “that they were directly involved in crimes” (compared with 3 percent and 1 percent overall).

The finding that two-thirds of the participants in the representative sample emphasized the sufferings of their own relatives in the war underscores the finding that the public culture of commemoration in Germany

differs greatly from private recollections. Whoever was guilty of the Holocaust, whoever committed the crimes in the extermination camps, the forced labor system, and the camps—one thing is clear to all German citizens: My grandpa wasn't a Nazi.

### **Postscript: How the Study Was Received**

The results of this study began to have an impact even before the final report had been published. All the major newspapers and many radio and television stations carried stories about it. After the book appeared, the findings entered into the discourse of politicians and government officials, who showed concern that the educational efforts of the past two decades had, in their view, borne astonishingly little fruit. The professional agents of memory—whether working in schools, foundations, or Holocaust memorials—were highly disconcerted.

The book itself became the subject of many school projects. In higher academia, too, the study garnered attention and was the subject of numerous panels and conferences.<sup>16</sup>

Although the study documents that for the generation of the grandchildren, the role models are resistance fighters, not Nazis—something that could certainly be viewed as a successful educational outcome—the public reaction was generally alarmist. In speeches, high-ranking politicians worriedly demanded more education, and the media latched on with great interest to the angle that grandchildren use their knowledge of history to different ends than their teachers had expected.

Foreign reactions to the study—for example, in the Norwegian newspapers—interpreted the results as representing a failed attempt to deal with the past and focused on the recent right-wing orientation among young Germans. This interpretation itself illustrates how the study became a projective test for every group's difficulties in dealing with the past.

Two years after its original publication in German, the study continues to receive attention. Even editorials on the 2004 U.S. elections reflected the background of *Grandpa Wasn't a Nazi*: "Say this about John Kerry: At least his grandfather wasn't a Nazi," wrote Victorino Matus on February 6, 2004, in the *Weekly Standard*.<sup>17</sup> The occasion for the article, entitled

“Springtime for Friedrich,” was a minor German scandal stemming from a statement by the head of the Christian Democratic Party in parliament, Friedrich Merz, that his grandfather had been his most important role model; it was promptly revealed that the grandfather had been a Nazi, at least if early membership in the SA and the Nazi Party were deemed sufficient grounds. So Merz had a public “grandpa” problem, and references to our study made it clear how firmly the research had taken root in the German commemoration culture framework.

This was true as well for the counter-commemoration culture of the far right. The NPD (the National Party of Germany), which recently walked out of a commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, produced T-shirts and posters with the slogan “Grandpa was okay!” Likewise, it is worth reporting that some younger neo-Nazis came to lectures on the study in order to tell stories of their own grandfathers and how they worked for the “*Volk*.”

This underscores an interesting aspect of the study’s reception: In the public discourse and in the response to lectures and panel discussions, the basic findings of the study have been confirmed *in vivo*. People who speak up at these programs are very interested in expressing their views of their parents’ or grandparents’ past, which frequently comes out in stories of how they opposed Hitler, only wanted the best, and didn’t know. A self-help group with the name “The Cheated Generation” took part in a public event in Bremen; one after another, its members recounted how exciting it had been to be in the Hitler Youth and the BDM (German Girls League), and that a lot was done for them as children—conveying to younger listeners how easy it was to be seduced.

In general, it could be observed at the lectures, as in the study itself, how strong were the feelings of identification and defensiveness vis-à-vis the eyewitness generation. Thus the research group was criticized for dealing too moralistically and rather unjustly with the eyewitness generation, although the study refrained from moralizing about historical behavior, especially since the subject of the study was explicitly communication about the past. Even scholarly audiences often voiced the classic legitimating question, with an aggressive undertone: “What would you have done?”

These responses demonstrate even more clearly than the study itself

how strong is this need for loyalty and identification with the grandparents' generation today in Germany. Together with the results of the broader representative survey, it suggests that the desire for a "good" past is the collective wish of a society in which, as Raul Hilberg once put it, the Holocaust is family history. That the private aspects of history, turning upon suffering in wartime and surviving in difficult times, are capable of making a comeback in contemporary German culture is shown, not only by the unremitting stream of television shows and movies about the Third Reich, but also by a number of books that have enjoyed popular acclaim in recent years. These books, from Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*<sup>18</sup> and Günter Grass's *Crabwalk*<sup>19</sup> to the bombing epic *Der Brand* by Jörg Friedrich,<sup>20</sup> focus on the subject of guiltless guilt on the part of perpetrators (Schlink) or German suffering from the crimes of the Allies (Grass, Friedrich). They are so successful because, as our study shows, they are much closer to the felt history of Germans than the official stories of the destruction of European Jewry and other crimes of the Third Reich.<sup>21</sup>

Until now, the central focus of postwar German commemorative culture has been that Auschwitz should not happen again. The value of drawing this moral conclusion from the Nazi crimes was never questioned in the culture of public commemoration or in Germany's cultural memory. But our study's findings, like the popularity of books focused on German suffering, indicate that this culture may be undergoing a restructuring. This ominous development reveals that the real effect, in terms of lived history, of the twelve-year period between 1933 and 1945 is becoming more visible with growing temporal distance. The obsessive concern with the unavoidable past of National Socialism and the Holocaust is not abating, but increasing. Lately some have emphasized that only sixty years have passed since the events (Thomas Schmid in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* on November 14, 2003), and the real phase of dealing with them has not even really begun.

In any case, it has become clear that the lasting distortion of family and individual biographies by the twelve years of Nazi power was much more pervasive than any involved in dealing with the past had ever dared believe. This is a significant social-psychological finding, since it suggests that there are apparently historical first-time consequences (Arnold Gehlen) whose

half-life on the level of intergenerational lived history cannot yet be determined. One cannot “get over” this history. Perhaps the ostentatious efforts to create a culture of commemoration, while at the same time attempting to put Germans in the ranks of the victims, can be seen as one effect of this intractable permanence.

Translated by Belinda Cooper

## Notes

1. The complete study on which this monograph is based was authored by H. Welzer, Sabine Moller, and Karoline Tschuggnall and published in German under the title *Opa war kein Nazi* by S. Fischer-Verlag.

2. See Wineburg, S., “Sinn machen. Wie Geschichte zwischen den Generationen gebildet wird,” in H. Welzer, ed., *Das soziale Gedächtnis* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2001), pp. 179–204; Wineburg, S., *Teaching history and other unnatural acts* (2002); Seixas, P., “Geschichte und Schule” in H. Welzer, ed., *Das soziale Gedächtnis* (2001), pp. 205–18.

3. Angvik, M. and B. von Borries, *Youth and History: A Comparative European Survey on Historical Consciousness and Political Attitudes among Adolescents. Part A: Description, Part B: Documentation* (Hamburg: Körber-Stiftung, 2000).

4. See Frank-Olaf Radtke, ed., with Oliver Hollstein, Wolfgang Meseth, Christine Müller-Mahnkopp, and Matthias Proske, *Nationalsozialismus im Geschichtsunterricht: Beobachtungen unterrichtlicher Kommunikation* (Frankfurt: University of Frankfurt, Frankfurter Beiträge zur Erziehungswissenschaft, 2002). Also Wineburg, S. “Sinn machen”; Georgi, V., *Entliehene Erinnerung. Geschichtsbilder junger Migranten in Deutschland* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2003).

5. Radtke, F.O., *ibid.*

6. Georgi, V., *Entliehene Erinnerung*.

7. Gudehus, C., “Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus als Kommunikationsprobleme in Führungen,” in “Standbein Spielbein,” *Museumspädagogik Aktuell* 67 (2003).

8. For example, sixteen-year-old Bülent, born in Germany and very interested in history, felt “like a German” for the first time during an excursion to Theresienstadt. “I forgot the Turk in me,” he says, because the Czechs in his student group saw him as part of the German collective subject. Thus, paradoxically, identification with the most negative part of German history led to an emphatic feeling of being “pure German,” that is, fully integrated. See Georgi, *Entliehene Erinnerung*, p. 301 ff.

9. Many students took part in the collection and analysis of this study, including Erika Rothärmel, Jenna Voss, and Angelika Kompmann. Olaf Jensen, Torsten Koch, Sabine Moller, and Karoline Tschuggnall assisted in writing the report.

10. All names are pseudonyms.

11. This wording suggests a broad horizon of interpretations. It could mean, and this

interpretation seems most likely, to reflect Sieglinde Grubitsch's intention, that the Jewish family survived the Nazis in their home due to the protection of neighbors—an historically unlikely possibility. Or it might mean that the family remained in their home until emigration or until deportation, without having to move first to the so-called “Jewish houses” to free up their home for “Aryan” tenants. See Harald Welzer, “Vorhanden/Nicht-Vorhanden, Über die Latenz der Dinge,” in Peter Hayes, Irmtrud Wojak, eds., *“Arisierung” im Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt am Main, New York: Campus Verlag, 2000), p. 300 ff.

12. Helen Fein, *Genocide: a Sociological Perspective* (London: Sage Publications, 1993), p. 14.

13. See Sabine Moller, *Vielfache Vergangenheit. Öffentliche Erinnerungskulturen und Familienerinnerungen an die NS-Zeit in Ostdeutschland* (Tübingen: Edition Diskord, 2004).

14. See Hans Mommsen, Susanne Willems, eds., *Herrschaftsalltag im Dritten Reich: Studien und Texte* (Düsseldorf, 1988); and David Bankier, *Die öffentliche Meinung im Hitler-Staat: die Endlösung und die Deutschen* (Berlin: Berlin Verlag, 1995).

15. In addition to the fifteen eyewitnesses in our sample who said they only heard of the existence of the concentration camps after 1945, four members of the children's generation insisted that people in the Third Reich could not have known that there were concentration camps. Six of the grandchildren also believed this.

16. A follow-up study has begun using the same research design to analyze cultures of memory in Western Europe (the Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway), southeastern Europe (Serbia and Croatia), and Israel.

17. In fact, John Kerry's Austrian-born paternal grandfather was Jewish but converted to Christianity.

18. Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

19. Günter Grass, *Crabwalk* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2003).

20. Jörg Friedrich, *Der Brand. Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2002).

21. The latest survey result shows that half of all Germans believe that “the Jews try to gain advantage from the past” (Heitmeyer, 2003).





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