

Thomas Kühne

## A Father, a Perpetrator, a Son

### Autobiographical Thoughts on Mystery and Curiosity

When I was growing up in Germany in the late 1960s and early 1970s, my dad used to send a Christmas package to an inmate of the Hohenasperg, a medieval fortress and then a well-known political prison.<sup>1</sup> Once in a while, my dad would also pay him a visit; the Hohenasperg was located north of the city of Stuttgart and about a ninety-minute drive from the Swabian town of Nagold, where we lived. As a soldier with the SS in the past war, the man had been tragically involved in bad things, or so we were told, for which he was tried in the 1960s and sentenced to life in prison. During the 1950s, while trying to establish himself professionally, my father contributed articles to the journal for interior design that this man edited. At that time, said man had lived under a pseudonym, Alfred Ruppert (instead of Albert Rapp), clandestinely managing to support his wife and three sons. He was a good man, according to my dad. Many bad things had happened in that war. Talking about them wouldn't make them any better, or so claimed common wisdom.

As a kid, I wasn't too interested in this man's history or my father's connection to him, nor did I know much about the SS other than that it embodied some sort of ultimate evil. The story about Rapp's two names disturbed me, and the image of a father eking out his life in a dungeon disquieted me. In my childish imagination, nurtured by all sorts of adventure literature, Rapp lay abandoned in a cold medieval cell, shackled to a stone wall. He died in 1975, about when my parents divorced. My dad moved away, and nobody talked about it anymore. At least not for a long time.

## The Father

Only the Hollywood TV miniseries *Holocaust*, watched in January 1979 by roughly a third of the West German population, refocused public interest in

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<sup>1</sup> Horst Brandstätter, *Asperg, Ein deutsches Gefängnis* (Berlin: Klaus Wagenbach, 1978). – I wish to express my gratitude to Thomas Kohut, Cornelia Rauh, and Mary Jane Rein for providing important feedback on an earlier version of this chapter.

the Nazi past and World War II on the murder of the Jews.<sup>2</sup> Before then, it wasn't the murder of the Jews that concerned Germans when they dealt with this past but rather, what the war had done to them, the Germans, including my father and his family.<sup>3</sup> My dad's home in Braunschweig and all of the family's belongings were destroyed by the British bombing raid in October 1944. His older brother was killed in action in spring 1945 in the Riga area. In the 1960s, war damage was still widely visible. Bombed cities such as Stuttgart or Cologne, where I was born, were not fully restored yet. Much of the damage was hidden. Most disturbing to me was the ubiquitous sight of disabled ex-servicemen – men with one leg, one arm (or a prothesis) or distorting face wounds and no voice; men sitting in wheelchairs; blind men with sticks and service dogs. These wounds were visible not only in public but even more so privately where I faced them twice a week, distributing a clerical newspaper for the elderly in my neighborhood.

My father was not one of the disabled. Yet the war weighed heavily on him. Drafted into the Wehrmacht in fall 1943, he was torn out of a happy youth (as he insisted) at the age of eighteen. He steadfastly refused to talk about his time as a soldier, except that it was the worst part of his life, apparently no better than the fourteen months he endured, increasingly sick with tuberculosis, in Soviet captivity after the surrender of his division to the Red Army in May 1945 in the Courland Pocket. I never knew him other than as fully despising any type of uniform, not only those of the new West German army, the Bundeswehr, but also those of policemen and even fire fighters. To him, a uniform and certainly the military, embodied the institutionalized betrayal of humankind.

And not only uniforms kept the trauma of the war alive. The Nazi past also mattered as the root of authoritarian mindsets that long prevailed in Germany. Coming from a social democratic family and having managed to avoid the Hitler Youth even at a time (1939–1943) when it was quasi-mandatory for boys of his age, my dad disdained, in fact was obsessed with, the dominance of *Altnazis*, or Old Nazis, in society through the 1980s. In 1975, he was bullied out of a company that was run by former Waffen SS men. He was not on speaking terms with an uncle of mine, the husband of a third cousin of my mother (and her only relative, apart from her parents). “Uncle Rolf” was a former Wehrmacht lieutenant and the epitome of a warhorse. Despite having lost a leg in the war, he prided himself on playing tennis and downhill skiing with his prothesis better than he would have with

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2 Sandra Schulz, “Film und Fernsehen als Medien der gesellschaftlichen Vergegenwärtigung des Holocaust. Die deutsche Erstaussstrahlung der US-amerikanischen Fernsehserie ‘Holocaust’ im Jahre 1979,” *Historical Social Research*, 32, no. 1 (2007): 189–249.

3 Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories, The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

his natural leg. And he only needed a glass of wine or two to bemoan that the Third Reich hadn't completed the annihilation of the Jews. Later, my dad broke with the family of his second wife, an Austrian whose mother I remember as matching perfectly the cliché of a Nazi women (*Nazisse*, in German), both in terms of physical appearance and blatant antisemitism.

## The Perpetrator

And yet there was Albert Rapp. As a youngster I had no clue what precisely he had done, although it dawned on me that he could not have been just a simple rank and file soldier, coerced into the army, as my father had been. As my relationship to my father was distant, I wasn't too curious about his life stories including this mysterious connection, and he wasn't interested in talking about them either. My early work as a historian did not focus on the SS or other core groups of Nazi perpetrators. In college in the 1980s, I was interested in debates about Imperial Germany's potential for democratization; my 1992 dissertation explored the lack thereof in Prussia before 1914.<sup>4</sup> The German debate on the crimes of the Wehrmacht in the mid-1990s<sup>5</sup> motivated my next project, a gendered perspective on its rank-and-file as bystanders to the Holocaust. My father's contempt of soldiers may have influenced this choice.<sup>6</sup> My own political upbringing was rooted in West German pacifism and antimilitarism, at a time when my hometown of Nagold was known primarily for its military base, where in 1963 a recruit had been trained to death using methods preferred by Nazi elite troops – one of the early spectacular Bundeswehr scandals.<sup>7</sup>

Rapp returned to my mind only after I emigrated to the United States in 2004 to join Clark University's program in Holocaust and Genocide Studies and began pondering a new book project – more than ever before thinking, questioning,

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4 Thomas Kühne, *Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur in Preußen 1867–1914. Landtagswahlen zwischen korporativer Tradition und politischem Massenmarkt* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1994).

5 Thomas Kühne, "Der nationalsozialistische Vernichtungskrieg und die 'ganz normalen' Deutschen. Forschungsprobleme und Forschungstendenzen der Gesellschaftsgeschichte des Zweiten Weltkriegs. Erster Teil," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 39 (1999): 580–662.

6 Thomas Kühne, *The Rise and Fall of Comradeship: Hitler's Soldiers, Male Bonding and Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 3–4.

7 "Tiefste Gangart," *Der Spiegel*, 13 November 1963: 52–56; cf. Thomas Kühne and Walter Binder Jr., "Zum 'Tag der offenen Tür' auf dem Eisberg," *Schwarzwälder Bote* (Nagold edition), 20 September 1974.

trying to make sense of my German identity and the personal history of it.<sup>8</sup> I felt reminded of that mysterious connection and asked my father for the name, which I had forgotten. He gave it, pretending that he didn't remember any details of Rapp's activities, except that Rapp had been sentenced for shooting five "gypsies" in Russia. But this terrible act hadn't been his fault; he had only followed orders. Rapp's hiding under a false name did not give my dad much cause for concern either. Rapp had done so to support his family.

The literature on the Holocaust and the SS didn't yet reveal much about Rapp's crimes and personality, so I decided to check the trial records in the Ludwigsburg Central Archive for Nazi Trials.<sup>9</sup> I learned a lot. From 1942 to early 1943, Albert Rapp had been the leader of SS Sonderkommando 7a, one of the mobile units of Einsatzgruppe A that was responsible for the murder of more than 1.2 million Jews and others in the northern regions of the Nazi-conquered part of the Soviet Union. In 1960, Rapp aka Ruppert came into the crosshairs of the West German justice system. He was arrested in 1961 and sentenced to life in 1965, not for killing five "gypsies," but for the "collaborative murder of one thousand one hundred and eighty individuals."<sup>10</sup>

Rapp was born in the Swabian town of Schorndorf in 1908. After earning an architectural degree, he studied law in Munich and Tübingen, a hotbed of Nazi academics. In 1936, he passed the bar exam but not to become a lawyer. Instead, he instantly joined the Security (i.e., intelligence) Service (SD) of the SS. Already as a teenager in the 1920s, he had been engaged in far rightist youth groups. In 1931, he had joined the NSDAP, then the SA where he befriended numerous fellow Nazis

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<sup>8</sup> For corroborating experiences, see Ursula Hegi, *Tearing the Silence. On Being German in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Helmut Krausnick and Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges. Die Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD 1938–1942* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1981), 211, 645; Kerstin Freudiger, *Die juristische Aufarbeitung von NS-Verbrechen* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 2002), 74–79. Recent contributions include Klaus-Michael Mallmann, "Lebenslänglich. Wie die Beweiskette gegen Albert Rapp geschmiedet wurde," in *Die Gestapo nach 1945. Karrieren, Konflikte, Konstruktionen*, eds. Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Andrej Angrick (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2009), 255–269; Christian Ingrao, *Believe and Destroy. Intellectuals in the SS War Machine* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2013); Stefan Klemp, "Albert Rapp: 'Du sollst Deinen Feind aus aller Seelenkraft hassen . . .,'" in *Täter, Helfer, Trittbrettfahrer*, vol. 10: *NS-Belastete aus der Region Stuttgart*, ed. Wolfgang Proske (Gersteden: Kugelberg Verlag, 2019), 354–375.

<sup>10</sup> Judgement Landgericht Essen, 29 March 1965, Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg (BAL), B 162/14174. See also *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen. Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen*, vol. 20, eds. C. F. Rüter and D. W. de Mildt (Amsterdam: University Press Amsterdam, 1979), no. 588, 715–815.

who later became leading figures in Himmler's SS administration and in the Einsatzgruppen. In occupied Poland in fall 1939 and early 1940, Rapp was in charge (under Eichmann) of the Germanization program, the forced replacement of Poles and Jews by ethnic Germans migrating from Russia and Romania. After appointments with the SD in Germany in the following two years, he took over the command of Sonderkommando 7a in Belarusian Klynki in February 1942. Only a few weeks later he proudly reported the killing of 1657 persons including 1585 Jews. And so it continued, until he was wounded in January 1943 and returned to Germany, serving with the SS administration in Braunschweig and Berlin. Rapp was the model of a career SS officer. Embodying the ideal of the fanatically antisemitic "political soldier" who fought unconditionally and without moral restraints for the Nazi cause, he used unbridled ruthlessness against the alleged racial enemies in the East. His men despised him as a relentless commander who couldn't care less about his troops, concerned only with his own advancement.

As is well known, the West German justice system observed utmost generosity if not negligence toward Nazi perpetrators. While many were investigated at some point (172,294 through 2005), few were prosecuted (16,740), less than half of them convicted (6,656). Most of them got away with light prison sentences. Only 981 were convicted for acts of killing, out of which less than 20 percent (182) received the maximum penalty allowed under West German law, life imprisonment.<sup>11</sup> Whereas American jurisprudence establishes capital crimes on the basis of objective circumstances and subsequently attaches little value to the motivations of the perpetrator, the West German system applied the "subjective theory" through the 1990s. Convicting a defendant as perpetrator requires a proven interest in the deed, i.e., if they killed or ordered the killing of people to satisfy "basic motives" such as hatred of Jews. Basic motives, however, were usually difficult to prove, and more often than not judges were not overtly interested in exploring Germans' blatant antisemitism anyway. Instead, West German prosecutors routinely returned mild verdicts by categorizing even convicted mass murderers as mere adjuncts, accomplices or assistants of the actual perpetrators, the top Nazis, all of them long dead; the adjuncts were found to have committed crimes only unwillingly, typically by following orders.<sup>12</sup>

Rapp was one of the exceptions.<sup>13</sup> Put on trial, a Nazi perpetrator could usually count on their troops and comrades to testify on his behalf, for instance, by

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<sup>11</sup> Guenther Lewy, *Perpetrators. The World of Holocaust Killers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 88–89.

<sup>12</sup> Lewy, *Perpetrators*, 90–92, 97–102; Lewy, *Perpetrators*, 105–107 on the change from 2009 on.

<sup>13</sup> For another blatant example, Heinrich Hamann, Gestapo leader in Nowy Sacz, see Thomas Kühne, *Belonging and Genocide. Hitler's Community, 1918–1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 68–76, 83, 88, 93.

deflecting any suspicions of basic motives. Not so Rapp. His former underlings were more than willing to send him to his fate. When he assumed his command in Klincy, Sonderkommando 7a had just been granted a multiweek long break to recover from months of continuous service (as killers). A different SS unit had already killed most of the Jews in Klincy. But Rapp didn't want to waste time and pushed his men to track down any racial enemies of the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* (community of the folk/people) remaining in the area. And he didn't stop chasing his men to chase down Jews until he was wounded. To the Essen court, there was no doubt that Rapp had acted on his own initiative, in accordance with the concept of basic instincts as defined in German judicial language.

After studying the Ludwigsburg files on Rapp, I reported back to my father, who at the age of 81 was still of sound mind and even accustomed to reading academic prose on historical topics, including my own work. I explained to him that the trial investigations, based on a plethora of testimonies of his former underlings and comrades, left no doubt of Rapp's character and mindset: he was a brutal anti-semitic and committed Nazi who had entered the SD in 1936 out of passion; the number of 1180 murders was certainly only the minimum of what could be proven in court, whereas Rapp's record in fact must have been much worse. My dad listened patiently to my lecture of twenty or so minutes, thought about it for a moment, and then said: well, as far as I know, he was sentenced for the killing of five individuals, not Jews, "only Gypsies," and he was ordered to do so.

This was the end of the discussion with my dad on Rapp. While annoyed by his reaction, I wasn't terribly surprised. After all, the essence of his political identity was the opposition to "the" Nazis and to Nazism. The Nazis had always been the others, not he himself, not his parents, siblings, friends.<sup>14</sup> He was the victim of Nazism. While the concept of friendship didn't apply to his relationship to Rapp, the threat of contamination – by sustaining some support for a Nazi fanatic and perpetrator – was unbearable to my father. Rapp could not have been such a monster. My research, on the other hand, inspired by Christopher Browning's inquiries into the social psychology of perpetrator units of "ordinary men," focused on peer group dynamics, not so much on ideological fanatics such as Rapp.<sup>15</sup> I decided to let go of Rapp.

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<sup>14</sup> This has been a popular trope, see "Opa war kein Nazi." *Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis*, eds. Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller and Karoline Tschugall (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Christopher Browning, "Twenty-five Years Later," *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2017), 238–241.

## The Son

Thinking about my “adjacency to historical violence,” it would be tempting to present the strange relationship between Rapp and my father as the origin of my own efforts to creep into the mindsets of Nazi soldiers, Holocaust perpetrators, bystanders, and other people willingly or unwillingly entangled in war, atrocities, genocide. Yet, it would be a stretch and a textbook illustration of what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu once called “l’illusion biographique.”<sup>16</sup> When we as autobiographers or biographers tell our life stories or those of others, we assume that this “‘life’ constitutes a whole, a coherent and oriented ensemble, to be understood as a unitary result of a subjective and objective ‘intention.’” We present lives that follow a “chronological and logical order,” with an origin and a goal. When we narrate our biography, we do so as “ideologues of our own life.” In order to prove the coherence of the respective life, we select certain events, experiences, decisions, successes, and failures, and we arrange them in meaningful ways.

Historians are mandated to establish causes and consequences. As a history major in college, I was intrigued by Friedrich Meinecke (1862–1954), a model of such a historian. One of the most influential nationalist historians in Imperial and Weimar Germany, he is nowadays mainly known for his 1946 book *Die Deutsche Katastrophe* (The German Catastrophe). Without simply denying the continuities from the German authoritarian state, which he adored (just as he never hid his antisemitic resentments), from Prussian militarism, German nationalism, and imperialism to the “catastrophe” of the Third Reich, the book famously managed to nonetheless preserve those traditions by tying Nazism to common non-German, European traditions such as Bolshevism. In this way, Meinecke was able to explain away the “catastrophe” as a mere accident, an “aberration” from the true path of German history.<sup>17</sup> Sidelined by the Nazis, Meinecke had published already in 1941 the first part of his autobiography, which sophisticatedly selected personal experiences and arranged them

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<sup>16</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “L’illusion biographique,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, vol. 62–63 (1986): 69–72, 69 for the following quotes. The translations are mine. For an English translation, see Pierre Bourdieu, “The Biographical Illusion,” in *Identity: A Reader*, eds. Paul Du Gay, Jessica Evans, and Peter Redman (London: Sage Publications, 2004), 297–303. For a review of the discussion, see Ricardo Altieri, “Eine Antikritik auf Bourdieus Kritik am biographischen Schreiben,” in *Work in Progress, Work on Progress*, eds. Marcus Hawel et al. (Hamburg: VSA, 2019), 41–53.

<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Meinecke, *Die deutsche Katastrophe. Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen* (Wiesbaden: Brockhaus, 1946), 9.

into inevitable continuities embedded in the glory of the German nation-building process. On one of the first pages, the reader learns that the deep “commitment to the Prussian state” of Meinecke’s protestant ancestors established a fertile ground for his career as a nationalist historian even before he was born. However, it was his “first own, entirely authentic historical remembrance” that determined this vocation irrevocably. The event at the origin of this remembrance – “the roots of my historical work” – was a pompous visit of the Prussian King William I and his Prime Minister Otto von Bismarck (who shortly after engineered the foundation of German nation state) in Meinecke’s hometown Salzwedel in 1865, to which he was an eyewitness at the age of three.<sup>18</sup>

Fabricating my own academic biography and its adjacency to historical violence in a consistent fashion by employing my dad’s connection to Albert Rapp, with the great Meinecke as the model, would face a couple of hurdles. First, it would have to be acknowledged that the Rapp episode occurred later in my life and was much less spectacular than Meinecke’s face-to-face encounter with William I and Bismarck. After all, I have never met Rapp face to face. An even bigger problem results from the demise of German nationalism since 1945, without which my generation’s and my own political and intellectual socialization certainly would have taken a different direction. Already Meinecke’s problematic effort to save the idea of the German nation’s splendor was doomed. Since then, attempts to praise, glorify, or heroize the German past, especially the one that led to 1945, have been more and more frowned upon if not rejected outright. Instead, a “negative” approach to dealing with this past has become standard in Germany. “Negative memory” is the term for addressing Germany’s reinvention of national identity and its reconstruction of national reputation through questioning and rejecting its evil past – Nazism, racist hatred, antisemitism, authoritarianism, military aggression, and genocide. Instead of heroizing one’s own collective past and its actors, “negative memory” allows for empathy if not sympathy with the victims of past evil. And it entails exploring and exposing the historical truth about past evil in all its complexities, including many Germans’ compliance with the Nazi regime.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Meinecke, “Erlebtes 1862–1901” (1941), in Friedrich Meinecke, *Autobiographische Schriften*, ed. Eberhard Kessel (Stuttgart: K. F. Koehler, 1969), 6, 13–15.

<sup>19</sup> Reinhard Koselleck, “Formen und Traditionen des negativen Gedächtnisses,” in *Verbrechen erinnern. Die Auseinandersetzung mit Holocaust und Völkermord*, eds. Volkhard Knigge and Norbert Frei (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2002), 21–32; Aleida Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur. Eine Intervention* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2013), 59–106.



## Sufferings

The breakthrough of “negative memory” occurred in the 1990s. While some Germans have worked toward it since 1945, and West German (and in different ways East German) governments and many politicians supported it from early on, society in most parts refused to discuss a break with the Nazi past publicly or privately and instead chose to keep silent about it. Germans did not want to be reminded of their traumatization through war, death, expulsion, captivity or of their multifaceted compliance with or their indifference toward the regime and its terror against Jews, other minorities, and the peoples in the occupied territories. Only beginning in the late 1960s did the second generation, the children of those who had been adults in Nazi Germany, question their parents’ silence about the Nazi past. The reckoning of post-Nazi generations with the silence of their Nazi parents or grandparents followed a twisted road. The 1968 rebels bemoaned allegedly fascist continuities, in personnel, ideology, and institutions, from Nazism to the West German democracy and capitalism. Since the late 1970s, inspired not least by the *Holocaust* miniseries (which follows the trajectories of two fictional German families, one Jewish and one Christian), this sweeping judgment gave way to diverse inquiries into what individual parents, fathers, grandparents, but also mothers had done during the Nazi period.

What these second- and in the meantime also third-generation accounts have in common is the mode of accusation – accusation not only of the parents’ or grandparents’ deeds and misdeeds in Nazi Germany, but also of their denial and silence afterwards, their “second guilt” (Ralph Giordano), their inability or unwillingness to work through, disclose, and admit to their “primary” guilt, their responsibility for, complicity in or indifference toward the Nazi regime and the crimes committed in the name of Germany during the Third Reich.<sup>20</sup> While parts of this second generation literature is furthermore driven by the notion of a “tertiary” guilt – the idea that the children have inherited the parents’ guilt or parts of it – its authors typically cope with the ballast of multilayered guilt by refocusing the narrative on the damage these moral burdens have done to them, the children.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ralph Giordano, *Die zweite Schuld, oder Von der Last Deutscher zu sein* (Hamburg: Rasch und Röhring, 1987).

<sup>21</sup> *Generations of the Holocaust*, eds. Martin S. Bergmann and Milton E. Juvovy (New York: Basic Books, 1982); *The Collective Silence. German Identity and the Legacy of Silence*, eds. Barbara Heimannsberg and Christoph Schmidt (San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers, 1993) (German original 1988); Stephan and Norbert Lebert, *My Father’s Keeper. Children of Nazi Leaders – An Intimate History of Damage and Denial* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 2001).

One of the most prominent examples is Niklas Frank's 1987 "reckoning" (or *Abrechnung*, as the subtitle of the German original says) with his father, the notorious Hans Frank who was hanged at Nuremberg in 1946 for his crimes as despotic Governor General in Nazi-occupied Poland.<sup>22</sup> Niklas, born in 1939, was raised by his mother in the spirit of pious remembrance of a sensitive, gifted, and intellectual father. The son's rage about his father's evilness and the (not much less) evil obfuscations of his mother and other family members and friends pervades the book on each page, often resorting to obscene language. That the father's evil, the Nazi past, has destroyed the son's life, is the essence of the book's message.

Another example is Alexandra Senfft's *Schweigen tut weh. Eine deutsche Familiengeschichte* (Silence hurts. A German Family History), which appeared 30 years after Frank's bestseller.<sup>23</sup> Senfft, born in 1961, is the granddaughter of Hanns Ludin, Hitler's ambassador to the Slovak Republic beginning in 1941. Ludin was responsible for the deportation and subsequent death of the Slovak Jews and was hanged in 1947. Senfft tells the story of the wife (her grandmother) of a Nazi perpetrator who stubbornly believed in her husband's innocence and instituted a culture of silence about guilt and responsibility in the Third Reich. The actual anti-hero of Senfft's family history, however, is her mother Erika, born in 1933. Erika lived quite the life in Hamburg's leftist intellectual in-crowd in the 1960s and 1970s – but only to increasingly suffer from and eventually collapse as a result of depression, alcoholism, and world weariness. The fact that such tragedies have occurred and still occur in all kinds of families and societies and may be related to individual choices such as an excessive lifestyle is not the subject of Senfft's analysis. Instead, her narrative focuses on the singular cause for everything that went wrong in her family: the Nazi past, or, more precisely, the original guilt of Hanns Ludin that is handed down to his children and grandchildren, not unlike the original sin of Adam and Eve that has been haunting humankind since its inception.

A dramatic example of the second generations' self-victimization was given by "Stefan," the son of an SS officer, in an interview in the 1980s with Peter Sichrovsky, a journalist born shortly after the war in 1947, son of Jewish Austrians.

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<sup>22</sup> Niklas Frank, *Der Vater. Eine Abrechnung* (Munich: Bertelsmann, [1987]). English version (in some parts omitting the obscene language and imageries of the German original): Niklas Frank, *In the Shadow of the Reich* (New York: A. Knopf, 1991).

<sup>23</sup> Alexandra Senfft, *Schweigen tut weh. Eine deutsche Familiengeschichte* (Berlin: Claassen, 2007). Cf. "Niklas Frank, Alexandra Senfft und Malte Ludin im Gespräch mit Horst Ohde ueber autobiographische Literatur und autobiographische Filme," in *Nationalsozialistische Täterschaften. Nachwirkungen in Gesellschaft und Familie*, eds. Oliver von Wrochem and Christine Eckel (Berlin: Metropol, 2016), 213–231.

In this interview, Stefan laments over “all that talk about you Jews being the victims of the war.” And he goes on: “But for those of you who survived, the suffering ended with Hitler’s death. But for us, the children of the Nazis, it didn’t end. [. . .] I am sure that in the old days my father brutalized Jews, but after the war there weren’t any left. There was only me.” Bottom line: “I’m in the same boat as you. I was the Jew in my family.”<sup>24</sup>

To be sure, these three examples contrast with more recent, more explorative, and more sophisticated second- and third-generation analyses of their parents’ Nazi past and their subsequent silence about it.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, the leitmotif of this literature is the transgenerational conversion of guilt into victimhood; the transmitter of this conversion is the silence of the Nazi generation about their guilt, responsibility, deeds and misdeeds. It is this silence that, according to the second- and third-generation narrative, has damaged them, the children or grandchildren.<sup>26</sup> This narrative of victimhood takes up and transforms a powerful discourse that culminated early, around 1960, in Theodor W. Adorno’s and Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich’s critiques of Germans’ inability to work self-critically through their own entanglement in the Nazi state, its Führer cult, and its crimes.<sup>27</sup> These critiques, inspired by Freudian philosophy, bemoaned rightly Germans’ refusal to honor the victims of Nazi persecution. Even more vociferously did they warn of the dire consequences of this silence and denial for the new West German democracy. Old Nazi ideas and ideologies would smolder under the surface of a democratic state and await the opportunity to attack it again. Still, in 1997, after almost forty years of rather stable and increasingly celebrated German democracy, the German political scientist Gesine Schwan somberly accounted for the destruction of German families and

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Sichrovsky, *Born Guilty. Children of Nazi Families* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 137–138. (German original 1987).

<sup>25</sup> Katharina von Kellenbach, *The Mark of Cain: Guilt and Denial in the Post-War Lives of Perpetrators* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Angelika Bammer, *Born After. Reckoning with the German Past* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019); Roger Frie, *Not in My Family. German Memory and Responsibility After the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>26</sup> On this motif of “consequential damage,” see Mathias Brandstädter, *Folgeschäden. Kontext, narrative Strukturen und Verlaufsformen der Väterliteratur 1960 bis 2008* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2020). More generally, see Erin McGlothlin, *Second-Generation Holocaust Literature. Legacies of Survival and Perpetration* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit [1959],” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 10.2: *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft II* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977): 555–572; Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior* (New York: Grove Press, 1975) (German original 1967).

parent-child relations as well as the “damage to democracy,” all allegedly resulting from “silenced guilt” in post-Nazi Germany.<sup>28</sup>

Rarely noticed, the discourse on the damaging effects of “silenced guilt” to second- and third-generation Germans or even the entire society actually allowed younger Germans to reconnect with the elderly in the spirit of common suffering from the Nazi past. The war generation had always insisted on their status as victims – as victims of a seductive leader, of a coercive or entrapping dictatorship, and most of all of a terrible war that had ended in the destruction of their homelands, the loss of millions of fathers, brothers, mothers, wives, sisters, and children, the traumatization of further millions of survivors by years of Allied air raids, Soviet captivity, and expulsion, the territorial and political division of their fatherland; and the stigmatization of their national identity.<sup>29</sup>

Ultimately, the enormously successful 2013 TV show *Unsere Mütter, Unsere Väter*, or *Our Mothers, Our Fathers* (Generation War in the Anglophone version) concluded this transgenerational reconciliation. Set in Nazi Europe during World War II, it tells the story of five German friends: two brothers who serve with the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front; a selfless war nurse; a talented singer; and her boyfriend, a Jewish tailor. Reaching spectacular viewing rates of 24 percent, the three-part series was hailed as the ultimate cure to the traumas of millions of German families by dissolving the tensions and conflicts caused by decades of silencing the past. As the producer explained, the movie allowed his eighty-eight-year-old father to finally talk, as never before possible, about the past. Note that the younger generation is now charged with interpreting the past. It does so, however, by eventually confirming crucial features of the obfuscating and self-victimizing remembrance of the Nazi past that the German “war generation” had produced and reproduced over decades. While the major characters are shown as complex, the series keeps the Nazification of German society at a distance and instead presents even all of them, not only the Jewish tailor, as victims of a grand tragedy.<sup>30</sup>

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**28** Gesine Schwan, *Politics and Guilt. The Destructive Power of Silence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 54, 135 (German original 1997).

**29** Dagmar Barnouw, *The War in the Empty Air. Victims, Perpetrators, and Postwar Germans* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); *Germans as Victims. Remembering the Past in Contemporary Germany*, ed. Bill Niven (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2006); Gilad Margalit, *Guilt, Suffering, and Memory. Germany Remembers its Dead of World War II* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

**30** Aleida Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur*, 33–42; David Wildermuth, “*Unsere Mütter, Unsere Väter: War, Genocide and ‘Condensed Reality,’*” *German Politics & Society*, 34, no. 2 (2016): 64–83; Katherine Stone, “Sympathy, Empathy, and Postmemory: Problematic Positions in *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*,” *Modern Language Review*, 111, no. 2 (2016): 454–477.

## Mystery

The topos of transgenerational suffering from the Third Reich, the Second World War, and the Holocaust offers a seductive template for framing my own biographical adjacency to historical violence much more consistently than the simple reference to the mystery about Rapp would allow. Not only the paternal part of my family history is loaded with experiences of victimhood, shielded from exploration by rigorous silence. The maternal side is so as well. My mother was even less willing than my father to reveal any details about her youth under Hitler and during the war. She was born in 1925 (a few months before my dad) into a family of Catholic believers in the village of Krojanke (now Polish Krajenka) in what was, after the Versailles Treaty, the Grenzmark Posen-Westpreußen. Krojanke was located close to the 1938 border with Poland and fifteen miles north of the city of Schneidemühl (now Pila), which, after the Nazi occupation of Poland, became a hub of the Germanization program in the Warthegau.

But unlike my father, my mother was drawn to the Nazi youth groups. She joined the Bund deutscher Mädel (BDM) as early as possible, at the age of ten, voluntarily and full of enthusiasm, as detected in her occasional cryptic remarks and those of her cousin (aunt Hilde, the wife of uncle Rolf,<sup>31</sup> who both came from the same region). My mother seemed to have had the best time of her life in the BDM, and, after graduating from gymnasium (high school) in 1943, with the Reichsarbeitsdienst (RAD, or National Labor Service). After she had passed away in 1984, I learned from the new *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of everyday life) of the Third Reich that it was not unusual for girls at that time who wanted to break out of stifling family life to feel empowered by the female comradeship, physical exercises, and bonfire romanticism of such groups.<sup>32</sup> But as long as my mother was alive, there was no talk about it, only silence. Cautious questions I might have wagered were left unanswered. Remembering, let alone talking about, the first nineteen-plus years of her life was obviously disquieting for my mother. It all remained a great mystery to me. Occasional remarks and old photos suggested some happiness in Krojanke and Schneidemühl, where my mother attended gymnasium. But neither

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<sup>31</sup> These two names are pseudonyms.

<sup>32</sup> One of the early studies was Nori Möding, "Ich muß irgendwo engagiert sein – fragen Sie mich bloß nicht, warum." Überlegungen zu Sozialisationserfahrungen von Mädchen in NS-Organisationen," in "Wir kriegen jetzt andere Zeiten." *Auf der Suche nach der Erfahrung des Volkes in nachfaschistischen Ländern*, eds. Lutz Niethammer and Alexander von Plato (Berlin: Dietz, 1985). For a summary of subsequent research see my *Belonging and Genocide*, 143–147.

my mom nor her parents ever entertained the idea of returning to their homeland in Poland after 1945 – not even for a short visit. This was unusual. Other refugees and expellees from the eastern German territories, including uncle Rolf and his family, traveled there routinely even before and certainly after the Wall came down.

Only one anecdote was repeated over and over. Students of the psychology of memory will easily recognize it as a “screen memory,” or “Deckerinnerung,” in Sigmund Freud’s terminology.<sup>33</sup> It is told to cover or indirectly address a traumatic event that cannot be communicated directly. In this instance, the anecdote was about how my grandfather, a subaltern railroad worker and switchman in Krojanke, managed to rescue his wife and daughter from the approaching Red Army by hiding them under layers of coal in a westbound train. My irreverent questions about how the two of them had endured several days under those heavy coal blankets, how they had breathed and fed themselves, and how my grandpa later got himself out of Krojanke, the cruel bolshevists in sight, were left unanswered. This sacred story did not allow for a Q & A session. It ended happily, in any case, with the family reunited in spring 1945 in the Braunschweig region. After settling in, my mother started interning in a pharmacy, met and married my father, studied pharmacy and graduated in 1957, ready for a career that she had pursued since her gymnasium days, as her diploma testifies. In the patriarchal spirit of the 1950s, she renounced this career when I was born in 1958; she reentered it only in 1976 after her divorce.

What occurred before or during the flight to the West in winter 1944–1945? I didn’t know as a child, and I still don’t know. My mother died in 1984 after many years of battling cancer, and no personal documents except some basic ones including the gymnasium diploma and (remarkably) the BDM membership booklet were left. My only relatives from the Krojanke time had been uncle Rolf and his wife Hilde, my mom’s cousin and my godmother. They had taken good care of my mother during the many years of her disease, despite living far away. When my mother died in 1984, I felt obliged to pay them a visit, together with my girlfriend, pushing aside ambivalent feelings about uncle Rolf’s political affiliations. It wasn’t a good idea. At an earlier visit, he had produced a genuine swastika flag. As he explained, he had wisely kept it so he could waive it when the Nazis returned to power. He was even more proud of what he had accomplished in early retirement: creating a “Blood Book,” as he called it, sumptuously bound in precious leather and written on heavy paper in red ink that

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<sup>33</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Über Deckerinnerungen,” *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. I (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1953), 531–554.

documented his life during the Third Reich. It also served as a eulogy for it, including its efforts to “resolve the Jewish question.” The visit after my mother’s death was even worse than I had anticipated. Uncle Rolf couldn’t refrain from reveling in his Nazism, despite knowing about not only my own but also my girlfriend’s critical attitude and areas of intellectual expertise (she was writing a dissertation on everyday life in Nazi Germany).<sup>34</sup> Our visit ended in a huge dispute and in our early departure; no farewell to uncle Rolf, and no chance to ever talk to him again or even to aunt Hilde about the past.

Instead, my father came up with explanations of sorts, although only many years later, after he had divorced his second wife and retired, haunted by guilt feelings or only the urge to rationalize the tragedy of the mother of his two children, my baby sister and me. It all came back to the Nazis and to the war; that is, he imagined that my mother had died from skin cancer as a result of the sun exposure she experienced as a BDM and RAD girl with no sunscreen at hand (dismissing the plenitude of sun baths in the decades of my mom’s adulthood after 1945). While this theory – an unintended caricature of the myth of German victimization by the Third Reich – never made much of an impression on me, another one did. It is much darker, more serious, more complicated, and maybe closer to the truth. But the “maybe” weighs heavily. Through the 1980s, it was impossible to talk about rape, let alone the kind of mass rape that Soviet servicemen perpetrated on German women when they invaded eastern Germany, retaliating for the crimes of German soldiers on Soviet territory from 1941 on, including the rape of Soviet women. Only Helke Sanders’s 1992 movie *BeFreier and BeFreite* (*Liberators and Liberated*), based on interviews with German women raped in Berlin by Soviet soldiers in May 1945, initiated a public debate about these crimes.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, the mass rapes during the wars in former Yugoslavia broke the centuries-old Western taboo against discussing sexual violence. My father saw Sanders’s movie and studied Sanders’s related book, and he digested the news about the war in Bosnia, finally comprehending what he imagined had gone wrong in the marriage with my mother. My mother had been raped before or during the escape from the East in winter 1944–1945. There was no doubt about it – at least not to him. The traumatization of my mother, never addressed in her entire life, even less the subject of any attempt at healing, had burdened and eventually made impossible a healthy intimate relationship.

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<sup>34</sup> Cornelia Rauh-Kühne, *Katholisches Milieu und Kleinstadtgesellschaft. Ettlingen 1918–1939* (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke, 1991).

<sup>35</sup> Helke Sanders and Barbara Johr, *BeFreier und BeFreite. Krieg, Vergewaltigungen, Kinder* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1992).

A pinch of irony seems in order when narrating these considerations and conclusions of my father. But then, I may be mocking or analyzing his escapism into the myth of German victimhood and the all too human urge to rationalize mishaps and failures of one's own life by charging them to the account of grand tragedies. Still, what do I really know? Not much. After all, I should admit that I too can subscribe to the idea of my mother's rape at age nineteen or twenty. My desire to accept my father's theory is based on my own amateur psychologizing about my mother's personality and my desire to understand the thorough melancholia, if not sadness, that characterized her for as long as I knew her. No documents, letters, or testimonies whatsoever exist, and there is no hope of ever finding such things. In the end, there are only blanks and question marks, maybe a dozen or so pieces of a mosaic of many thousand. Inserting my own adjacency to historical violence in the rich tradition of German victimization by the Nazi war and the Nazi dictatorship, is tempting, but it wouldn't suffice to establish a consistent biography of that adjacency. The mythic oil of the narrative of victimization is too obvious, and the self-pity that it fuels demands its analysis, not its autobiographic reproduction.

And yet . . . autobiographical thinking can't altogether renounce the search for some consistency, some ideas of causes, consequences, or *telos*, as even Bourdieu in his acid critique of the biographic illusion evinces. A broad range of writers may have managed to overcome "l'illusion biographique" in the mode of aesthetic fiction; Bourdieu points to Faulkner and Robbe-Grillet.<sup>36</sup> But narrators of their own lives face a serious dilemma if they don't want to end up with "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," as Macbeth bantered at the advent of modernity, the era that mandated individuals to ponder the unique mundane meaning of their own lives.<sup>37</sup> Autobiographical thinking can't make do without establishing meaning. Mine can't either. I shall choose the interplay of curiosity and complexity to inject meaning into my life as a historian of violence.

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<sup>36</sup> Bourdieu, "L'illusion biographique," 69–70, also for the following.

<sup>37</sup> William Shakespeare, "Macbeth," Act V, Scene V, in *The Annotated Shakespeare*, Vol. III, ed. A. L. Rowse (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1978), 460. Cf., more generally, Peter Sloterdijk, *Literatur und Lebenserfahrung. Autobiographien der Zwanziger Jahre* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1978).



## Complexity

The mystery, the taboos, the silence, the confusion about the past of my own family and Germans at large certainly have caused damage. But they have also evoked a precious, good curiosity – the type of curiosity that has driven generations of Holocaust and Third Reich scholars, especially those who have been working since the 1980s. Questioning the previous preoccupation with the Great Men of evil, Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels and the like, and with anonymous political structures, organizations, and processes of mass crimes, academics since then have illuminated the many choices ordinary people had even under a genocidal dictatorship. Parallel to the surge of second- and third-generation inquiries into the private dimensions of that time, these scholars have probed the interwovenness of suffering from and complicity in this dictatorship. They have debated the ambiguity of evil and its humanness. Christopher Browning's dictum that "empathy for the perpetrators [. . .] is inherent in trying to understand them," has laid the ground for a new approach to studying perpetrators in all their facets, including as accomplices, bystanders, and in the contexts of the societies that produced them, German and non-German.<sup>38</sup> The idea of empathy for the evil doers has widely replaced previous practices of either demonizing them or otherwise obfuscating the complexity of their motivations and the social settings that made them do what they did. To be sure, my father's shallow testimonial to the moral goodness of Albert Rapp is transparent. Yet it carries a piece of truth – a disturbing truth, though. But only the assertion of such ambiguous truths enables us to understand why individuals became perpetrators, accomplices, bystanders, and onlookers of violence, and why some of them even changed their roles during the violent dynamic.

It is this type of academic work, together with the parallel documentation of and inquiries into ambiguous agency, tenuous choices, and unfathomable traumatization of the victims of the Holocaust, above all the Jews,<sup>39</sup> that has laid the intellectual ground for a culture of "negative memory" that has slowly

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<sup>38</sup> Browning, *Ordinary Men*, p. xx. Cf. Thomas Kohut, *Empathy and the Historical Understanding of the Human Past* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>39</sup> The state of research is masterly summarized by Peter Hayes, *Why? Explaining the Holocaust* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017). See also David Cesarani, *Final Solution. The Fate of the Jews, 1933–1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016); *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*, eds. Peter Hayes and John K. Roth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); *A Companion to the Holocaust*, eds. Simone Gigliotti and Hilary Earl (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020).

established itself in post-Holocaust Germany, Europe, and beyond.<sup>40</sup> Instead of glorifying, obfuscating, or simplifying the past, this culture is committed to critically analyzing, debating and exposing the political causes, social responsibilities, and multifaceted consequences of terror and destruction. It is fueled by a deep sense of shame about the past wrongs but also by thorough confusion about its subjects. The confusion about the subjects of violence is constructive. It generates insights into the complexity of mass violence. Translated into curiosity, confusion about the past inspires questions and research, the gathering of intelligence as an ongoing, never ending process of critique and self-criticism.

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<sup>40</sup> Koselleck, "Formen und Traditionen des negativen Gedächtnisses," 32; Jörn Rüsen, "Holocaust Memory and German Identity – Three forms of generational practices," *Textos De Historia*, 10.1+2 (2002): 95–104, here esp. 100–102 on the "inclusion of the otherness of the Holocaust."

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