

Introduction to an event at the University College of London, May 2014:
"The Transmission of a Troubled Past: Between the Personal and
Professional – Alexandra Senfft, author: In conversation with Stephanie
Bird, UCL"

by Dr. Julia Wagner, University College of London, German

Alexandra is a journalist and author who lives near Munich. She is an expert on the Middle East and spent several years living in the West bank and Gaza Strip while working for the UN Relief and Works agency for Palestine Refugees. A few years ago, at a panel discussion about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Alexandra made a comment which I found very relevant for our subject today: She said that Germans had engaged with the legacy of the Nazi past on an intellectual, abstract level, but only few had looked at their own family's past and their entanglement with the Nazi regime. She thought that if Germans were more open about this they could take a different stance in international debates and others, for example Israelis and Arabs, might view and listen to them differently. Alexandra herself has chosen not to ignore her family's past. Instead she wrote a memoir laying open the dynamics inside her family across three generations. Her book is called 'Schweigen tut weh. Eine deutsche Familiengeschichte'. The first part could be translated as 'silence is painful' and the second part as 'A German family story or a German family history'. In it, she takes a close look at her own family and the historic developments which shaped the lives of her grandparents and those of their children and grandchildren.

'Schweigen tut weh' is essentially a portrait of Alexandra's mother Erika Senfft, nee Ludin, a beautiful and fascinating, complicated and wilful woman who suffered a number of terrible tragedies and herself caused tragedy to other people's lives. Erika, was the oldest daughter of Hanns Ludin, a fervent Nazi and member of the SA, who made a career in the Third Reich and eventually served as Hitler's envoy to Slovakia. In this role Ludin helped to organize the deportation of more than 60,000 Jews. In 1947 he was extradited to Czechoslovakia and sentenced to death by hanging. Alexandra argues that her grandfather's involvement in the Nazi regime and his violent death cast a shadow over her mother's life which she could not escape and which contributed to her decline and her tragic death. According to Alexandra, her mother never openly confronted this family legacy, but she could not live with the silence either.

When Erika died at age 64, almost exactly 16 years ago, she left behind a jumble of documents and letters. In the introduction to her book Alexandra writes that by leaving these documents to her two children she also 'unconsciously left it to them to confront' (p. 12) the past. It took Alexandra 7 years before she felt ready to tackle reading the papers. From the very first pages of her memoir it is clear to the reader that the process of untangling historical fact, subjective truths and her own emotional

reactions was often difficult and painful. The book follows Erika through the various phases of her life, the high points and the times when she hit rock bottom: her childhood days in Slovakia, the return to Germany where she attended a prestigious boarding school and learned about her father's execution, the time after she dropped out of school and was taken in by a succession of family friends while figuring out what she wanted to do with her life. We learn about how she trained as a photographer, met and married the young lawyer Heinrich Senfft with whom she had two children, Alexandra and her younger brother. During the early years of her marriage, the Senffts often entertained the intellectual elite of West Germany. They danced and drank and discussed the Nazi past in general terms, but never the role Erika's fathers had played in it. The book goes on to describe Erika's life after the break-up of her marriage, her relationships with new partners and her gradual descent into depression and alcoholism. It ends where it began, with Erika's death in 1998 which at the same time was also the starting point for Alexandra's own quest to understand what happened. On the last pages of her memoir, Alexandra says that the writing the book finally enabled her to mourn her mother. At the same time it helped her and to open up emotionally, to let herself feel pain and grief for those whom she calls the "actual victims" [eigentliche Opfer]– that is the victims of the Holocaust.

After an afternoon of academic papers and discussion, this next session will have a different format. My colleague Stephanie Bird is going to have a conversation with Alexandra about her family's story and the process of writing about it. After that, we will watch a documentary called "2 or 3 things I know about him" which was created by Alexandra's uncle Malte Ludin.

Alexandra's book and the film offer two very different takes on the same story. They both explore how one family, the Ludins, dealt with the legacy of Nazi crimes. Because Alexandra's mother Erika was no longer alive at the time the film was made, her voice is largely missing from the story told there. But we hear her voice through her letters in "Schweigen tut weh".