

Nazi-era thinking never went away in Germany

Alexandra Senfft Opinion

Far-right populists are building on ideas that survived thanks to postwar silence

My late father's mantra was: "Your generation has been so lucky to grow up in peace."

As a boy in Berlin in the second World War he extinguished fires of buildings bombed to pieces. He saw corpses, witnessed physical and mental devastation as the Nazis wreaked havoc across Europe and beyond.

Though my father was not sent to the front the traumas of the war never left him. It was his generation of Germans, the children and teens raised during the war, who bore the brunt of their elders' misdeeds, failures and fanaticism. Even today, Kriegskinder (war children) suffer quietly from feelings of guilt, shame, disorientation and detachment.

Our grandparents, the majority of whom were perpetrators and bystanders, had draped themselves in resolute silence. Their children, our parents, weren't encouraged to ask questions regarding the Nazi period, let alone query the involvement of relatives.

Preserving democracy

During the student uprisings in the 1960s my father, Heinrich Senfft, was among those who started to speak up. He became a renowned lawyer and devoted all his adult life to building, strengthening and preserving constitutional democracy. He focused on old Nazis and, in 1978, forced former Third Reich judge Hans Filbinger to resign as premier of the state of Baden-Württemberg.

It is thanks to people such as my father that my generation grew up free, secure and in relative prosperity. But, since he died last year, I have had an uneasy feeling that we have become complacent. Many of us assume democracy is here to stay and take its many privileges for granted.

As my father and his generation pass away, right-wing populists are campaigning to undermine the democratic principles that were born out of the disaster of the second World War.

Instead of protecting minorities, they incite us to exclude them and consider them "the Other" or the invader. Our open-minded, multicultural and progressive Europe is regressing into petty nationalism.

The so-called Alternative for Germany (AfD) has become the third-strongest force in our federal parliament by stirring up resentment against the most vulnerable: refugees, who are seeking shelter and protection from wars, violence and acute poverty. Dressed in serious suits and business blouses, they push Muslim stereotypes

and align themselves hypocritically with European Jews and Israel to exploit them for their own devious ends. Their success builds on Nazi-era thinking and feelings that have persisted in Germany, thanks to postwar silence that covered up perpetrator guilt.

Never fully uprooted, xenophobia and anti-Semitism are visible once more in Hungary, Poland, Austria, France and the Netherlands. Right-wing movements there claim Islam is sweeping across Europe and will destroy the very foundations of our culture, our prosperity and freedom. But it is the populists who are the danger, exploiting insecurities over a world in flux to undermine the pillars of democracy.

Born equal in rights

It falls to us to renew the lesson of the second World War – never again – and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948, that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights".

This was all on my mind recently when I took my student daughter Magda to Bratislava to meet Holocaust survivor Tomi Reichental. Together we went to the grave of my grandfather – my mother's father – Hanns Ludin. He was buried there in 1947 after his execution as a Nazi war criminal.

He was the envoy of Nazi Germany to Slovakia. From his desk he was responsible for the deportation of the Slovak Jews and thus for the murder of Tomi's family.

Our encounter was an

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eye-opener for my daughter. History that seemed so far away came alive in front of her. To realise how the past is always present was an intense, sensitising moment for her. She understood the need for such encounters between opposing family narratives, however painful they may be, because they build bridges to understanding and empathy.

Passing through Vienna on our way back home, Magda and I stumbled upon thousands of students from Austria and Germany demonstrating against the far-right Freedom Party that, months/weeks later, would join Austria's coalition government.

Moving through the city, sharing their belief in a world of equality and freedom, of open borders, political and cultural exchange, I felt hopeful. While Europe's extremist forces are once again strong, the rule of law to which my father devoted his entire life will remain stronger.

Tomi Reichental – Condemned to Remember will be broadcast on RTÉ One at 9.35pm today. Alexandra Senfft is a German journalist and author of *The Long Shadow of Perpetrators: Descendants Face their Nazi Family History*