

The Pain of Silence

The Story of a German Family

Prologue

The night my mother died still feels like a bad dream to me today. It weighs on my soul, posing questions.

The doctors have disconnected the respirator. Side by side, my brother and I remain sitting with her for a long time, gazing at her, touching and stroking her – dissolved in tears. Is she at peace at last? Many hours later, exhausted, we decide to part from her. We leave the intensive care ward and go out into the darkness.

I feel like a traitor, leaving my mother alone in this strange room. I want to protect her, but it is too late. I will never see her again. It is so hard to let go. My head is full of confusion. I try to recall melodies of the past to help me, but the music that I love so much sounds strident and off-key now. There is no comfort there. Disoriented, I stumble out of the hospital building.

In silence we get into the car in the parking lot and drive away, past her hospital room. I take one last glance back at the single-storey building where my dead mother, or what remains of her, is lying behind closed blinds. Johann Heinrich puts his foot down and the hospital quickly disappears out of sight. I hate this night; I hate the spring with its feeling of promise, for being unaffected by her death. At least the weather is kind to us and harmonises with our grief; it is cold and pouring with rain.

We feel numbed as we drive through the sleeping town, splashing through puddles to the hotel. My brother and I climb into bed together and continue talking for a long time; about our mother, her life and her far too early death. Neither of us can sleep.

She had had fallen into the bathtub at home, which contained nothing but scalding water from the boiler. Maybe she hadn't been sober and simply forgot to run the cold water. Perhaps she lost her balance and slipped. It could be that she didn't give a damn at that moment and that she flirted with danger; how should I know? Here in this shabby hotel room, with the rain pelting against the windows, I cannot get those pictures out of my head. I will never be able to erase them from my memory.

My mother was still alive when I saw her. She was attached to breathing apparatus and imprisoned in tubes and bandages. The doctors had given her morphine to ease the intolerable pain of her burns. The only way that this once so expressive woman could communicate with me was by moving her eyelids or her fingers. Each time she surfaced from the depths of her sedation and recognised me, she wept. "Mammele, hold on!" I pleaded mentally, but I couldn't even press her hand for all the wires.

But she didn't hold on. I had always feared the worst, because with us death was always present. It lodged in my mother's bedroom, to which she retreated when she was in bad shape. The phantom that had haunted me for decades, my nightmare, had become reality: she was dead. Only sixty-four years old. The finality of it was what hurt most. There was still so much to explain and to understand - and so much to ask. I comforted myself with the thought that she had waited to die until we could hold her in our arms and she could at last let go. But despite my attempts at rational explanations, my conscience still nagged. Why hadn't I come to the hospital sooner?

Instead, a nurse told me, she had been reduced to clinging to photographs of her two children; she refused to let go of them, looked at them frequently and even fell asleep clutching them. She must have felt so alone.

After her death, when my brother and I drove to her flat, we were overwhelmed by the past. It was embarrassing enough to be rummaging through her elegant underwear and expensive designer clothes but we felt even more uncomfortable looking through the untidy mountains of letters and photographs. It was like breaking a taboo. The correspondence included love letters, letters from her mother and her five siblings, from my brother and me, and from her lawyers. I was unable and unwilling to read much of it at the time. The photographs documented her life, many dating from her youth and life as a married woman, the majority from the time when she was very beautiful and stunningly attractive; long before she was changed by depression and addiction.

Some of the photos were of her father, Hanns Ludin. My grandfather Hanns was Hitler's envoy in Slovakia, where he was tried as a war criminal in 1947 and then hanged. He is said to have dangled from the gallows for nine minutes, before asphyxiating in agony. At that point, my mother was fourteen years old, the eldest of six brothers and sisters. As the firstborn, she was his favourite child, a real daddy's girl. She had no chance to mourn him at the time, nor later on. So her misery began to take its course, surreptitiously and furtively at first, later bellowing and frenzied.

My father says that, even quite soon after the births of me and then my brother, my mother often retreated to her bed, where she gathered people around her who coaxed and encouraged her well-meaningly. I have no memory of that. In any case I

can scarcely recall my early childhood; my only associations of that time are vague feelings and a few familiar smells. Today I can only imagine how I felt then – my mother lies in bed, withdrawn; I pluck at her nightdress and earn nothing but tears in return. My first continuous memories date from the time when I went to school in England from the age of fifteen – far from my mother, out of reach of our domestic chaos. For her, my departure was yet another onslaught on her wounded soul.

Of course, I still remember clearly the day she told me rationally, virtually sober: “I got drunk last night”. It sounded like an announcement, or perhaps a threat. I was just fourteen then – the same age my mother was when she lost her father. And just as she had felt responsible for her distraught mother and her younger brothers and sisters after the death of her Nazi father, so I now took over the role of the apparent tower of strength, wise and sensible, who’d become “a grown-up” far too quickly. I often felt that our relationship had been turned on its head: I cared for my mother as if she were my child. Looking back, I believe that my mother had had a similarly inverted relationship with my grandmother, for she often treated her like a minor. In one way she was domineering, but at the same time she was like a naughty child needing to be shown her limits.

My mother had virtually stored her entire past in her flat and after her death it was her children’s task to put things in order. She had subconsciously left it to us to come to terms with the past. The suitcase she had brought with her when she visited my family and me for Christmas four weeks earlier still stood in the bedroom. After her return she had never unpacked. I left it as it was for years, too, because it symbolised something like her last journey to me. Sometimes I removed a piece of her clothing

and buried my nose in it, so as to recall the essence of her, preserved in the woollen fabric.

On her last visit to me and my children, she had done her utmost to do everything right! But I was withdrawn; I could not look her in the eye for fear of coming under her spell again and of renewed disappointments. She probably thought she perceived rejection in my behaviour; sometimes I could see the pain in her face. Yet I so longed for her, I so longed for everything to be all right again.

I did clear up my mother's flat and pack her letters and photographs into boxes, but it was only seven years later, that I began to come to terms with their contents. I had to overcome some inner impasse. Of course, I did read many of the letters before the funeral and used some of them to write an epitaph to my mother. But it was only gradually that I have become able to untangle the individual strands of our network of family relationships and understand how everything fits together. The letters, taking on a life of their own, unfold an unsettling story. It is the story of my mother, a post-war woman, whose life is closely intertwined with those of her parents – and mine with theirs. Some of my relatives asked me while I was writing, why I could not tell the story of my mother independently of my grandparents' story; after all, those relatives thought, they hardly had anything to do with her tragic development as an adult? However much I love them and respect their feelings, I could not grant them this favour. It would have meant ignoring where we come from, where we are today, where we are going.

There was always an enormous resistance to everything “evil” in our family: the father – my grandfather – was regarded as a “good Nazi”, as someone who apparently did not know what repercussions his political stance and deeds had. He was someone who, despite signing deportation orders for Slovakian Jews, apparently had no idea that these Jews were destined, not for labour camps, but for death. He was another of those numerous “innocent” National Socialists. Or was himself a victim of his times, as they say. What was my grandfather then: perpetrator or victim?

We all adored his wife, my beloved grandmother. She was the personification of good; she was almost worshipped like a goddess of truth. Yet this incessant goodness, this tolerance, this benevolence and prudence was itself a form of defence. My grandmother brought up her children believing in the good National Socialists; she taught them to see only their good sides, and believe that a "good" person cannot perpetrate any crimes. Anything that failed to match that immaculate image was forbidden, kept secret, glossed over. The perpetrators were the vulgar Nazis, not us. We could not be perpetrators as we were educated and cultivated. Only my mother was sometimes “bad” – when she had been drinking, she used to rage, swear and denounce them. Then even her father was no longer the noble saviour of Jews, but a common “Schwein”. She alone of our large family occasionally treated their mother disrespectfully - that wonderful old lady, whom we all revered. I never understood why she treated my grandmother so harshly.

According to the family’s version of her story, my mother was psychologically disturbed as a result of suffering a sudden increase in weight during her childhood, which was triggered by a “hormonal disorder”. It is also said that she never got over

having to leave her boarding school earlier than her brothers and sisters because of her poor performance and her subsequent inability to receive her graduation certificate. It is also part of the family legend that her husband, my father, encouraged her to drink, even virtually forced her to drink, and that she had never been able to cope with their separation, which is why she became depressed and took to drinking. There had been several other depressive family members, so it was clearly already in my mother's genes, it was said.

I kept on believing all of this for many years. I needed a reason or a name for her suffering. For a long time I didn't understand the kind of dilemma she faced. I subjected her to moral pressure, demanded that she fulfil her maternal obligations to me; tried to convince her of my point of view. However, she was totally out of reach, already on her long road to suicide. I only caused her more pain with my awkward preaching. She often retorted to me: "Just wait until you're in my situation!" I took it as a mean threat; I was not her after all – and anyway, what did I have to do with her suffering? At the breakfast table one morning she put a knife to her throat and, in a sombre voice, said it would probably be smarter if she killed herself. My brother, who was sitting there with me, was not yet eleven. We were both deeply shocked. Her screams from the bedroom still penetrate the marrow of my bones. If the phone rings in the middle of the night, I sit bolt upright in panic, still thinking that it is her, in urgent need – oblivious of the time – demanding my attention again. My mother overstretched my love for her.

I wish I could tell her now that I've understood her at last and can forgive her for what she did to my brother and me. I finally stopped believing the last of the family versions of her life when she died. Naturally there were formative factors during the

course of her life, but they were not at the root of her propensity for self-destruction. She used to tell me how hard the years after the war had been; that she was the one who bore the responsibility at home and worked really hard on the farm where the family made their home for a short period after the war. And all the time she was also having to care for her five brothers and sisters – at least that was the way she experienced it, although it may not be the only truth.

In my view, the trigger for her suffering was her father. He may have been a charming, educated, attractive and amusing man, but he was a desk-bound perpetrator who carried the political and diplomatic responsibility in Slovakia for the death of nearly 70,000 Jews. I hold this no less evil than personally carrying out the killings and in some ways perhaps even more perfidious. This guilt was never fully accepted in my family. Actually they disputed it, and some deny it still today.

My grandfather also bore responsibility for my mother's suffering, albeit indirectly, for I have come to understand that she subconsciously assumed his guilt, almost internalising it – and was unable to live with it. My grandmother was also responsible for this. She not only supported and encouraged her husband during his lifetime in everything he did, but she then sacrificed her eldest daughter to the myth of a guilt-free, truthful, ever-respectable husband: Hitler's envoy to Slovakia. She deceived herself as well as everyone else. This was clearly done in self-defence but this self-defence caused my mother, her daughter, irreparable psychological damage.

Today, within the family there are still contradictory interpretations of the developments of that time. Our views differentiate and diverge far beyond what I could do justice to here. The fact is that - if at all - we have only just tentatively begun

our emotional reckoning with the past. The year 2007 marked sixty years since my grandfather's execution – almost the length of a human life. When I consider how much the guilt of the past still affects us, his descendants – undetected, concealed, buried, suppressed – those years seem to span no time at all. Certainly very little of that time has been used to work through the past.

Since the deaths of my grandmother and mother within just a year of each other, I represent the next generation in the female line. I feel it is my responsibility to offer my children the perspective that I have formed, even if it deviates from family dictates. I want them to grow up free of handed-down guilt and shame, and I want them unburdened by the riddles of the past. They ought not to live in a false world sharply divided between the poles of good and evil that I grew up with. I wish them to learn instead that both are integral to, part of, life, a lesson that I worked very hard at before I could bear the ambivalence. I hope my children will develop a healthy awareness of injustice, free of others' projections, an ability to differentiate for themselves rather than accepting extreme and false dichotomies.

History does not let us alone. It will repeat itself if we do not confront those parts of it that have to do with us and if we fail to brave the past. I never denied that my grandfather was a National Socialist, nor did I ever believe that a high-ranking representative of the Third Reich could have remained innocent. But whenever I told friends about my grandfather I always ended up mumbling that he had apparently also saved some Jews. That is actually correct, there were a very small number of such cases, but they cannot justify the fact that he was deeply enmeshed in National Socialism -- and far from rescuing Jews -- he was primarily active in sending them to their certain death. The fact that he was instrumental in carrying out deportations was

never mentioned in my family and I never pushed the point because it would have tortured my mother even more. So I adopted the frequent references to “rescued Jews” because, at that time, even I could not help leaving open this little door of hope. Who wants a war criminal for a grandfather? It would have been nice to have been able to say: *My grandpa was not a Nazi*. But my grandfather was a Nazi and he was one who actively contributed to his own culpability. That does not mean that either his offspring or my children and I are guilty. Guilt cannot be inherited – but guilty feelings and anguish certainly can. My uncle Malte’s documentary film, “Two or three things I know about him” (2005), was a stifling portrayal of this suppression in our family; it was his film that gave me the ultimate impetus to write this book.

The traumas that my grandfather’s political entanglements and his terrible death unleashed directly or indirectly upon his descendants are indisputable. But what befell us is not remotely comparable to the suffering, the anguish and the pain inflicted upon the National Socialists’ victims and their offspring. The two cannot and should not be equated. Suffering must be accepted and recognised, but it can only be adequately considered and appreciated in its own context. Above all, suffering does not provide a *carte blanche* for the vindication or whitewashing of injustice nor is it grounds for any leniency towards those who harm others. Victims can also be victimisers and victimisers victims; there is no process of disqualification.

At what point does one personally cross the line into guilt: when one remains silent, suppresses the truth, or looks away? Did my grandmother feel guilty about her eldest daughter because she unconsciously knew the reason for her depressions, without being able to put her finger on it? Or is she culpable because while she realized that her daughter needed “the truth”, she could not bring herself to make this sacrifice and

instead remained loyal to her husband? Were my relatives guilty because they failed to offer my mother sufficient support? Am I guilty, too, because I sometimes treated her as a mother who had failed me, rather than a severely ill woman?

This form of guilt is rooted in human weakness and suppressive mechanisms – and although it is damaging, there is a chance of reconciliation. But there is no pardon for mass murder, such as that committed by the Germans during the era of National Socialism. The deaths of millions of Jews, of Sinti and Roma, of homosexuals, communists, and resistance members represent an historic fact that is indefensible. We need to understand how such crimes come to be perpetrated and how human beings can become murderers, and yes, even to comprehend that we could all become murderers. This does not mean that children and grandchildren must bear the guilt of their grandparents' misdeeds. It means acknowledging the historical facts. Hannah Arendt has called this “truths of fact” because where perspectives are concerned, there is no one truth.

I am trying, in this book, to trace the path my grandfather took and to comprehend what he did, starting from his parental home, through his NS career, to the fact that he gave himself up voluntarily after the war and ended his life on the gallows. Perhaps his past will explain my mother's life and through that my own past? In the course of my search I have encountered issues that are perceived quite differently by other members of my family; each has her or his own perspective on our collective story. What I have discovered and recorded here is my subjective view of the historically objective “truth”. The relationship between the subjective and the objective is undoubtedly fraught with tension and ambivalence and it is certainly not always congruent.

In the process, however, I have more or less stopped believing in coincidence. And it is probably no coincidence that it was exactly seven years after her death that I began to write about my mother, about her life and about what it meant to me. I'm not superstitious, but the number seven is certainly striking. Did sufficient time have to pass before I could understand her grief, could perceive the suffering of the actual victims as bearing directly upon my individual life, and not purely historical or political? Too many apparent coincidences in my life have formed coherent frameworks. Somehow everything fits together. For years my mind has been plagued by a threatening black cloud – is it a dread of things intangible and obscure, or family taboos, or is it mourning? Was it perhaps the fearsome depressions suffered by my mother, the cause of which I failed to recognise for so long: the traumatic violent death of her father; a father who indirectly, but with full responsibility, exercised the violence which marked us all?

I was once asked, during a therapy session, to picture an old wooden box in an attic and think what its contents might be. Immediately I had vague memories of my childhood. (I had never seen a box like this, but I recently discovered that there really is a box in the family cellar, brimming with Nazi artefacts, daggers of honour, insignia, documents and so on.) On my imaginary journey to this box, I remembered at once the blissful feeling of snuggling under the bedcovers in my grandmother's bed in the mornings as a little girl. My beloved grandmother – and now I am now able to say it frankly - who was the widow of a war criminal. She was his accomplice because she gave her husband her unconditional support – and looked away. And I, the granddaughter, was happy to be “under the blanket” along with her.

I want to be able to see properly; I want to see everything now. Gradually I am feeling my way through the blackness. I am daring, at last, to look at the contents of the box – this time it is my own. I cannot see the bottom yet, but I have already dealt with the items on top. Bit by bit, many scenes from my life and those of my mother, my family and my ancestors are coming together to make a whole. It is all taking on meaning slowly – my meaning. Daily, I have been waking up anxious, wondering whether I will be able to see it through. The process of understanding is not purely intellectual; it takes place in the deepest regions of my existence, of my identity. I am often plagued by headaches and exhausted from the effort of standing my ground, protecting myself from family “onslaughts”, distancing myself.

I don't want to lose my family through this search and I fear the human abysses that I experienced so intensely through my mother. But I will not turn back. Having begun my search through the box, I cannot fold up the documents again and pretend that I've seen nothing. It would haunt me. It would never leave me in peace. Doubt would grind me down just as my mother was pulverised by conflicting thoughts, feelings, conjecture and unbearable facts.

The past is alive. Even my ominous grandfather has suddenly taken on a human shape with which I can grapple and argue. Through this process, I have grown fond of the person I had simply demonised as a Nazi. And my grandmother, whom I had previously worshipped and idealised, has gained some rough edges; she's become a normal person to me with strengths and weaknesses. My love for her, however, still remains.

I no longer want to be the child under her blanket, though. I want to be an adult who can see the family from outside, can hold different views and defend herself. The box in the cellar, in which my family has stored its past, loses more of its oppressive weight the deeper I reach into it to lift out dusty letters. Little by little a huge burden is falling from my shoulders.