First Church of Belmont Unitarian Universalist
Summer Service on June 16th, 2013

Growing Up With A Nazi Heritage

Reflections from two native Germans
Stefan Frank and Valentin Frank (father & son)

Opening Words

Thomas Pynchon (b1937) in "Gravity's Rainbow"

It's been a prevalent notion. Fallen sparks. Fragments of vessels broken at the Creation. And someday, somehow, before the end, a gathering back to home. A messenger from the Kingdom, arriving at the last moment. But I tell you there is no such message, no such home -- only the millions of last moments . . . nothing more. Our history is an aggregate of last moments.

Reading

Martin Niemöller (1892-1984), Protestant Pastor and anti-Nazi theologian

First they came for the communists,

and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists,

and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews,

and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a Jew.

Then they came for me,

and there was no one left to speak for me.

Reflection I - Stefan Frank

A few years back, I was sitting in the Jewish Temple in Belmont observing my oldest son Valentin supporting his friend Ben's Bar Mitzvah by putting the scripture back into the ark. Sitting in this Jewish Temple among our Jewish friends and celebrating that family's joyous moments made me reflect on how much I personally have developed in my attitude and relationship towards both the Jewish people and the Holocaust, my native country Germany's shameful past.

My parents were both born during the Nazi regime, when my grandparents were in their twenties and thirties. Both of my grandfathers fought in the Second World War; one was captured by the Americans, the other by the French. Both returned home within a year after the war. As far as I know, none of them was a Nazi. One of my wife Ariane's grandfathers was in the Nazi party, while the other deserted the army in the area of Stalingrad and walked home. And my uncle was forced into the Hitler Youth and operated an anti-aircraft gun when he was 14 years old in late 1944.

What was it like growing up in my generation in Germany? By the age of 10, most German children of my generation had seen countless movies, TV shows, classroom videos and magazines articles depicting murderous Nazis, piles of corpses, killing machines, and every form of unthinkable cruelty imaginable -- usually culminating in a visit to the local concentration camp. We had been told about the killing of millions of Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, and intellectuals. And we were told that the perpetrators were our fellow countrymen and forefathers, Germans like us, and this mess was our heritage. After years of history classes about the Nazi regime, we were at the same time tired of the pictures and convinced that no sane person could ever do something like this. And we were a little proud of the fact that this Germany does really preserve, process and stand up to this crime and not deny these atrocities, like the Turks do with the Armenians or the Japanese with China.

In other words, we did learn a lot about the crime, but what did we learn about the perpetrators? They were people like Goebbels and Himmler, an oligarchy of cruel men that played the media and the public opinion like no other -- deceiving German voters and hiding their crimes for a long time, threatening the general population into obedience or at least preventing it from revolution. They managed to form a relatively small but powerful group of SS and Gestapo that kept the people in check. Of course, we would have wished that the people in the general population could have shown more heroism and resistance, but this is difficult when they did not know the depth of the crime and resistance would put one's family in danger. What our parents told us is that the general population was also a victim of -- and were unable to resist -- the Nazis. Everybody in our family were good folks, not Nazis, even Ariane's grandfather, who joined the Nazis in order just to obtain more food for his family.

And what did we learn about the victims of the crime - the Jewish people? Simply said, everything we learned about Jews had to do with the Holocaust. Every movie, every article, every mention of jews was set in the Third Reich. And this was not counterbalanced by regular Jewish people in our surroundings, since there are understandably not many Jews left in Germany. I personally did not meet a single Jewish person before I moved to the US at the age of 29. Thus the only association that came to my mind when I was still living in Germany was: Jews are victims of my forefathers' crimes. Jews in the historical context were usually destined to end up on one of the piles of corpses in the concentration camps, while I am supposed to feel infinite guilt towards those still living. One thing that reflects this more than anything else is the fact it took both my wife and I 10 years of living in the US before we were no longer nervous when we used the word "Jew". Strange as it may sound, I was far less nervous about using the F-word in the wrong environment then using the J-word. Saying "Jew" always made me clench and duck a little.

In summary, I was perfectly able to describe the brutality and enormity of the crime and the implicit guilt of the German people but I stayed emotionally detached at some level, since neither the Jews nor the Nazis were people like us … and the piles of corpses are just too high to digest.

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When our family moved to the US in 1996, we were invited to our first American thanksgiving feast by a Jewish professor I worked with. He and his lovely family shared their traditional turkey feast with us in an incredibly warm and loving environment. We had desserts and some more wine and started singing German and Russian songs. At one point I mentioned Germany in some context and he told me that he would never set foot on German soil since most of his family was exterminated in German concentration camps - and then he poured me some more wine and taught us another song. Strange as it sounds, that was the first time I connected warmth, love and positivism with the word Jewish. And for the first time I felt deep emotional rage against what my forefathers had done.

And for the first time I realized that the Jews in Germany were neighbors and friends of my grandparents, who watched their Jewish neighbors being arrested and deported. This is artfully reflected in my favorite Holocaust memorial by German artist Günter Demnig called "Stolpersteine" - "stumble blocks". In over 500 cities in Germany and former Nazi occupied countries, blocks of stone and brass are embedded in the sidewalk in front of houses that were occupied by Jews during the Third Reich inscribed with the name and the fate of the Jewish family that lived there. These stones are raised half an inch so pedestrians trying to avoid them are reminded that the Jews were living among us as neighbors and friends.

At about the same time, I read a book called "Aimee and Jaguar" by Erica Fischer, which told the true story of an affair between the blond Aryan wife of an SS officer and a Jewish girl from the intellectual / artsy scene of Berlin. Even though Jaguar - the Jewish girl - died in a concentration camp, the book describes her as this creative, bubbly, artsy, interesting person who you invariably

fall in love with - as I did. And my rage deepened from the emotional sadness about the loss of my professor's family and the loss of Jaguar herself into the realization of how many truly beautiful people were eradicated in Germany. This might sound petty compared to the human toll, but I also felt for the first time the cultural and intellectual loss Germany experienced under the Nazis and how much more interesting the country would be if the Jews were still around.

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That rage and sadness also reopened the question "who were the people that did that?" One quote of the US chief prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials, Robert Jackson, resonated well with my experience when he asked this question. In his closing remarks of the trial against the top Nazis still alive at that time he said: "The defendants have been unanimous, when pressed, in shifting the blame on other men, sometimes on one and sometimes on another. But the names they have repeatedly picked are Hitler, Himmler, Heydrich, Goebbels, and Bormann. All of these are dead or missing. No matter how hard we have pressed the defendants on the stand, they have never pointed the finger at a living man as guilty. It is a temptation to ponder the wondrous workings of a fate which has left only the guilty dead and only the innocent alive. It is almost too remarkable."

So did I make it too easy on me by blaming these "others", these Nazis? One of the defendants sentenced to death in Nuremberg was the head of the Warsaw Ghetto, Hans Frank. Because we share the same family name, I looked into his life and realized that he not only grew up 15 miles from my home, but also he looked uncomfortably similar to many of the 220 relatives I have in that area, many of them named Hans. He even had my hair line. Is he related to me? I realized that I would not know, since nobody in my family would admit to that. This made me remember when I found an old gramophone record in our attic with the Horst Wessel song, the Nazi's number one battle song. Gullible young me swallowed the explanation "our neighbor was a minor Nazi and asked us to hold on to this so he would not get into trouble". I never asked "if he was a Nazi, why did you protect him?", I never asked "Why did you not destroy this trash?" I never asked my neighbor why he was a Nazi -- if the story was true at all. And when we dug into Ariane's grandfather's past, we found that he joined the party in 1932, a year before Hitler came to power and was not a minor follower: He was one of a handful of prominent Nazis in our little town - most likely proudly cheering when our local Jewish families were led through the streets for their deportation. So in other words, it was not "them" that did this, it was people like us.

The movie "Downfall" made in 2004 by Bernd Eichinger tells the story of the last days in Hitler's bunker. In the movie, propaganda minister and architect of the Nazi regime Joseph Goebbels tucks his children to bed singing them a tender lullaby and kissing them good night before they fall asleep after their last -- and poisoned -- meal. This scene received criticism in the German media, because it dared to show a Nazi as a loving father and human being.

However, I feel very strongly that this is exactly what I owe my legacy as a German and what I owe the millions of Jews my forefathers killed. If I want to extract at least one positive aspect of the Holocaust namely trying to learn how to prevent another one, I have to understand the perpetrators. I have to assume that many Nazi criminals were loving and caring humans, convinced that they did some good, according to their own definition. I have to understand that they might have been in my family, and I have to accept the fact that people like me did that. Only then can I truly do my best to prevent another Holocaust in the future.

Why did it take me so long to come to this conclusion? One reason is that humanizing the Nazis is dangerously close to excusing the crimes. So nobody dared to discuss the probability that Goebbels loved his kids. Portraying Nazis as anything but monsters was perceived as hurting the victims all over again. So while Germany is doing a lot to preserve the history about the Holocaust, it is centered on the crime and the victims and has already lost most chances for truthful testimonials from the perpetrators.

Understandably, my grandparent's generation was too ashamed and too afraid of the consequences to openly talk about their faults. Theirs was a generation that hid involvement and pointed fingers at others, and I am convinced many of them repeated their lies often enough that they could not tell truth from a lie anymore. And my parent's generation? They were kids eager to believe their parents to be good when they were served the excuses and lies about who actually did support the Nazi movement. I did not have this insight soon enough to talk to the people of my grandparent's generation and truly ask the question, "Why did you join the party? What were you thinking when they paraded the local Jews through the streets? Why did you not help them?"

Which brings me to the famous words of Protestant Pastor Martin Niemöller that I read before ("First they came for the communists …"): I only recently learned the context of Niemöllers words. He actually supported the Nazis and Hitler on their way to power, he was complacent with fighting the communists since they were atheists, he gave sermons about how Jews should not have power in Germany and are paying their debt for nailing Christ to the cross, and only started resisting Hitler when the Nazis went after his own protestant church. So these words are not enlightened guidance by a righteous man, these words are bitter testimony of a man who was as guilty as many Germans.

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As I wrote this reflection I wondered what I have learned from my story. Simply said, it took me 35 years to understand that both Jews and Nazis are as humans as I am. So why is this important to others and what can we learn about it?

There were two reasons that I did not humanize the Jewish people sooner:
- there were no Jews left in Germany and
- everything I learned about them portrayed them as victims, not ordinary human beings.

Now I understand the risks of defining people one-dimensionally, for example as victims, and thereby idealizing them. I do see parallels in my own catholic family when it comes to their stance on homosexuality - there is a huge difference between the media's extensive coverage of homosexuality and the experience of that great new choir director of my dads choir that happens to be homosexual. Lasting compassion comes not only from knowing about suffering but also from knowing the victims.

But even more important for me is the importance of humanizing the perpetrators. Modern media has a tendency to dwell on crimes and their victims. It is emotions of righteous disgust and compassion that are keeping people in front of the TV. And the perpetrators? Simply said, if the deed is monstrous, the perpetrators must be monsters. True monsters not only help rally people behind a common enemy, they also help to avoid uncomfortable questions such as "could I have been part of this?". And when the piles of corpses grow higher and higher, the viewer is less and less able to conceive how a sane person could be part of it; he implicitly distances himself more and more from the perpetrators.

I do believe that if we do not accept that ordinary people like us can do monstrous deeds, we have not really learned from the Holocaust. Germany in the 30s was a highly educated country, incomparably rich, had decent communication technology, and a true democracy. The Nazi movement was born from a demographic not too dissimilar from us sitting here in Belmont together.

As a German, I don't dare to ask you to think of my grandparents generation as loving and caring humans. It would sound too much like I want to defend them and brighten my legacy - even though I am more critical of them than ever. But I do urge you to ask yourself very honestly what it really takes to avoid becoming a perpetrator and to accept that you could become a perpetrator yourself in the right circumstances.

Sometimes, well meaning people I talk to about Nazi Germany offer me the easy excuse: "Well why should you be held responsible for the crimes of others?" I deeply dislike this easy way out. Some of the Holocaust was carried out by people like my own family, my forefathers. So if I want to change the world into a better place of peace and love, I have to battle evil in myself and in my group of friends and family instead of pointing my fingers at that other, fairy-tale evil. If I owe one thing to my Professor's family and to Jaguar, it is to truly claim that responsibility.

Reflection II - Valentin Frank

When my father said that he was writing a piece on his, and therefore by extension our, family history in relation to our Nazi heritage, this actually got me thinking quite a bit. At the time, he wrote this mainly to satisfy himself, not to ever publicly present it, but rather it seemed just to sort out what it exactly meant, to have a Nazi heritage, and to be honest with himself about all that happened, so many, many years ago.

This last bit is the part that fascinated me most though. I have always been paradoxically cynical about the past and learning from it. It seemed to me that although one must learn from the past, in order to not repeat the follies of generations past, there is a flipside to this idea; the fact that tying one's self down with ideals of the past has the potential to cause just as much unhappiness and destructive, rather than constructive, action as would otherwise have been avoided. I've always thought that looking more forwards will help create a better future than looking back, but as Nick Carraway said as the closing words of The Great Gatsby, "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly lessly into the past". In short, as much as we want to move on from thing that happened, we are intrinsically tied to past events.

So where does that put me? I know for a fact that relatives of mine played a part in the atrocities of the Second World War and the horrors that happened during this time. I know that my forefathers stood at the side of the road as Jews, homosexuals, and others deemed undesirable and inferior were gathered up and sent to die. How could I be cynical about that? Obviously there is a historical image that we do not want repeated and thus we want to avoid, however I believe that one must always be wary not to take this in the wrong way. To truly take the events of the past as a reminder towards mindfulness rather than an effort to pass evil off as simply evil and alien.

I personally like to think of myself as being born into an interesting generation when it comes to this piece of history, because it will be right in the middle of my lifetime that the Second World War will pass from being living memory to true history, in the sense that it is past and gone. On February 4th, 2012, an English woman named Florence Green passed away, thus marking the point where no more veterans from the First World War would be able to tell us personally about the events of it. With the end of the Second World War now 67 years ago, this point is approaching too for this conflict.

For me, this is a quite symbolic change. My dad talked about how there was his grandparent's generation who would never criticize the Nazis and the events of that era due to having lived it, and then their children, his parents, my grandparents that would not speak up out of shame for their parents' actions and experiences. Well, here I am, having never met any of my great grandparents, but still with direct stories from my grandparents and anecdotes from relatives - stories of the "Raisin Bombers" from my grandfather and old memorabilia from my grandmother. Yet, this all is starting to feel very distant. In history class, there seems to be a bit of a split between the historic and distinctly distant 40s, with their war and strife and the 50s, which seem to be just around to corner to where we are now. But does this change mean that the history should also be treated in a different way?

In his novel Mason and Dixon, Thomas Pynchon writes that "History is not Chronology, for that is left to lawyers — nor is Remembrance, for Remembrance belongs to the People". If we accept this, and we want to truly learn from history, then we need to separate these ideas. Truly classifying something in history means more to me than praising and remembering the good and shunning the bad. As my dad already stated in his piece, the demonization of evil acts and simply writing them off as evil actions only leads to a kind of mental separation from truly understanding and thus growing from what has happened. However, as many of you can imagine, this is often very much an easy way out.

If the topic of my relatives' involvement in the war ever came up, I would jump at the chance to tell the story of my Great Grandfather Henry, my middle namesake, who abandoned the German army on the Russian front and then walked back home Germany, a journey of over 1500 miles that involved sneaking past Nazi watch posts and garrisons in order to not get caught. I make sure to emphasize how lucky he was that the war had ended by the time he got home, otherwise he would have most likely been recognized a traitor and killed. I would most certainly not bring up my grandfather who had actually been part of the Nazi party, no matter if for moral or immoral reasons. And why? Because it felt good to be the victim. It felt good to be able to say that others were wrong and I saw that and wasn't like that.

When I was younger, I actively told myself that I disliked, maybe even hated my forefathers for having been part of that entire era, for having given meaning to the word Nazi, for having made it so that every time I told people I was German, there was an immediate stigma of discrimination. It was not that people immediately assumed anything about me, but rather that there was immediate uncomfortable connection made. I would

ask myself “Why did that have to happen. I did nothing wrong. Why is the nationality that I like to call myself tarnished for reasons so far out of my control? I found myself getting quite frustrated with the inevitable.

But how futile is this? Of course nothing I do can bring back the millions of lives lost for no reason and no matter how much I want to, I can’t erase the shame or denial that so many in the generations above me felt, but looking forward how can I approach the world in a way that is most constructive. As Pynchon said, the key is not in knowing the facts of the past, as that is simply knowing the chronology, and neither remembering and preserving the past in its glory and shame, as remembrance doesn’t lead to understanding, but rather taking the past as history and truly understanding what happened and how it came to that, and this involves not forgiving, but humanizing those who did it. Otherwise is so easy to say they were wrong and evil.

A few months ago, I saw a very interesting movie, called “The Wave”. It uses a classroom of teenagers at a high school to simulate the beginnings of an autocratic, extremist dictatorship. The disturbing part was, that it was impossible to tell when the boundary was crossed from innocent to dystopian. Just so, I can’t demonize my great grandparents for being part of something. I can’t hear from them exactly how thing were, and in a few short decades, I won’t be able to hear that from anybody at all. What is important now is a sense of mindfulness in the past. Neither to make excuses for why something happened in the past, and neither to aggressively crack down on the past for what has happened.

As I mentioned earlier, In the Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald said that we were boats, borne back ceaselessly into the past, and that is true as our heritages and histories will follow us wherever we go in life, but if there is anything that my forefathers have taught me, it would be to be mindful about the future.