



Helga: My father was in the Waffen SS, the armed unit of the SS ("Schutzstaffel," the Nazi's "Protective Squadron"). He was pretty young when he joined, he volunteered at 16. Both my mother's and my father's grandparents were Nazi followers. They weren't members of the Nazi Party, but I don't know of any acts of resistance, which is why I would call them "followers."

Klub Zwei: How did your mother and father meet?

Helga: My mother is 19 years younger than my father. She was born in 1942 and he was born in 1923. My parents married later, in the 1960s. My father worked as a bookkeeper after returning from captivity as a prisoner of war. He started up his own business and opened up a store selling stationary and books in a small town in southern Styria where he was born, and where I was born. I also knew my father had wanted to become a cook and that he had been very athletic. I think it was his enthusiasm for sports that led him to the Nazis and particularly to the SS.

Klub Zwei: How present was the Nazi past in your family after the war? Did your father talk about what he did while he was in the SS?

Helga: He pretty much obsessively told the same stories over and over. He really idolized the SS. He talked about his time in the SS so much that everyone was tired of hearing about it. My mother regularly got up and left the room when he started telling stories. My sister and I couldn't just leave. We would always challenge what he said and fight with him. The older we got the more we insisted he stop talking about it. It was sheer psychological terror, always having to hear the same stories.

Klub Zwei: Did your mother know he was in the SS when they met?

Helga: Yes. He never hid it. There was a picture of him wearing a cap with a skull on the front, the SS cap. That picture was on a shelf in our living room for a very long time.

Klub Zwei: What was your reaction to this cap as a child? It must have been scary. Was he proud to present himself in that way?

Helga: Yes. From his point of view, not putting it away was an act of resistance. I didn't find the image threatening, but my father as a figure. When I was a child he never answered any of my questions. I would ask him things like "how was it for you?" He would always just regurgitate some old cliché.

Klub Zwei: Was there a particular incident that made you become interested in addressing your father's Nazi past?

Helga: In school when I became more political I started to form my own opinions and stopped repeating what my father said. Our history class was really good. Now I am doing concrete research on his past to find out, for example, what SS unit he belonged to and when and where he was stationed in Europe. I wanted to find out, because I started sleepwalking again. That was a reason for me to concentrate on it more.

My father was an ambivalent figure in my life. On the one hand he had an extremely bad temper and was psychologically violent, but on the other hand he made me feel empathy and compassion. The drama of my childhood and adolescence was that these conflicting feelings were so incredibly strong. It's typical to feel that way towards perpetrators, to also love them. At the time I interpreted his actions as something he just couldn't help doing. Now I have more clarity in my feelings toward him. But when I was young I kept going back and forth between rejecting and loving him and having empathy and compassion for him. My father always talked about being wounded and about all the terrible things he saw during his time as a medic. He consistently depicted himself as a victim. Children are really receptive to things like that. Children don't have the rationale—like I have now—until they are adults. Now, when perpetrators describe themselves as victims to me, I have the knowledge and power to say: that's only a story that doesn't have anything to do with history. I didn't have this insight back then, so it was all very ambivalent and tough.

Klub Zwei: Were the students in your school asked to discuss their families' histories in class?

Helga: No, but unlike my father, my history teacher was very factual. As a child it was good for me to be around rational people. Because of the elaborate emotional entanglement my father orchestrated with the entire family, I found reassurance in objectivity and historical facts. For example, in facts about how many people were murdered, who declared war on whom, when, where and so on. My father had always relativized these facts and, like so many others of his generation, he also changed their meaning in all kinds of ways. History class didn't do that at all; it did just the opposite. That was a great comfort to me at the time.

Klub Zwei: You said that your mother is the total opposite of your father. What was that like?

Helga: She was a teacher and free pedagogy was one of her aims. She believed children should be able to do anything they want as long as they don't harm anyone else. She was very strongly opposed to authoritarian rules. If she went out at night, she would stay out really long. She showed us, by example, that she led her own life and she would not allow herself be confined to the household.

Klub Zwei: What was her role when you spoke about the Nazi era within the family?

Helga: She never wanted to talk about it. She never said what she thought about the Nazi era. If we cornered her and forced her to say something, she would say that she's sure that my father never killed anyone. That really stuck in my mind, because it was a very strong statement to hear at the age of ten or twelve. It also contributed to my extremely conflicting feelings, because that couldn't possibly be. She would say it like it was the most natural thing, but it couldn't possibly have been like that!

Klub Zwei: You began researching your father's past two or three years ago. How did your family, i.e. your mother react?

Helga: I was really afraid to tell her. But I needed my father's death certificate for my research at the National Archives. She was cool, didn't ask too many questions, and arranged the death certificate for me. Over the years she's become more and more interested and has even started to do some research on her own. I have the feeling that she's accepted the fact that I'm doing this research. We still have conflicts about it, because she has a very revisionist approach to history. Whenever we talk about it, she always brings up how the perpetrators were also victims and that gets me worked up every time.

Klub Zwei: What have you found out so far?

Helga: In the beginning, I felt the strong need to gather factual information. Now I know how hard it actually is to get this kind of information. It is difficult to gain access to certain documents in the archives, because they often require a close relative to sign for their release. In order to submit a request for a document at the archives, you have to deal with the whole family. That really slows the work down. That's why I shifted my focus onto my own family context and contexts that I am able to access information on. At the moment I am considering contacting my father's friend who was in the SS with him. He lives in northern Germany.

Klub Zwei: Did you know about him when you were younger?

Helga: He often visited us. When we were children, my sister and I went there for vacation once. I find it positive that my research now runs along several paths.

Klub Zwei: You mentioned that your father abused his position of power within the family.

Helga: He had an extremely bad temper and was very controlling all across the board. He was particularly authoritative and manipulative. I know that he was abusive too. I mainly experienced psychological abuse. He just wouldn't accept boundaries. He always wanted attention; he wanted you to do things for him. It was mostly his ambivalent nature that I already described, which he would use to his advantage. He took advantage of the fact that his children loved him. He would give us things and take us on trips. But he would also take advantage of us emotionally by constantly bad-mouthing and belittling us, or stop.

Klub Zwei: What do you mean when you say he took advantage of you emotionally?

Helga: He was very degrading and insulting. What I mean by "emotionally taking advantage" is that he used his position as a father whose children loved him—because all children love their fathers—in order to mistreat us. That's a pretty common phenomenon, I think. He would make sure his own needs were met and if he went too far—you can't just keep on humiliating children endlessly, at some point even children will want to run away—he would buy us ice cream...

Klub Zwei: How did he degrade you?

Helga: He said all kinds of things like that we were stupid and we only acted like we knew things, but that we actually knew nothing. It was often in reference to school, because he never finished secondary school. He did really poorly in school, he told us so. He would always put us down when we got high marks. If we said something smart he was bound to tell us that it was stupid. It was more an issue of intelligence, I think. He also put me down because of my body, because I wasn't thin as a child. He never said I was too fat or that something looked ugly on me, instead he would always use typical phrases like "you'll never find a husband."

I was glad when he died. His death triggered a high level of ambivalence in me. On the one hand I was attached to him and loved him, and on the other hand I hated and feared him. That's why I was actually glad when he died. Then I went into therapy. I hadn't been able to get rid of that image of him, because it was so incredibly powerful and deeply ingrained. It has taken me a really long time to dispel it. As a matter of fact I am still working on it, right here and now.

Ambivalences: Daughters dealing with their father's Nazi past; passages from a conversation between Klub Zwei (Simone Bader and Jo Schmeiser) and Helga Hofbauer in December 2006 at Café Prückel in Vienna, Austria.
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