Love History
A documentary film by Klub Zwei:
Simone Bader and Jo Schmeiser

Director of photography: Sophie Maintigneux
Editor: Karin Hammer
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[TEXT TITLE:]
Klub Zwei zeigt / presents

Maria Pohn-Weidinger:

There’s a photo of my grandfather in every home on my mother’s side of the family, except in my parents’ home, grandfather is in his Wehrmacht uniform.

It’s my childhood image of him: a proud, Aryan man looking so cool in his uniform, totally out of context. My brother told my aunt that it was crazy to have this photo.

She said, “You’re right, but we don’t have any other.”

Jeanette Toussaint:

Sometimes I feel uneasy about my own history. The name Toussaint has two s’s. When I spell my name, it gives me the shivers, when someone repeats it back as ss.

I always say double s, ss refers so clearly to my father. You weren’t asking that, but it also has to do with language.

Lenka Reschenbach:

My dad once told me that he met my grandpa, and my parents told him they were going to have a baby: me and he said, “Get yourself a gun to protect your family.”

Stuff like that.

I wondered if I saw him totally wrong. Then I also started asking what was up with him, why he had said that. I asked lots of “why” questions.

[TEXT TITLE:]
Liebe Geschichte / Love History

Voice over (Nicola Lauré al-Samarai):

On April 27, 1945, Chancellor Karl Renner declared Austria's independence. The Second Republic was founded on the Moscow Declaration of 1943. Austria was considered Hitler's first victim. This erased any Austrian blame for National Socialism. The "victim theory" became a founding myth.

Legal bases for "denazification" were created. All members of the NSDAP and SS had to register. Some were held accountable in a people's court. Imposed were job dismissals and bans, penalty fees, the repeal of voting rights.

Women were rarely held accountable. They were often enthusiastic Nazis, but key positions were held by men. After 1945, mainly men were seen as Nazi perpetrators.

Voice over (Rainer Egger):

The Socialist, People's, and Communist parties advocated rehabilitation of "minor Nazis". While compensation was delayed for NS victims, measures were created to aid the "war generation". Even incriminated Nazis profited.

Shortly after the war, the parties began competing for the votes of former Nazis. Many of these Nazis integrated into the People's Party or Socialist Party.

In 1949, so-called "formers" also organized themselves as the Federation of Independent Voters, VdU, a melting pot for staunch Nazis. The Freedom Party emerged from the VdU in 1956.

[TEXT TITLE:]
1950s
Gänsehäufel
Public pool
City of Vienna

Helga Hofbauer:

This not knowing was the reason for my research. For me, this not knowing is a national epidemic in Austria: the silence and not knowing. Nobody talks about the Nazi era or the Austrian perpetrators. Hardly anyone talks about the victims. Or, they have to demand that the silence is broken. There's even less talk of Austrians as perpetrators, not in a clarifying way. That's why, for people growing up in Austria, this not knowing and this silence are so formative.

For me, history class in high school was a positive experience, because the teacher taught us facts about the Nazi era and the war without relativizing them. It was not revolutionary, no political undertones, it wasn't even linked with a political agenda.

My father always completely relativized the facts. He had a strong revisionist view of history.

Patricia Reschenbach:

My father definitely propagated Nazi sentiments. It's difficult to talk about it in front of the camera.I really don't want to repeat the comments he made. I refuse to say them.

There's one story. We couldn't watch the show Dalli, Dalli. My father wouldn't let us, because the producer was Jewish. He told us in his own words why we weren't allowed to watch. So we watched at our neighbor's or not at all.

At the name Bruno Kreisky, he'd launch into a tirade.

[TEXT TITLE:]
Propagation / Wiederbetätigung

At lunch every day, he told us his view of things. If you challenged his view, he'd cut you down, say you were stupid and you didn't know what you were talking about. He'd get increasingly aggressive, he was extremely abusive, verbally. He would threaten to stop giving us money or hit us, which he didn't do. He was intimidating. The more you defended yourself, the more threatening he got, he was always extremely intense, excessive.

But I loved him, he was handsome when he laughed. He was funny. He was generous. He'd give chocolate to us and all the other kids we played with. He was spontaneous. In the middle of the night, he'd come in with ice cream for my sister and I.

So, looking back, he bribed us, to use us to listen to his stories. He told them over and over. My mother wouldn't listen, because in his stories you could always sense how he suffered from his past. He thrived on recognition, and he used us kids for that. He portrayed himself as a victim and used our empathy, the fact that we loved him, because he was our father. When you're just a kid, you don't realize that.

I like it here. I am glad you chose this place. I have a strong connection to institutions like this beach, to swimming places in general. As a child, my parents would buy me season passes for two pools. I spent a lot of time at the pool, and the river. That's why this location is a good choice.

My work on how Nazi ideology is conveyed relates strongly to how body images are conveyed.

[TEXT TITLE:]
Helga Hofbauer

Klub Zwei – Simone Bader:

Did you and your sister feel like you had to do sports? Were you pressured?

Helga Hofbauer:

Neither of us felt it as pressure, but more as an opportunity. We got season passes to two places to swim and that was great. It was an opportunity, like skiing holidays and the tennis club. But there was always an underlying or blatant teaching of Nazi ideology.

My sister and I were members of the Austrian Gymnastics Club, where we could do gymnastics twice a week. At the beginning of each lesson the teacher would say, we'll start with "Gymnastics Heil." We would all line up and shout, "Heil." That was normal. So, sports were a means to pass on ideology.

As far as sexuality goes, my father had a very straight perspective. He was extremely homophobic and transphobic.

He'd say, "He looks like a broad," about queer or trans people, or cross-gender performances. He rejected sexuality and considered hygiene, cleanliness, and normative body images more important than desire, sexuality, or pleasure.

Patricia Reschenbach:

My father spoke of sexuality as disgusting like sexually transmitted diseases. At the age of nine, I could write the word gonorrhea. I knew what it was. I could spell it at the age of nine or ten. He taught us about sexually transmitted diseases, like having sex would make you sick.

Helga Hofbauer:

When he was in the military, he had some physical exam. He had to stand in line, naked, and was constantly on guard that the penis of the guy behind him wouldn't touch his ass. He would tell the story to let us know he wasn't gay. He related it to homosexuality and rejected it. He always said that he's the way nature intended, he was extremely heteronormative.

There's a picture of him at a costume party as half-woman, half-man. He would displace the issue by saying that queerness is okay at a costume party, but he's entirely normal.

And to me, too, when I came out as queer, he said, "That's not normal, not natural." Talking about social issues, he would often say, that's not how it is in nature, like survival of the fittest. "The strong will eat the weak" was a standard remark to explain social processes. Oh my god!

Voice over (Rainer Egger)

In 1960, Adolf Eichmann was tracked down in Argentina. His trial began in 1961. He was charged with crimes against the Jewish people and humanity. He was executed in 1962. The Eichmann trial is one of the most important Nazi trials. The Holocaust became a public issue throughout the world.

Repercussions from the trial were felt in Germany and Austria. Investigations and court proceedings resumed. The Frankfurt Auschwitz trials took place from 1963 to 1965. Already in the 1960s, Austria sought closure on the issue. Legal proceedings often ended with acquittals.

Voice over (Nicola Lauré al-Samarai)

Franz Murer, for example, was charged with murdering thousands of Jews in the Vilna Ghetto. He got a 25-year sentence in the USSR. After the State Treaty in 1955, all Austrian prisoners of war were released. Austria agreed to try Nazi perpetrators. But Murer lived for years as a People's Party official in Styria. He was first tried in 1963 in Graz on the instigation of Simon Wiesenthal. Murer's sons and the audience ridiculed the Jewish witnesses. Murer's acquittal was celebrated triumphantly.

Voice over (Rainer Egger)

In the 1960s, women were not seen as perpetrators. A few appeared before the court: camp guards and doctors. They were seen as inhuman beasts beyond "normal femininity" and considered exceptions. The picture established among the public was that most women were apolitical and uninvolved in Nazi crimes.

[TEXT TITLE:]
1960s
Juridicum
Faculty of law
University of Vienna

Dietlinde Polach:

We lived in a house with a yard. I would sneak upstairs into my stepmother's bedroom. In her night table, under brown packing paper, there was a pile of letters from my father to my mother. On most, the address was typed and the letters were typed or handwritten in Kurrent. I had a hard time reading Kurrent. I don't think I read them all, but I did read quite a few of the typewritten ones. Unfortunately, I can't remember what they said.

My stepmother always kept tabs on where I was. She knew I was upstairs, because the stairway creaked. I had to be quick. She didn't want me to read the letters, but she probably didn't even know. I always read them in a rush. I only recall the last sentence, my father always wrote. He sent my mother cigarettes, she was a heavy smoker, and for his baby girl, that's me, chocolate. At the end, he always wrote: "Heil Hitler, Germany will prevail."

[TEXT TITLE:]
Dietlinde Polach

The documents stated that he was a senior squad leader in the SS, that he was married and had three sons. He was in Ravensbrück. He was definitely there. But, did I know that when I read through the documents? I don't think so. Later I learned that he had been stationed in Ravensbrück and that's where he met my mother. Based on the documents I received from Jeanette, there is no doubt, my mother was a perpetrator. If you look at photos of her, you can hardly imagine that this person is capable of torture.

My family told me she was kind, especially to me, and hard working. There was no reason for me to think of her as bad. I thought, she had no formal education because of her upbringing, so she had to take any job. I don't suppose you need special training as a guard. It was not very intellectually challenging and if you used your mind, you'd be seen as getting in the way. So maybe she was just a tool used by those people at that time. I never thought badly of her, she was good to me. I had only heard good things. I thought, she just worked there, because she had no choice. I couldn't imagine her torturing anyone.

I was completely flabbergasted when Jeanette and Simone presented me with indictments from two women who had been interned in Ravensbrück about how she had tortured them. She probably tortured even more. But these two went public after the war. I only found out later from Jeanette's research that she had been in Auschwitz, too.

Jeanette Toussaint:

I spent a lot of time with my colleague Simone Erpel thinking about how to tell Dietlinde. She thought her mother was a good mother who loved her very much. She wouldn't believe she had abused prisoners. That wouldn't fit the image she had of her mother. It was very difficult. After the interview, we told her what we had found.

Dietlinde Polach:

Wait, I have it all right here. I just have to find it. On a winter's day in 1940, the temperature was -25˚ C, supposedly in order to save the lives of a sizeable work crew, she had the prisoners stop their work and chased them around, making them run as fast as they could. She ran behind them with her bloodhound trained to chase prisoners. After two hours, she had them stop running. The prisoners, overheated and drenched with sweat, were ordered to resume their work in -25˚ C. More than 30 prisoners had to be brought to the infirmary.

[TEXT TITLE:]
Indictment / Anklage

Dietlinde Polach:

Maybe she did other things, too. Some women probably died or may have been transferred to Auschwitz or wherever. These two women wanted to press charges, but by that time my mother had already died.

Patricia Reschenbach:

I don't really know what my father did during the war and don't have all the facts. I'm not really sure if he was in the SS. He repeatedly said so, but there's no evidence. For me, he is clearly a perpetrator.

Also with his statements, he made a great effort to pass on his ideas. I grew up with lots of this ideology and the things he claimed. So, in this sense, he's a perpetrator.

According to his CV, he was a paramedic, a "Sanitäter", which in German includes the word for perpetrator, "Täter".

Katrin Himmler:

We thought there was a clique of "top Nazis". Now we know there were many more people involved in the crimes. Lots of men and women took part, not only in the SS and police force, but in government organizations, in the administrative apparatus, and many other areas.

That makes it so hard to define who was a perpetrator, because it was the Nazis' intention to divide up responsibility among as many as possible, so the individuals involved could feel: I'm not really responsible, I was just following orders, or performing menial tasks, or I didn't know what was going on. I was too far away. That makes it so difficult to define exactly what the term perpetrator involves.

It's always important to differentiate and look closely at each case: can they be called perpetrators, as such, or collaborators, supporters, followers, or do we need to further differentiate to profiteers or passive supporters? There are many distinctions.

Jeanette Toussaint:

At first, I didn't realize that I was working on perpetrators because my father was one. I definitely think that has had an impact. I've always wondered what made him join the SS. This question might also guide my research.

[TEXT TITLE:]
Jeanette Toussaint

A little while ago, I received a document saying that he had disrupted a demonstration a few years after the war. It was a memorial for victims of the SS massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane. He pushed his way through, supposedly to get to work, but wasn't able to.

He claimed he was a disabled veteran, until the police warned him that if he kept it up, he'd be arrested. According to the police protocol, he got nervous and asked what would happen, saying that he had fought in the war and such.

My mind started to race: did he really mean to disrupt? Was he still entangled in that ideology? Did he think it was right, what happened back then, what he did?

I would have liked for him to have thought about it. But that's an illusion. I know from interviews with women, former SS guards, that they never reflect on their actions, even if just guarding prisoners. I wouldn't have gotten far with my father either.

I'm curious about what's left to find. That's the researcher in me. There's also a bit of anxiety about what I'll find. How would I deal with knowing that he took part in Nazi crimes? Then there's the eternal quest to find out why. This can evoke different feelings. At the moment, there's a certain balance.

Klub Zwei – Jo Schmeiser:

Dietlinde, how did you feel during the research, when you found out things?

Dietlinde Polach:

I was very emotional when I learned that my mother wasn't as good as I had imagined. I was also very emotional during my last visit to Ravensbrück, when I had a chance to look around and see the lake where she swam. I have photos of her and her sister, my stepmother, there in the water and on the frozen lake with her dog. All these images ran through my mind like a film.

I saw the house and thought of where she may have lived or the café where she met my father, and all the people who lived there. I was really struck by all that. I was already struck on the drive to Ravensbrück. The road there goes through a very beautiful forest. I thought she drove to some place where terrible things were happening, but going there she probably didn't know what to expect. And the people living there...

When I saw the exhibition and the photographs I nearly broke down and cried. It really shook me up. But when I look at the documents, well, you get used to it. If new things kept coming up, it would get difficult again. At the moment, I can deal with it.

Klub Zwei – Jo Schmeiser:

What is it? Aggravation, mourning, anger?

Dietlinde Polach:

What is it... it's dismay. My heart starts pounding and my chest tightens, it hurts, physically, that my mother was involved in such crimes. It gets under my skin. Dismay, yes, dismay.

Voice over (Nicola Lauré al-Samarai):

In 1970, the Socialists began their rule as a single-party government. Chancellor Bruno Kreisky engaged in active foreign policy and made reforms. Abortion was legalized, there were progressive policies regarding women and social issues.

Feminist historians intensified their research on women in National Socialism. They described women as victims. Guilt was delegated to men and the patriarchal Nazi system.

Voice over (Rainer Egger):

The Socialists of the 1970s can be accused of counting upon their voters' anti-Semitism. Four former Nazis were in Kreisky's cabinet from 1970. One had even been in the SS.

Then, there is the Peter affair. In 1975, the Socialists were about to lose absolute majority. Kreisky considered a coalition with the Freedom Party under Friedrich Peter.

Voice over (Nicola Lauré al-Samarai):

Simon Wiesenthal publicized that Peter had belonged to a notorious SS brigade.

Kreisky defended Peter and attacked Wiesenthal. He implied that Wiesenthal had collaborated with the Gestapo. Kreisky executed a strategic perpetrator-victim reversal. Wiesenthal, a survivor, became perpetrator, while Peter was made his victim. Peter's past with the SS shifted into the background.

Voice over (Rainer Egger):

Kreisky was a clear opponent of National Socialism. As a Jew, he spent the Nazi era in exile and lost family members. But he was lenient with former Nazis and supported reintegration. Kreisky believed that it was not possible to exclude so many people from a democracy. He was thus in accord with Austrian post-war politics.

[TEXT TITLE:]
1970s
UNO City
Vienna International Center

Katrin Himmler

I found it shocking the first time I saw my grandfather's file. He joined the party in 1931 and was already a member of the SS in 1933. I had had a vague idea, but it's different to have the facts laid out before you. It's quite a big step.

I had heard that my grandmother was apolitical and had no idea what was happening. I had a hard time believing that, although, it fits with the role of most women at that time. But many women reverted to this position after 1945, because it was comfortable and compatible with their social role: to take care of the house and the kids and stay out of politics. I don't think it was really like that.

One of the most difficult moments was when I read her denazification file and found out that my grandmother voted for the NSDAP on March 5, 1933. She said it, it's in her file.

Another difficult discovery for me, because I knew my grandmother, but not my grandfather, and was very fond of her, was finding out that in 1950-51 she had contact with Nazis on death row in Landsberg. She wrote to them and sent them packages. It was very hard to accept that that was my grandmother.

Helga Hofbauer

I think it's important to take a time-out. To not do anything that you don't want to know at a certain moment. It takes time. You discover things that are hurtful. Like when I found out my grandmother was a Nazi. That hurts me. I loved her. Because in my memory, she is a role model, she's a strong, interesting woman. Now that I know she was a Nazi, it hurts me, it's sad.

Katrin Himmler

The first draft of my book was extremely emotional, a very personal account. It was a way to understand my connection to it all, these documents I found about my family history, all the new information. It was important to process all that and to find out how it affected me.

Why had I begun research on my family so late? I really grappled with the question of why. Although I'd been dealing with the issue all my life, it took me so long to even think of asking what my own grandparents were doing during that time.

In our family, it was useful to have this evil personified in Heinrich Himmler, the culmination of all evil. All the others could easily fade into his shadow. This had an impact on the family, and still does for some, so that for a long time, no one examined what the other family members had done. Heinrich eased the burden for the rest of us.

My father told us about the family constellation very early on, he spoke openly about the fact that Heinrich Himmler was his uncle, his godfather even, and that he had committed terrible crimes. As a young child, it was clear to me how difficult this was. How emotionally difficult it was for him and therefore for us, to be related to this mass murderer. I remember it as an emotional burden.

When we were children, my sister and I thought it was good that only girls were in our family, so the name Himmler would eventually die out. We wanted the name to disappear or be erased.

[TEXT TITLE:]
Katrin Himmler

There came a point when I felt I could live with this name. But I wanted my son to have the chance to start again, to have this different name. That's different than giving up a name that is part of your life. That's more difficult.

People often ask me, why in the world I still have my name and why I haven't changed it. It's really difficult for people who aren't in this situation to understand. Your name has to do with your identity. You grow up with it, you're born with it. The family around you has the same name. Regardless of the reason, it's a difficult decision to give up

your name and take on a new one. It's also saying: I don't want to be part of it. I want to break free. That doesn't work anyway, it's just superficial.

Klub Zwei – Jo Schmeiser

I wanted to ask you about your son. There are two sides to his history. Your family's history, and his father's. Does that have anything to do with it?

Katrin Himmler

Yes and no. It's a bit tricky. We decided to give him his father's last name. The name of his Jewish, Israeli father. That shouldn't be seen as an attempt to assign him the persecuted Jewish side. We're both aware of the fact, and so is my son, that he is a product of both sides, with both identities, both parts in him.

That doesn't have to do with a name alone. More important is how he grows up, what we teach him about our family history. We try to pass on the best balance to him, so that he can learn about both sides.

Bringing him up bilingually didn't work out, but he is growing up with two cultures and learning to embrace them both as his own.

Dietlinde Polach

That was definitely a different era, 1968. There was the student revolution in Paris. Optimism. I made a point of doing things differently. I raised my daughter much more openly, gave her more space, more warmth. I simply adored her. She was such a beautiful and sweet child, but there were still moments when, you get so aggravated.

I can't say that it's specific to my case, sometimes I had to restrain myself from lashing out. But I don't recall ever hitting her. So, there are things in me, that were passed on.

[TEXT TITLE:]
Passing on / Weitergabe

Maria Pohn-Weidinger

An issue for me was always my potential for violence and the big "don't" with regard to violence. And then the provocative question: why not? What if I have to defend myself or protect another person? Why not use force?

That immediately put me in the midst of Nazism, it's such a strong statement: You must not be violent. That's the epitome of being a Nazi. Working on the issue through bodywork meant finding out what it means to be a Nazi, regardless of all the hard facts.

What image do I have? What do I want to fight off? This incredible fear I might also be a Nazi.

Katrin Himmler

I experienced that with my parents, too. But it was much more obvious with my father. He gave us lots of opportunities. He liked doing stuff with us, being silly, playing around. And we loved it, too.

But the atmosphere could change in a flash. For us as kids, it was so unpredictable. Sometimes we were afraid he'd fly into a rage. The mood would switch. Coping was hard, because we couldn't say: It's terrible you're acting like this.

Unfortunately, at times I fly into a rage or react strongly to things my son does. But he can deal with it differently. He feels he can react differently than I could as a kid. So, there's continuity but also gradual change.

Voice over (Rainer Egger):

In the 1980s, the victim theory began to crumble. Other countries questioned their post-war myths.

Feminist researchers criticized the picture of women as victims. Many researchers, as daughters, had tried to spare their mothers.The lack of confrontation with woman perpetrators was recognized as a defense maneuver. Women's roles as perpetrators were examined.

Voice over (Nicola Lauré al-Samarai):

The most striking break in Austria's dealing with the past was the Waldheim affair. In 1985, the People's Party nominated Kurt Waldheim for President. During the election campaign, journalist Hubertus Czernin published explosive details about Waldheim's past.

He served as a Wehrmacht officer in Thessaloniki from 1942 to 1943. During that time, the Jews were deported.

It was not possible to prove Waldheim's direct complicity, but at the very least, he knew of the crimes. A heated public debate ensued. Waldheim was heavily criticized for stating that he could not "remember anything anymore" and had "simply done his duty".

The New York Times and World Jewish Congress commented. Waldheim spoke of a "large-scale smear campaign" controlled from "abroad". Anti-Semitic and anti-American reactions appeared in Austrian media. Waldheim became President in 1986 with 54 percent of the vote.

However, many Austrians protested publicly. The debates often continued within family circles. For many young people, the Waldheim affair led to the first look at their own Nazi family history.

[TEXT TITLE:]
1980s
Haas-Haus
Hotel at Stephansplatz
Vienna

Patricia Reschenbach

My father changed his name. I had no idea I was born Rzeschabek. I was always a Reschenbach. I found out when I was 16 or 17. My mother said that we used to have another name. I asked about it, but got no answers. I didn't even know how it was spelled. I had only heard the name Rzeschabek and it was just my father's old last name. It was definitely a secret that the name was changed, one of many secrets.

In terms of his past, I remember a few very sketchy things. Once we were sitting at a table at someone's house and he said he had shot partisans.

At the time, I thought he was a hunter and partisans were wild animals. When I found out what partisans were, that they were people, I was totally shocked.

[TEXT TITLE:]
Patricia Reschenbach

At that time, in the 1980s, I began to ask questions and wanted to know his role in the war. He firmly refused to answer my questions. He talked a lot but said nothing, a lot of talk with nothing said. No hard facts. Like, "I was there in 1939, from 1939 to 1941," I wanted to hear that.

Helga Hofbauer

It's hard to have no idea, to feel like he could have done anything, with no concrete idea about his role as a perpetrator. Was he a soldier in the Wehrmacht? Did he volunteer for the Waffen SS?

It makes a difference and it's good to know exactly what he did and what his environment was and what the family thought. It's so complicated.

Patricia Reschenbach

The first time at the National Archives was difficult. I felt this resistance, but I really wanted to find out more, to continue, face it, and keep working on it. There was the time factor.

At first, I had no idea it would take so long. Everything seemed too slow. I didn't understand why it all took so long. I had to realize it is a process.

Katrin Himmler

It hasn't been so long, maybe a year or so, that it has become more difficult for me. Things get to me. I have problems when I do too much. I've learned to look after myself, recognize my limits, the burden, how much horror I can take and where I need to draw the line, so that I can function in my everyday life. So, I can live my life.

[TEXT TITLE:]
Burden / Belastung

Maria Pohn-Weidinger

I always slip into this discussion, there should be a bottom line drawn at some point. That's a problem. I have an urge to begin the phase of my life, when it's still an issue, but not constantly present, a time when I'm able to integrate it into my life, when I no longer have to constantly erase the history, when this intense confrontation is over.

When my research gets intense, I fall asleep and wake up with Nazi literature. Right now, it's important, but at some point, I want to be able to set it aside.

Patricia Reschenbach

My mother told me another secret. "Don't tell anyone I told you." My father had been married to another woman and they had two children. I kept asking until I found out their names. They lived in Vienna. I had two half-siblings living nearby.

I was so angry. The audacity of him not telling his own children about their other siblings! I have a right to know.

Lenka Reschenbach

He was 20 years older than my grandma and he had one whole family and then started another. I never understood

the situation. I don't think they had much contact to this other family.

Patricia Reschenbach

There was also violence in the other family. With them, my father was more violent, physically. He beat my half-brother, who told me that our father had broken his hand on a table. I found out about all this later, when I was 22 or 23, when I first met my half-brother.

I don't know the best way to explain it, but now is the first time I can actually say, “Jewish” or “Jew”, without flinching. At home, I only heard the words used anti-Semitically. The word “Jew” scared me.

Sometimes I find it so difficult to find the right words. I'm afraid that this Nazi father in me will burst out. Like saying something you didn't mean to. Like chewing gum slipping out, a kind of slapstick, that's probably not the right word, but I'm scared, or I used to be, of certain things happening.

It's over now, the fear is gone. I was a very insecure child and young woman, I had genuine shame, guilt, and fear. What am I allowed to say? When? Where? When might something burst out that would hurt other people? Something uncontrollable, like vomit.

Voice over (Nicola Lauré al-Samarai):

In 1991, social-democratic chancellor Franz Vranitzky stated in parliament, and, in 1993, in Israel, that Austria was responsible for Nazi crimes. He asked survivors and descendants for forgiveness. Vranitzky's speech was the first official break from the victim theory. But he did not reject it entirely.

Vranitzky ruled in a coalition with the People's Party. He rejected inclusion of the Freedom Party under Jörg Haider. Haider, the son of Nazis, addressed Waffen-SS veterans in Krumpendorf in 1995 as "honest people, people of character who (...) stick by their faith and stay loyal up to this very day."

Scholars began studying the effects on families of Nazi perpetrators. As early as the 1970s, Jewish academics had looked at the Shoah's effects on the children of victims. Now research focused on how the effects of National Socialism continued within perpetrators' families.

Voice over (Rainer Egger):

In 1995, the Hamburg Institute for Social Research organized an exhibition on the Crimes of the Wehrmacht. Documents proved the German army's involvement in extermination of Jews. For scholars, nothing new, but shocking for the public.

The exhibition was shown throughout Germany and Austria. Strong protests erupted in reaction. Wehrmacht soldiers and their descendants felt attacked. They defended their fathers and grandfathers and attempted to exonerate them.

"He was 'only' in the Wehrmacht," no longer was a valid excuse. The "clean Wehrmacht" myth had been destroyed.

[TEXT TITLE:]
1990s
Leopold Museum
Museum Quarter
Vienna

Maria Pohn-Weidinger

I began doing research on my family history and, at the same time, research for my PhD. At first, they were parallel projects. I didn't know yet that they were connected. Then, I realized that my greatest motivation, alongside the academic titles, the PhD, was to speak with my grandmothers.

My maternal grandmother is still alive. I interviewed her when I was doing biographical research for my master's thesis. We began to talk, but it failed miserably. These conversations within the family are so hard, but that talk with her really startled me.

[TEXT TITLE:]
Maria Pohn-Weidinger

My research is on "rubble women", who grew up during the Nazi era and were adults in 1945, a very specific generation. I look at their strategies, developed throughout their lives, and how much they integrated their experiences under the Nazi regime, or possibly as Nazis, into their lives after 1945.

This was the background, when I did the interview. I was shocked to realize that my grandmother fit right in. She could speak about good and bad things, up to 1945. With the Nazi era, of course, erased, when she got to 1945, she said, "I can't continue."

No, what she said was more like, "I can't think of anything else." Then, she summed up her postwar life in two minutes. Based on her narrative strategy, I could see that her world had fallen apart. I think she still can't deal with it.

I knew she believed in the classical arguments, like: "What Hitler did to the Jews was not so good, but the rest was good." But to see how deeply ingrained it is within her, from my analysis of narrative strategies, that's remarkable.

Also remarkable is that I've never listened to the interview again. I have this recording, but I can't listen to it right now, maybe when she's dead. A lot will change after this first generation dies off.

[TEXT TITLE:]
Representation / Darstellung

Women smiling for the camera as they sort through rubble, that's the picture of "rubble women".

I've only found two sources that discuss the historical term. It was new to me and it also sparked my interest. In a historical sense, they were women who, because of their Nazi pasts, were "forced" by the Allies to work and were stigmatized with a swastika. I found a picture of those women, but not out in public. They are working in a tannery or dye works, wearing swastikas. All the women I have asked didn't know what this image was.

It's no coincidence I interview women. Women rarely get to speak and tell stories.When you look at Austria's public policy of remembrance, there are hardly any women involved. They have private, not public sites.

Wehrmacht veterans have war memorials, "their" tables, veterans' clubs, where they tell heroic stories. Negative sites of remembrance, but they have them. Women don't have such places, a coffee circle at best. That motivated me to give them a voice.

Jeanette Toussaint

In the concentration camps, women were not commanding officers. They couldn't give orders at this level. The highest position for a female guard was head guard. In this context, she could give orders to other female guards.

You have to look closely at the female guards in direct contact with prisoners. How did they act in these positions? They also had a certain leeway. Gender-specific behavior has to be examined within specific positions and organizations.

Another issue is how to judge women's behavior in National Socialism. What images have emerged based on what these women did? I am thinking of survivors who have described women as exceptionally brutal, more brutal

than men. That also conveys information about gender roles, like the peaceful woman.

These women deviated so much by abusing prisoners that their actions were judged differently. Men behaving the same would have been considered more “normal”: aggression was seen as normal for men.

Maria Pohn-Weidinger

Gender also plays a role in my research. The interview situation would be different if I were interviewing men. It would also be different if I were a man. The gendered interaction is relevant for what is and isn’t said.

I’m convinced that society’s silence on National Socialism, and the victim excuse still have effects today. Even on the third generation, which is no longer involved, we weren’t involved.

The silence affects how I deal with violence and emotions. Regardless of whether my grandparents were involved. It’s obvious, our society is saturated. It affects every biography, every family history. No family is unaffected.

Voice over (Rainer Egger):

In February 2000, a new government was sworn in. People's Party chairman Wolfgang Schüssel formed a coalition with the Freedom Party under Jörg Haider. For years, Haider and his party were criticized for their racism and anti-Semitism. Massive protests resulted. The EU imposed sanctions.

On November 9, 2000, Chancellor Schüssel reactivated the victim theory. On Kristallnacht Day of Remembrance, he told the Jerusalem Post: "The sovereign Austrian nation was the first victim of the Nazi regime. They took Austria by force." Only when asked did he admit to Austria's responsibility.

Voice over (Nicola Lauré al-Samarai):

In 2002, a commission of historians presented a report on Nazi looting and restitution. Official measures were set up for monetary compensation of the victims, mainly Jews. Austria's national fund for Nazi victims was designated to implement these measures. This showed political will, but it was too late. Many people had already died.

Restitution of art works was also an issue in the 2000s. Looted art held by state museums should be returned. Some cooperated, others refused. There were problems with private collections, such as the Leopold Collection. An ongoing trial deals with the Portrait of Wally by Egon Schiele, seized in New York in 1998. Fourteen Albin Egger-Lienz paintings are possibly looted art.

[TEXT TITLE:]
2000s
Main Public Library
City of Vienna

Klub Zwei – Simone Bader

Your mom wants to put together a kind of family album with all of the documents from her research. Everything she found out about your grandpa, so that Tim and you would have access to this album. What do you think of that? How do you feel about it?

[TEXT TITLE:]
Lenka Reschenbach

I think it's a good idea, but my brother should at least have the opportunity to hear other things about his grandpa. Not only that he was a National Socialist, but also a bit about how he was still his grandpa. Tim shouldn't think of him only as a bad person.

I want him to also hear about how he was to me. You couldn't tell by looking at him. He was humane in another way, someone you could talk to. Tim shouldn't just write him off.

[TEXT TITLE:]
Ambivalence / Ambivalenz

Katrin Himmler

With ambivalence, it's easy to say it. Ultimately, it's the only honest approach to these perpetrators. At the same time, it's the most difficult one. Ambivalence is not just a stance that you develop and stick to. It's a position constantly worked out, painstakingly.

Then, it tips in one direction or the other. That makes it so difficult. Sometimes you look at these individuals and feel closer to them, my grandparents for instance. Other times the incomprehension and distance are much stronger, the anger about what they did is greater. You can't understand it. They feel like strangers.

Lenka Reschenbach

I didn't know my grandfather was a Nazi perpetrator. I have images of him in my mind, of me combing his hair while he lay there. In the images I remember, he is lying in bed. He was ill the whole time I knew him.

I would pick daisies from the yard and put them in a vase beside his bed. I remember him telling me that my other cousins were too loud and I was his favorite. At the time, I was glad.

I only found out later that my grandpa was a Nazi. It was so sudden. I never imagined it. That also destroyed my image of Nazis. Suddenly my grandpa was one, too. I thought, they were different, cruel and inhumane. My grandpa was odd, but I liked him.

Klub Zwei – Jo Schmeiser

Would you identify yourself as a descendant of perpetrators?

Patricia Reschenbach

Now I'm working on how not to be the child of one's parents. At some point, you have to stop being your parents' child. I'm at this point now.

Katrin Himmler

It's hard to decide where to draw the line. Sometimes, I feel more part of it, so I say: Yes, I am on the perpetrators' side. Other times, I say: I am on the margins. I am part of the larger German collective, not just part of my family, which is on the perpetrators' side. But I do feel a special sense of responsibility, as part of this family.

Jeanette Toussaint

I know that my father volunteered for the SS, but not the crimes he was part of. This term "a descendant of perpetrators" is difficult, it has negative associations, like carrying some inherited blame. That's not how I feel about myself. Clearly he's my father, whatever his crimes were, I can't make amends. As his daughter, I have to confront it.

"A descendant of perpetrators." No. I wouldn't define myself as that.

Maria Pohn-Weidinger

Yes, in the sense of having participated, having looked away, watched, denounced, yes, I certainly would.

Lenka Reschenbach

Today, I would still like to ask him what he has to say about it. If he regretted anything, if he forgot, if he wanted to forget, to cover it up. I know he wanted to do that. Was he ashamed, or afraid of the consequences?

I wish I had asked him more.

[TEXT CREDITS]