

Väter – Täter

Audio

Patricia Reschenbach:

What definitely left an impression on me, I think, was that I grew up with my parents telling lots of lies and life-lies. Later I found some things out, for instance that my father retired in 1969, a year before I was born. When we were children, until the age of 11 or 12, we always thought our dad worked. We left for school in the morning and he would leave the house with his briefcase. I guess he went somewhere. I don't know where. That's a pretty strong image: my father leaves and disappears "somewhere." In retrospect, it's hard to imagine how he spent his days. I don't even know. He pretended to go to work. My mother actually did work. He was retired. It was almost like acting in a play.

Text

Fathers

[Väter]

Text

Perpetrators

[Täter]

Audio

Patricia Reschenbach:

Well, I do know that I come from a family with a perpetrator background. But knowing this and... in the end... well, "knowing" is really the best way to describe it... Stop. Cut.

Patricia Reschenbach:

How should I put it?

Klub Zwei: Maybe we can make it a bit easier. Let's talk about what initially motivated you to researching your father as a perpetrator. Was there something particular that triggered you? What is the story behind it?

Patricia Reschenbach:

The initial trigger was being in psychotherapy. My therapy was based on family reconstruction. It was systematic family therapy, which also meant working with family constellations. When I did them, the therapist—and even people in the group (it was group therapy)—pointed out to me that there were gaps in my constellations. That there was a lot of “not knowing” that could be remedied by researching, asking your family or pulling a file at the National Archive.

Klub Zwei: How did they establish these gaps? How did they come to ask you if "It might be interesting for you to look and see if there were perpetrators in your family?"

Patricia Reschenbach:

Some of it was based on my statements or attitude toward myself, which were really harsh. I was noticeably hard on myself, so my therapist asked if our family didn't have Nazis... Oh, no. That's not how he put it... If I didn't come from a family with a perpetrator background. It came up repeatedly... For the most part it was this harshness toward myself and others, which was a recurring theme in my therapy.

Klub Zwei: Harsh, also in the sense of strict?

Patricia Reschenbach:

Strictness? Yes. The best way for me to describe it though is as a "harshness" toward myself and others. That's maybe... It was always like: maybe something's there. There was and I knew it. But it was a seminar in which I experienced it spatially that initially triggered a closer and more intensive occupation with it. Several family constellations were set up in the room, all of the participants' families. I actually realized that I come from a perpetrator family when I was standing in that room. Another participant was from a victim family. Her constellations always dealt with her missing grandparents—I'm not sure anymore if it was her parents or grandparents—which was another topic altogether. That's when I realized I had something completely different to contend with.

Helga Hofbauer:

Now I have really started to research his past, year by year, in terms of where he was stationed, which SS storm troupes he belonged to, which parts of Europe he was in and during which time of the year. I started this, because I began sleepwalking again. I was a sleepwalker in my adolescence, but mostly when I was a child. Nobody ever thought anything of it, because lots of kids do it. But I took it seriously when I started to sleepwalk again, about 3 or 4 years ago, and fell out of my loft bed. That was another reason for me to focus on it more and to work on it seriously. So, when I got up in the middle of the night without knowing it, I had a dream that made me recall other dreams of his past and my past with him.

Klub Zwei:

What was your dream about?

Helga Hofbauer:

It was a dream about a cellar and wanting to get out. It was very emotional and linked to feelings of something that you don't know, but really want to find out. It pulled me directly toward stuff about him, stuff I didn't know, but wanted to find out... It was so ambivalent: he talked so much, but never really told us anything—nothing that would explain or... any real facts.

Patricia Reschenbach:

There were... So... I... don't know how old I was, but I always thought that partisans were deer or wild animals, because there was always talk about—or I heard him say a couple of times—having shot partisans or “shot at” them.¹ I thought about him “shooting at” this thing and thought he must've been a hunter. Later I realized... I found out what partisans really were and I was totally shocked. I was really shocked to discover that to him partisans were “wild animals.”

Helga Hofbauer:

One of my childhood dilemmas is that my father was such an ambivalent figure in my life. He had a short temper and was psychologically abusive, but he also evoked in me

such strong feelings of empathy and compassion. The dilemma of my childhood and adolescence was that these feelings were so strong... I think it's also a typical feeling to have toward perpetrators: you also love them.

Text

Love

Text

History

Audio

Klub Zwei: How did your family deal with sexuality? Did you ever talk about it?

Patricia Reschenbach:

It was really hidden. It was one of those things that were better left unsaid. Nobody ever talked about it and there was no sex education... We had to find out everything on the sly. If it was done in secret then it was okay and you had your freedom. When... At some point I told them I had a boyfriend. It was a big drama and my father got really upset. After that I stopped telling them, or anyone else in fact, anything. Nobody knew anything about me.

Helga Hofbauer:

One of the most intense things he passed on to us... is that he reduced sexuality and the body to hygiene. So, for him... how should I put it... I think that in our family life the body norms, sexuality and its constructions my father passed on to me and my sister are the images in Leni Riefenstahl's films. They really portray exactly what he told us: there is an ideal body. It is white, has blond hair and blue eyes. He also always told me not to dye my hair, because people with truly blond hair were rare. That is a classical statement. These films clearly show what he told us. The ideal body isn't too thin or too fat; it's athletic but not too athletic, and women shouldn't look overly athletic anyway. Instead, the ideal body is somewhere in between. Bodily cleanliness and hygiene were also really important.

Patricia Reschenbach:

Yes, or was it? It was...

Klub Zwei: Were your parents affectionate with one another?

Patricia Reschenbach:

Hardly at all. No, they were not really affectionate... We were only ever allowed to give my father a peck on the cheek. He was always afraid that we would give him some childhood disease or a cold or something. We even had to ask him if we could give him a kiss. It was mostly things like that. But it was really... well, today I can laugh about it, but it was not funny at all then.

Klub Zwei: What about your mother?

Patricia Reschenbach:

Looking back, my mother was always something of a little sister to me. The three of us often spent time together. We always had to make a plan to make sure Papa didn't find out. Sometimes I felt like the oldest sister among the three of us. I often had lots of responsibility... I learned to be responsible for lots of things that weren't my own at a very young age. I quickly slipped into the role of an adult.

Klub Zwei: Are there things you still do because of that? Or do you feel like you've been able to free yourself from all the things he tried to teach you?

Helga Hofbauer:

No, I don't think I have freed myself. It wasn't his image to begin with—it was also society's. That's why I think the entire post-perpetrator society is still not free from it—and neither am I.

Klub Zwei: What about your parents' sexuality? Was there anything you noticed? Did they show any affection in front of you and your sister?

Helga Hofbauer:

Well, like I said, my father's ideal was extremely asexual. An asexual body—that's what he would have liked. Well, I don't know if my parents' relationship was actually like that. If they ever had sex or not. I don't know. But I think his ideal was an asexual body: a body that was not "soiled" by sexuality, bodily movements or fluids. Just like society's norms. He didn't like anything smelly or sticky.

In a way, my mother was his polar opposite. And I'm not sure if that's the reason he even lived together with her. It was even a bit grotesque. Sometimes she would leave her bloody sanitary napkins lying around in the WC. He thought that was outrageous. He couldn't even talk about it. That's how outrageous it was. He would say something like, "your mother, she..." He would make her out to be compulsive, as if she had not will to do it any differently. That's the way he portrayed her because of her chaotic, female nature—a typical view of femininity. I think that stands out, because with stuff like that she was his polar opposite.

Patricia Reschenbach:

I was raised to be someone who would grow up, get married and have kids one day and that my career wouldn't be my highest priority. For quite some time my mother would say: "it doesn't matter. Just make sure you meet someone nice and someday you'll have a family"... Those were my instructions, which I gathered from brief conversations or remarks. That's what my information was based on. I have to say that, in the end, my mother really supported me. I was able to finish school, study and graduate. I am grateful to her for that. In that respect my mother was actually extremely supportive. I find anything family-related or hermetically... isolated threatening. There was also a point when I decided I did not want to live with my partner who I had a child with anymore, and I actively ended the relationship. That was really something for a woman with my upbringing, for someone who was not raised to be proactive, independent and self-determined. I always knew that's how I wanted to be and now I am.

Helga Hofbauer:

I came out to my father as queer, i.e. as a lesbian. He brushed it off by making a derogatory comment and never spoke about it again. I think that my relationship to history, that is the history of my relationships and love relationships, has strongly been influenced by his extremely rigid and normative ideas. In some respects, the relationship between my father and mother was shapeless. They disagreed on so many different things that it never took shape. He always referred to images of physical fitness, bodies and sexuality that were solely notions without all content whatsoever. He never verbalized any words for touching, kissing, sex or fucking—ever. So, that was always such a void—so unbelievably empty. In my own sexuality, identity and sexual orientation I always had the feeling that I was fighting against this notion of wanting to make my sexuality invisible. For instance, I didn't know anyone who said that gay or lesbian people even existed, because for him they didn't. Anyway, sexuality wasn't something that could be defined or had any emotions, feelings or sensory perception attached to it. Because, for him, the most important thing was to have a healthy body: an ideal body that wasn't too fat or whatever else a body had to be. There was never any talk about pleasurable sensations. I think the reason it took me so long to come out is that I had always been fighting this notion that sexuality does not exist. I think that made me extremely cautious. That and my resistance to what had really been occupying me the whole time: that I can be who I am. Having permission to be who I am has kept me busy for years—and it still does today.

Klub Zwei: How does that tie in with dealing with the Nazi past?

Helga Hofbauer:

It does play a role. It's not a coincidence that my love relationship is with someone from a perpetrator family. I'm really interested in engaging with others on the topic. I am in a discussion group with Jewish and non-Jewish people. A Jewish person from the group once told a story about a store he always shopped. Later, he found out that the shop owner had lived in Israel, when he spoke to him once in Hebrew. He thought to himself: how can Jewish people tell that somebody else is Jewish? Other people in the group agreed and said they had similar experiences. If you can still tell if someone is Jewish without even talking to them—then I thought to myself—that the descendants of

perpetrators recognize one another too. It made me think about that. Because— although this is off the topic of love relationships—love relationships are such intense experiences, I think that when you recognize or notice that someone's questions or approaches are similar to yours, that it brings you closer. I think this has played a big role in my love relationships.

Patricia Reschenbach:

There is definitely a connection, because both of my partners, the first and the second—who is now my husband—do... well, are also from perpetrator families. My husband is even a descendant of a high ranking... of the perpetrators. It occupies us a lot. He has no difficulty researching it, because historians have already done considerable research on his grandfather. So, in principle it's relatively clear: I want our son to know and I want it to be something we talk about. For instance, a family album contains so many important documents. This should be one of those documents. It should be in there. He should have access to it.

Text

Emotion

Text

Reflection

Audio

Patricia Reschenbach:

Of course, I also view making this public as an act of breaking with it. Right, it's not much more than that. And the emotions related to it... I'd rather not talk about them...

Klub Zwei:

You once wrote about emotions that you often feel such an inner resistance to.

Patricia Reschenbach:

It's because my emotions have misled me. I think that analysis of or critically assessing the situation is much more productive than following my emotions. My emotions have led me astray for so long. That's why I try not to give my emotions the upper hand and keep them at bay. That's the reason.

Helga Hofbauer:

I think the emotions surrounding it are existential and moving. I don't think I'm voluntarily doing this research, to put it simply. If I could, then maybe I just wouldn't do the research. Well, I already feel so much pressure inside. I feel stressed, which is really important. But I still have the feeling that... this not-knowing is still so powerful. This part of my background has such great power over me. It gives me much more self-confidence to know about it and to see that I try to go against this not-knowing. Researching and tackling these issues makes me a wiser and happier person. But it is also has this immense power and that's what keeps me under pressure.

Text

Helga Hofbauer and Patricia Reschenbach in conversation

Text

with Klub Zwei, Simone Bader and Jo Schmeiser

Text

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Text

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Translation

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ⁱ The German original text “[...] dass er Partisanen erschossen oder ‘geschossen’ hat” differentiates between “*erschossen*” and “*schossen*.” The former means to shoot and kill, whereas the latter is a hunting term, which is used for animals killed in numbers. Here, “shooting at” partisans has been chosen to express this difference in the sense that they were seen as a target, hunted and killed arbitrarily.