

On Being Both a Perpetrator and a Victim¹

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First of all, I want to express my warm gratitude to Marina Mojovic for inviting me to speak, at this conference.

When I thought of what I might share with you, today, in a conference on “The Impact of Social Trauma onto Identity”, I realised that I need to speak to you about some of my personal history, as a German. I shall do this with the curiosity about the history you are bringing to this conference, and I hope that we shall be able to use our time together to deepen our understanding both of ourselves and each other.

I was born in the last months before the end of WW II. Between the 2nd and 8th year of my life, I grew up in what became the German Democratic Republic, and from 1953 onwards in what used to be called West Berlin. Being German in the 2nd half of the 20th century up to today has meant being member of a nation which caused unbelievable suffering and death for millions of people, in and beyond Europe. Nazi Germany bombarded Spain, invaded Czechoslovakia, Poland, Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Lybia, former Jugoslavia (including bombardement of Belgrade by the German Airforce), Greece, and finally Soviet Union.

Integral part of these invasions was the persecution and annihilation of Jewish citizens, wherever they lived. I learnt about Concentration Camps, about annihilation of Jews all over Europe, comparatively early and openly. Also my parents had heard about Concentration Camps early and had become members of a group in the protestant church which was anti-Hitler. I grew up not understanding how on earth one could be a Nazi. I came to understand this only much later: how seductive it was, for young people or for all those who wanted a career, how seductive it was to believe to be superior to others, as a German, to have permission to take pleasure in destructively aggressive behaviour which, under different circumstances, would have been a civil taboo; how difficult it was to resist going with the flow, to resist joining the party or other Nazi organisations, specially when the pressure increased, and it did increase daily, so to speak, on everybody. There was so much seduction to turn a blind eye to boycott of Jewish shops, Jewish medical doctors, Jewish lawyers, to Jewish neighbours disappearing, to steal what they had to leave behind, but also to turn a blind eye to the murder of the mentally ill, to the persecution of political critics etc. Everybody could have known who wanted to know. But who did want to know? When I think of the unbelievable cruelty of concentration camps and death marches, I don't want to know, either. Fortunately, some did know and tried to do their best to help.

Apart from the seduction to comply to an authoritarian and persecutory government, there was also anxiety. I believe my parents lived in constant fear of doing or saying something that might send them to prison. And yet they tried to hold on to their convictions as best they could.

However, this does not mean that they were “innocent”. In spite of the anti-Hitler attitude in my family of origin, some family members had *anti-Semitic* and all had *nationalist convictions*. These were rooted earlier in German history than fascism, but they helped prepare it. Nationalism led to foundation of the German Reich, in 1871. German Nationalists used to feel superior to other nations like the French, the Poles or the Russians. It made them feel obliged to fight Hitler's war. Of course, there was no such thing as conscientious objectors – when they were drawn, they had to obey. But they were also identified with their “duty”, men and

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women felt loyalty to Germany, and the men, as soldiers, also towards their comrades. There was a tradition in Prussian Protestantism for this kind of identification, and there were remnants of this attitude in the social world I grew up in.

On top of these attitudes, nobody who lived in those days was able to “get away” with no involvement at all. You had to think whether to greet with “Heil Hitler” or “Guten Tag” when you entered a shop. You had to decide whether to put out the Nazi flag on days of national or Nazi celebration. People were sent to prison for small things, in those days. Even though often nothing happened to you, you never knew, the social climate was one of constant threat. Did you comply or did you resist – and risk endangering yourself and your family? This means that even though my parents were anti Hitler, they were also anxious. Sometimes they were courageous, sometimes they were not. And those who were convinced Nazis; or those who wanted to live their private lives in peace, trying to close their eyes to what was happening; those who, in order to survive or keep their job, denied the cruelties which were happening all the time and thereby betrayed their own human convictions, who thereby became bystanders; or those who thought that even though they didn’t like Hitler, he would soon be gone from the political stage, again ... all those who didn’t actively resist, supported the Nazis, supported the war (which, in Eastern Europe, was meant to annihilate and destroy), they supported the unbelievably cruel murder in the concentration camps, actively and directly – or indirectly. I am born into a nation of perpetrators and bystanders. Nazi crimes are “under my skin” and they will stay with me, throughout my life time. And of course one of the burning questions is: would I have behaved differently if I had been alive, in “their” time? Like my parents I might have been overwhelmed by fear of persecution ... and felt guilty as they did ... I don’t know about my father who died early, but I know that my mother felt guilty for the rest of her life for not having been more courageous. But there were many of my parents’ generation who didn’t even feel guilty until they died.

So what about the guilt feelings **I** used to have, for many years, about this family and national heritage of mine? It took me a long time, but most of all: it took my participation in the first Nazareth conference to understand that there was something wrong with **my** guilt feelings. How come I felt guilty for deeds or failings which I had not done, but which were done by my parents or others from their generation? Isn’t that a strange phenomenon?

Very few of my parents’ generation were involved in resistance or in secretly helping Jews to hide or leave the country. There were some, thank God, but not many. After the war, very few were able to face their identification with the grandiose and destructive Nazi ideology or with their becoming bystanders to what was happening, let alone perpetrators. The involvement of most Germans in what had happened went largely un-acknowledged or even completely denied, but it did not disappear, in people’s minds. There is hardly any day when you do not find anything in the media about the past and how it affects our present. But in the families or in personal relationships, it is still extremely difficult to talk about it, so that the crimes – and the guilt associated with them – contaminated the minds of the next generation. Children identify with their parents, and they identify with their parents’ unsolved conflict, i.e. children of the war identified even though unconsciously, with their parents’ guilt. But how can this guilt be acknowledged and mourned by them since it is not their own?

As for myself, I remember resisting to take leadership roles, as a young professional. My idea was that fascism taught me the destructiveness of leadership in general. I believed that power was bound to be used in a destructive way, therefore I ought to stay away from it. My school experiences had not helped to ease these anxieties. Today, I understand this resistance of mine in a different way. I believe I did not trust my ability to lead in a containing, trustworthy way

and be open for democratic control. The inappropriate guilt feelings which were derived from my parents and their generation were an unconscious shelter against feeling guilty for mistakes **I** might make **myself**, in my own adult life.

Even the fact, that West Germany had a lot of support from the Western Allies while GDR had to pay reparations to the Soviet Union, even the fact that both Germanies became comparatively wealthy countries, quickly, but also the half-hidden knowledge that many of the perpetrator generation made a career, didn't have to pay the price for what they did – all this may have contributed to the guilt feelings, in my generation.

I understand my suspicion over against myself as due to a personal and national identification which I needed to leave behind in order to grow and take up my social responsibility today. I had to learn to des-identify with the guilt of the previous generation, but at the same time keep acknowledging the fact that it was the German people – my people – which fought Hitler's war, which committed the Shoah. This is the way in which I am a perpetrator – being born into a nation which behaved so unbelievably destructive, and it makes me feel full of shame.

So then: How can I – the child of the perpetrators – claim also to be a **victim**?³

There were decades, after 1945, when this thought could not be thought, let alone be talked about. It was too close to those Germans who insisted on denying their involvement in the guilt I have described above. They did that by claiming to be victims themselves. E.g., the bombing of German towns resulted in ever so many families having lost their place to live. Others were evicted from Poland, Czechoslovakia and other areas of Eastern Europe. Not only did Germany lose quite a bit of its Eastern property, as a consequence of the war, but many Germans lost individual property. There were many – and I'm afraid still are some – Germans who were by no means prepared to accept that this loss and their eviction was a response, however hard, to the un-describable crimes Germans had committed in those countries. For decades, whenever someone would talk about Germans as victims, this would immediately be understood as a defence against acknowledging German guilt, and very often, it **was** such a defence. Even now, when I try to talk to you about German children of WW II as victims, it makes me feel uneasy. Can I talk about it without denying the guilt? Can I talk about it without inviting pity with the perpetrators, thereby – especially here, in Belgrade – reversing roles and offering myself as victim **instead of** acknowledging my perpetrator heritage?

Even though I risk being seen as avoiding, I shall try to offer some thoughts, about this aspect of my generation and myself.

As I mentioned before, I was born a few months before the end of WW II. By this time, each of my parents had lost two brothers in the war. When I grew up, this was a story almost every family had to tell. These losses couldn't be mourned. Not only was the Prussian upbringing one of not attending to one's feelings, but sorrow would also have felt self-righteous. It was the Germans', our own people's fault, wasn't it? "We" started the war. So now "we" mustn't complain. This was the attitude I grew up with and I put forward myself. Everybody complaining about losses was looked at with the suspicion of denying the German crimes.

There was and is also victimhood involved in being a child of the perpetrator generation – and as we know, meanwhile, also in being a grandchild of this generation. Since speaking about one's guilt and hearing about one's parents' guilt is so difficult, the emotional heritage is transmitted through the generations, by unspoken messages. It is not only done in the way parents used to relate to their babies and infants – which, in Nazi times, was brutally strict and

³ Bode, S. Die vergessene Generation. Die Kriegskinder brechen ihr Schweigen (2004) Klett-Cotta
 Bode, S. Kriegsenkel (2009) Klett-Cotta
 Thimm, K. Vätertage. Eine deutsche Geschichte. (2011) Fischer

un-empathic. We have had similar phenomena in GDR where upbringing was to create the socialist personality – and even though socialism was supposed to create more justice, in the upbringing of children it stressed the group and ignored empathy with the individual, just as the Volksgemeinschaft had stressed the importance of the people or else the Arian race. Most children of my generation – including myself – had a rather un-empathic upbringing.

My father had been allowed to leave the Wehrmacht due to physical illness and deep depression, in 1942 – it was still before Stalingrad. Early in 1945, the Soviet Army was approaching, and my parents decided that my mother should flee with us, the three children, from the village where my father had been a pastor. Weeks later, when the permission was given by the community officials to leave the village and practically everybody left, my father followed his family. Many of those who didn't leave had traumatic experiences to cope with.

Fleeing in the last months of the war was dangerous in itself. There are hints that I felt my mother's anxiety as a baby. In the winters to follow, my parents were starving and freezing, but they shared this with the majority of Germans, at the time, and nobody in the family died from hunger or frost. They were relieved to have rescued their children, but they were also ashamed not to have stayed in the village which, for some reason, seems to have felt more courageous and therefore more appropriate to them. I believe that, since we were little, my brothers and I were unconsciously filled with noticing my parents' anxieties and guilt feelings, but neither they nor we could talk about it, certainly not at the time, nor later. We siblings talk about it today.

I grew up in Berlin since I was 4 years old, so my childhood memory is living in a destroyed city, and – since the wall was built – being locked in by a frightening, oppressive totalitarian Soviet and East German communist rule. Even though nobody could ignore the remnants of the war, it took Germans a long time to begin to mourn that this was what the majority had brought over themselves. Some people have never been able to acknowledge that they had a share in it. How can a child cope with learning about the cruelty its parents generation has committed? How can it develop growing up among people who were trying not to deal with their guilt, and – on top of that - were also traumatised by what the “total war” which many of them had agreed to, had brought upon themselves? In this respect, I am also a victim since all this happened before I could even understand what had been going on – let alone take any influence.

It is interesting to note that only after the year 2000, there are books published about “children of the war” and even “grandchildren of the war”. Nowadays, there are groups of them who inform about their meetings, in the internet. They offer a platform for talking about ones' experiences as a child or grandchild of the perpetrators – and they are being used by many people. After decades of silence out of confusion over what was happening to them and possibly also out of shame, at long last they can talk and try to understand what they couldn't understand, for many years.

In this way, I believe, my own and many of the next generation are also victims. So both is true: Being child or grandchild of the German perpetrators involves being a victim, but is also contaminated with the guilt of the German people. In the light of this truth, it was a hard lesson for me to learn to accept my German-ness.

Having said this, I would like to add: For me, being both a perpetrator and a victim goes along with a special responsibility. When I was young, I used to believe that something like the Nazi times in Germany couldn't happen again. Unfortunately, nowadays, I think differently. In

my lifetime, so many wars were and some still are fought, including the one Serbia was involved in, in the 1990ies. There are explicit wars – like the ones using weapons – and structurally implicit wars, i.e. those in which the economic system produces injustice, incredible wealth for some and poverty for others. There is the persistence of racial prejudice – not only, but also in Germany – which intensifies economic warfare. There are rising fascist parties in France, Britain, Germany, Norway, Hungary and elsewhere. There is abuse of our natural resources, specially in Western industrialised countries, or the use of potentially destructive technology like nuclear energy. My German heritage means for me to try and get involved in my society and work against prejudice and injustice.⁴ This doesn't mean that I can be free of guilt, today. E.g. as a German citizen, I have some responsibility for the fact that my government allows German companies to export weapons to other countries or to export chemicals which are known to be potentially of dual use, both for peaceful purposes, but also for chemical weapons – to mention but two of very many current examples. I am against it, but as member of the German nation I cannot claim: not guilty. It is my adult life and I am a member of the society which is involved in these deals.

This is why conferences like this one are of crucial importance – not only, but also for Germans and Serbs: to help us think about our own past and present, in our roles as citizens.

Thank you for your attention.

⁴ S. Erlich, M. Erlich-Ginor, H. Beland Fed with Tears – Poisoned with Milk. The “Nazareth” Group-Relations-Conferences. Germans and Israelis – The Past in the Present. Psychosozial-Verlag 2009