

## **Dealing with the experience of Nazi perpetration and persecution in families and society: Working with descendants**

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As the Nazi period recedes in time, there has been a perceptible shift in the interests of scholars and society in recent years. While the focus was previously on Nazi crimes, there is now a great willingness to explore the familial and social consequences of perpetration and persecution in the Nazi era. My summarised observations are based on the experience of working with the descendants of persecutees and perpetrators at the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial as well as on research into Nazi perpetration and persecution.

### **Research seminars at the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial**

The Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial was redesigned and expanded between 2003 and 2006. During this time, we looked at the repercussions of perpetration and persecution for the second and third generations and conducted interviews with the descendants of both groups. Their perspectives were ultimately incorporated into the new permanent exhibition and the special exhibition on the camp SS at Neuengamme.

In 2009 the Memorial began offering research seminars in which participants explore the question of what their relatives did or experienced under the Nazis. These seminars are regularly attended by the descendants of perpetrators and persecutees alike, as well as by scholars and other interested individuals. The Memorial has also established a variety of talks, including a seminar aimed at the descendants of perpetrators, the purpose of which is to look more intensively at Nazi perpetrators and the lasting effects of perpetration in one's own family. This seminar is very popular – the demand was initially far greater than for seminars aimed at the descendants of Nazi persecutees – which can be explained in part by the fact that there are many more descendants of perpetrators living in Germany than of persecutees. The growing willingness of the descendants of Nazi perpetrators to question their own family history is a result of research into the National Socialist *Volksgemeinschaft* and the perpetrators, which has increased steadily since the 1990s. Previously, it was primarily the children and (less often) the grandchildren of prominent Nazis who grappled with how they should confront their family legacy. Now, however, the descendants of followers and bystanders are also asking: “What did my relatives do in the Nazi period?” In addition, complicity and collaboration are being confronted more frequently in countries formerly occupied by Germany, resulting in questions being asked about familial connections to Nazi crimes in these countries as well.

For a long time, there was a concern that the intensified focus on the causes and consequences of perpetration, as well as the work with the descendants of perpetrators, would draw attention from the fates of those persecuted by the Nazis and their descendants. But this concern has proved to be unfounded. Through internationalisation and networking (e.g. at the annual “Future of Remembrance” forum and on the [Reflections on Family History Affected by Nazi Crimes](#) blog, as well as in seminars and at conferences), the work with relatives of persecutees has become a permanent part of the mission of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial. Furthermore, programmes for the descendants of persecutees and perpetrators are certainly not in competition with programmes for other target groups; instead, they touch on issues that are relevant to all groups of visitors and that enrich the work of memorials overall.

Working with the descendants of both perpetrators and persecutees opens up new prospects for exploring National Socialism and World War II in their global historical dimensions as well. The effects of National Socialism, much like those of colonialism and Stalinism, continue to have an impact on the present day – and they do so worldwide, in Germany, in formerly occupied countries, in the so-called neutral states, and even in the so-called Third World, in societies and families alike.

## **Differences between the descendants of perpetrators and persecutees**

There is a very critical difference between the descendants of perpetrators and persecutees. While most of the former are still reluctant to look at their family history and are rarely confronted with the perpetration in their own families in the course of their socialisation, dealing with the consequences of Nazi violence is usually an important part of the lifeworld orientation of the descendants of those persecuted by the Nazis. Particularly if their relatives were murdered, the descendants of persecutees often find it impossible to escape their family legacy. While members of the latter group self-evidently situate their own family history within the social history of National Socialism and its crimes, most of the descendants of perpetrators lack this contextualisation. They acknowledge the crimes, but they decontextualise them by glossing over the fact that the crimes were committed not by strangers, but by people who are related to them.

This trend toward distancing and abstraction is inherent in the way many descendants of perpetrators approach the Holocaust and other Nazi mass crimes. They are thus perpetuating a trend that is innate to Nazi perpetration itself – and other forms of mass violence. While much of the population justified Nazi violence as being legitimate in the penal system, this violence was decoupled from the individual and reinterpreted even during the act itself, e.g. in that the violence was both perpetrated and remembered as being a “necessary measure”. After the mass violence ended, no one wanted to admit to having been involved, and hardly anyone could explain how people had been capable of doing “something like that”. This decoupling has continued to the present day in the intergenerational transmission in families and societies. For these groups, transmission within the private familial sphere was and is often disconnected from public discourse about Nazi crimes. In light of this, one goal of the seminars is to break down the divided approach to National Socialism that is prevalent among the descendants of perpetrators, followers, and bystanders.

By contrast, the descendants of those persecuted by the Nazis often build a bridge between their own family history and the violent history of National Socialism. This group is aware that persecution was a collective fate that their relatives did not meet by chance, but rather because of social ideologemes such as racism, antisemitism, and antiziganism that were dominant at the time. Among the descendants of those persecuted on political or racial grounds, the knowledge of their family’s fate is often an integral part of their socialisation and is inscribed in their family traditions. However, this is less true of the descendants of persecuted groups who are still fighting for recognition today, including those persecuted as anti-social elements or criminals by the Nazi military justice system.

## **What did my family do in the Nazi period?**

As these historical events recede in time, the question about family history (“What did my family do in the Nazi period?”) can be a relevant way of approaching the past for many people, because it establishes an important connection between historical events and the present day: What does it have to do with me? If we view National Socialism and World War II as global historical events whose consequences continue to affect societies worldwide, then this question is pertinent not only in Germany, but also in formerly occupied countries and collaborating regimes, in countries that accepted refugees (or not), and even in what were referred to at the time as neutral states. However, the question is more urgent in post-National Socialist German society because the consequences of Nazi violence are evident everywhere here, even today, and the refusal to acknowledge and reflect upon this often

leads to a considerable discrepancy between the public remembrance of Nazi mass crimes and the private narratives and traditions in families in Germany.

Spurred on by scholarly findings, there has been a welcome increase in the number of descendants of perpetrators who are critically addressing their family history in public or grappling artistically with how it affects their own lives. In Germany as well as countries formerly occupied by Germany, there is growing interest in exploring the issue of perpetration and collaboration by one's own ancestors. The descendants often distance themselves from prevailing family narratives that reject or ignore the family's past, and they articulate the conflicts of loyalty that go hand in hand with acknowledging their relatives' guilt, interfamilial estrangement, loss of contact, and the experience of their relatives' inability to express remorse.

The descendants of persecutees, too, are increasingly dealing publicly with their family history and asking how it impacts their own lives. The public reception of literature about family history is another factor in the intensified exploration of this history. And the people who publicise their stories do so with a political mandate which, at its core, consists of a "never again". This mandate connects them with the descendants of perpetrators who critically confront their own family history. A declaration to this effect that was issued in 2014 said: "The children of perpetrators and the children of concentration camp prisoners [...] must bear the consequences of a past for which they themselves are not responsible. They can and should act together so that the crimes committed by or suffered by their parents are never repeated." (Multi-generational encounters at the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial)

Conveying a knowledge of violent Nazi crimes and their causes, and dealing with the consequences of this violence, is relevant not only to the descendants of persecutees and perpetrators but to all people, because it forms the basis of our own power of judgement and of a reflective awareness of history with regard to historical events and their lasting effects. The familial and social repercussions of perpetration and persecution have a high explanatory value for social processes, not only in relation to National Socialism. For this reason, the motivation of those involved in the crimes as well as the factors behind the emergence of the violence and the mechanisms for implementing it, the fates of the groups affected by this violence, and the way in which society dealt with those responsible for it after the war are playing an increasingly important role in the educational work of memorials – with all groups of visitors.

Confronting the past always involves confronting ourselves: our historical awareness, the constitution of our society, the approaches to our family history, and our own positions on the challenges of the present day – such as the social racism apparent in the rise of populist right-wing movements and nationalist tendencies in Europe in connection with refugees, as well as on-going antiziganism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia. Dealing with the familial and social consequences of perpetration and persecution is therefore an issue that affects us all.

## **Literature**

Oliver von Wrochem, with the cooperation of Christine Eckel (ed.), *Nationalsozialistische Täterschaften. Nachwirkungen in Gesellschaft und Familie*, Berlin 2016.

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