

GERMAN FAMILY MEMORIES OF NAZI ERA DIFFER FROM PUBLIC RECORD

When it comes to the history of Nazism and the atrocities of the Third Reich, Germany has an “official memory culture,” according to a German professor who studies memory and the transmission of family history. “There are huge gaps between public and private memories” in Germany, said Harald Welzer, director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Memory Research at Essen, Germany, and research professor of social psychology at the University of Witten/Herdecke in Germany.

Welzer spoke at a recent MARIAL Center colloquium about the research project “Transmitting Historical Awareness.” It dealt with family communication about the Nazi period in the Federal Republic of Germany. For the study, forty former West and East German families were interviewed—once with the whole family at the table and then individually. In each family, three generations took part: children, grandchildren, and the “eyewitness” to what happened in WWII.

In his talk “Grandpa Wasn’t a Nazi: Nazism and the Holocaust in Germany Family Remembrance” (available online at www.marial.emory.edu/calendar/eventarchives.html), Welzer discussed how history is formed and transmitted through conversations among the generations, how anti-Jewish stereotypes similarly are passed down, and how Germans interpret the roles of their parents or grandparents in the Third Reich.

Welzer noted that most young people in Germany are well educated about the past and think Nazism was bad. Holocaust education, teaching through memorials, and school lessons about Nazism and the Shoah have become very popular in Germany. But general historical knowledge and the assimilation of personal family histories are two different things, he said.

In fact, Welzer found a paradox: although they are informed about the past, young Germans cannot accept that their own grandparents committed atrocities during the Nazi era. Often this means the younger generation doesn’t ask too many questions. Welzer described a boy who is asked why he didn’t question his grandfather about “why he went

along with it all.” The boy says, “I can’t ask a question like that. I know too much about it already. And the stories he has told are so varied.” Welzer noted: “The universe of evil was there, but everybody was against it.”

Each generation makes its own sense of the stories passed down in their families, Welzer’s study found, and “nobody is willing to tell the truth” about what happened during the Third Reich. Evidence may show that a grandparent committed atrocities, but their



“Nobody is willing to tell the truth.” Evidence may show that a grandparent committed atrocities during the Nazi era, but their children and grandchildren try very hard to establish them as “good people.”

Harald Welzer

children and grandchildren try very hard to establish them as “good people,” Welzer said.

The grandparent’s recollection of specific events during the Holocaust is often “foggy” and confusing, he added. He described one example in which a man talked “in an ambivalent way” about how he killed a Russian woman during the war, even though a letter that he wrote home during the war, which is now archived, described “criminal acts” in which he participated. Still, the grandfather hedges about the details. And later, the man’s daughter says, “How could this have happened?,” as if to suggest it didn’t really occur at all.

“In time, each generation makes its own sense of the stories,” Welzer said. “The grandchildren refigure and reconstruct the stories.

The grandfather grows more heroic from generation to generation.” Welzer cited another example, in which a German woman living near the Bergen Belsen concentration camp was described as having helped to care for and feed Jews who were liberated from the camp as World War II ended. Her descendants claim that she “tricked authorities” so that she could offer “safe haven” to Jews who had escaped the camp. The reality, Welzer said, is that she refused orders to help the liberated, and emaciated, Jewish survivors of the camp.

Reconstructing these stories is the only way Germans can come to terms with how their relatives behaved during the Nazi era, said Welzer, whose primary fields of research and teaching are memory, group violence, and research methods. “My hypothesis is that these are sides of the same coin,” claimed Welzer. Young Germans know what went on in the past, and the knowledge of that history “forces the retelling of these stories,” he said.

Family loyalty and the image of a good grandfather trumps a person’s criminal past, he said, so “the only solution is to make their grandparents resistance fighters.”

Welzer cited a 2001 survey of 2,000 Germans, who were asked, “What do you know about your relatives during the war?”

Twenty-six percent of those who responded said their relatives helped people who were persecuted. Thirty-five percent said their relatives didn’t go along with those persecuting Jews. Sixty-five percent said their relatives “suffered a lot” during the war.

“The picture that emerges is that German society resisted Nazism from 1933 to 1945. In fact, the survey showed that only 6 percent of the population had a positive attitude toward the Nazis. “The younger generation has learned that there is a certain way to talk about the past,” Welzer said. These stories have become family myths and have allowed Germans their own stories, which are often far from the truth. ■