FORGIVENESS

by
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I was born in Budapest, Hungary and grew up in the suburbs of Los Angeles, California. My parents were never fully comfortable speaking English, so we became part of the expatriate Hungarian community. None of our friends knew that we were Jewish, and on Sundays we would drive into Los Angeles to attend the Hungarian Christian church, I don't even know if it was Protestant or Catholic.

When I was a teen-ager, after one of these journeys, my mother casually remarked that she suspected that just about every man in the church had been members of the "Nyilas," the Arrow Cross, Hungarian Nazis. This shocked me. All these nice men, with whom I had grown up, who had attended my piano and dance recitals, were possibly anti-Semitic murderers? The next time we got together, I looked at every man there and wondered what they had done during World War II. Had they killed anyone? Did they kill any Jews? Did their children, my friends, know? Would they denounce us if they found out we were Jews? How do you go on living a normal life, as if nothing had happened, if you murdered someone? Needless to say, my parents forbade me from ever asking my questions, but I never stopped wondering.

The loss of my trust in this social group aggravated the darkening lens through which I was beginning to view the world. My parents were not able to assimilate into American life, so we were different, and as far as I was concerned, being different was not a good thing. The only place I felt comfortable with my parents in a social setting was with the Hungarians, and now that was shattered. Meanwhile, my parents continued to socialize with them. I asked them how could they eat and drink with these people. My mother said that they spoke the same language, had the same culture, and this was the closest they could come to home.

While I understood my parents, I could not bring myself to continue socializing with the Hungarians in Los Angeles. The hole opened up by that loss, as well as being a rebellious teenager in the wake of the Viet Nam War, left me confused, lonely, and angry. However, as with all things in our family, it ended in silence, so my anger turned into sadness and then later into depression. My parents could not understand what I had to be depressed about. After all, we were in America, no one was trying to kill us, we had plenty of food, and a nice place to live. What more did I want? I also felt that I had no right to be depressed. After all, whatever feelings I had or obstacles I encountered, what was that compared to what my parents had endured? Unfortunately, not dealing with my feelings did not lead to those feelings going away. Instead, it led to pain, anger, mistrust and misunderstanding, not only with my parents, but in my interactions with people in many different situations and settings.

By my 30's, with a failed marriage behind me, I decided that in order to move forward with my life I had to reach back. So against my parents' wishes, I traveled alone to Europe for the first time. I met my extended family in Hungary and Germany, as well as many other people along the way in many countries. I looked at every person my parents' age and wondered, "What did you do during the War?" My mother had warned me before I left to

never bring up the subject. Her position was that it was a different era then, to leave it alone, and besides, it wasn't any of my business since it didn't happen to me. When I asked my aunts and uncles in Hungary about my mother's position, they agreed with her, as did my cousins. None of them wanted me to rock the boat where they lived since I would go home and they still had to live there. So I kept silent.

After my father died, my mother, never an easy person at her best, no longer had anyone to talk to who could understand or relieve the pain and tension of her memories. This led too many unwarranted, inappropriate, and embarrassing outbursts. Sometimes it was at the market, or at the doctor's, or in the post office, or just anywhere, alienating and isolating her as she grew old. Through the negative reactions of others, I recognized my reactions and began to empathize with her. I could see that even after more than forty years, she was a stranger in a strange land, living among people who could never fathom what the eccentric old lady with the accent had gone through or all that she had lost, from her family to her youthful aspirations to her language to her homeland.

In her 80's, she decided to write her memoirs, covering her life from her childhood in Hungary through her old age in America. She asked that I give a copy to all my cousins. So I went around the world and gave each cousin a copy. I was told a copy was given to the Holocaust museum in Budapest. After her death, my brother described her as a simple leaf forced to ride the storm of world events over which she had no control, landing in faraway lands where she could never find her way.

I had spent a lifetime in silence, deeply affected by my parents' experiences as Holocaust survivors, wondering if the other side was affected by their parents who were perpetrators? Then suddenly, through a conference called One by One, the opportunity arose for me to finally ask my questions of the descendants of Nazis. By then in my 50's, the idea of exploring this topic with the opposite side intrigued me. When I told my family that I was thinking of attending this conference, my children thought it was awkward. My brother was completely against my exploring these questions, asking me what good would come of it, either for them or for me. My German relatives were against it, feeling I might sympathize with the Nazi descendants, something they found unfathomable. My husband was against it because of the expense.

In June, a month before the conference, I finally decided to go and booked the trip. Although everyone I knew ranged from lukewarm to negative about my attending, I felt compelled to go, to ask, to voice what I had been wondering about for years. In July I traveled to Berlin, alone and filled with apprehension, where I was picked up by the organizers and at a reception, met the Germans and the Jews attending.

The following morning the work began. As I listened to the stories from the Germans, I felt sorry that their wonderful memories of their parents and grandparents were sullied by their finding out that they had, in fact, been Nazis. How can you reconcile the wonderful grandfather on whose lap you sat, who kissed you good night, with a Nazi involved in killing thousands of Jews. Like me, they could never ask, living in silence and wondering. Through research they learned where their fathers or grandfathers had been, the records filled with commendations for their participation in killing people. I wondered how I would feel if I found out my father was a criminal, a murderer, and was grateful that I was on the other side.

And then Martin told his story. His father had been a Nazi policeman in Estonia. Martin was racked with guilt, starting a foundation there, visiting the country, vowing to never forget, and he "was sorry." I had never heard anyone say they were sorry. I don't think anyone ever apologized to my parents. Certainly, we were never contacted by anyone from Germany, Hungary, Poland or Austria, countries in which my grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins were murdered. All over the world there are the endless commemorations with big speeches about the horrors of the Holocaust, but I had never heard anyone just say they were sorry. And even though that didn't change anything, and even though Martin had not committed the crime, and even though I was not the victim, there it was, the words I had never heard from anyone. And my tears flowed, for my parents, my grandparents, for Martin, and for me.

I returned to California feeling emotionally lighter than I had in years. Many of my friends were curious about the trip and at a casual dinner one very warm evening, a man asked how I felt sitting in a room with Germans whose parents had been Nazis. And I could honestly say that it was the same as sitting there with him. Through the dialogue, the "other" had turned into an "us," built one by one.