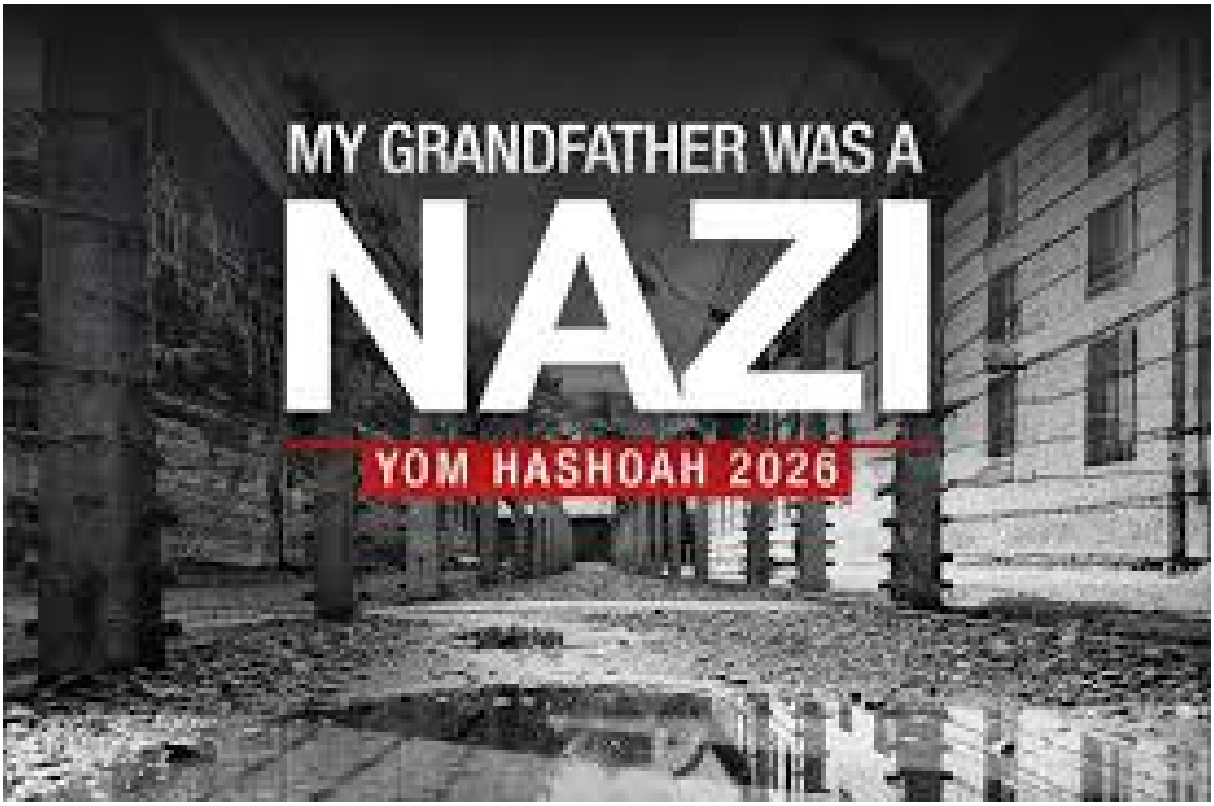
בס"ד



My grandfather, the Nazi

Editor:Sam. Eisikovits

Eisikovits1@gmail.com

Just Released: Likutei Shmuel – Sefer Bereishis.
A treasury of insights, parables, and stories for the Shabbos table. Looking to enrich your Shabbos table with meaningful content? "Likutei Shmuel" is a carefully curated collection of the very best from recent Torah leaflets and weekly publications. It brings together inspiring divrei Torah, thought-provoking parables, captivating stories, and uplifting messages — all selected and edited with precision by Rabbi Shmuel Eisikovits.
Whether for personal learning or for sharing at the table, in shul, or with friends, this sefer offers a wealth of material that's engaging, accessible, and spiritually nourishing.

Volume One: Bereishis

Rich, varied content for every parsha. Ideal for family use, educators, and public speakers.
Currently only in Hebrew.

Affordable price 60 IS available now.

Order here: https://dash.bookpod.co.il/product/2231

My grandfather, the Nazi

After discovering his own patriarch's role in the Holocaust, scholar Johannes Spohr offers workshops that confront uncomfortably specific truths amid a wider culture of remembrance

LONDON — When his grandfather died in 2006, Johannes Spohr began to delve into his wartime past. The historian's discoveries were grim. Rudolf Spohr was a member of the Nazi party, applied to join the SS, and, as a Wehrmacht officer, was aware of the gassing of Jews.

But the grandson's revelations led him on a path to helping others research their families' roles in the darkest chapter of German history.

Germany's *Erinnerungskultur* — or "culture of remembrance" — is well-known. Over the past two decades, the country has sought to collectively confront its past with memorials and monuments, exhibitions, public commemorations, and, perhaps most visibly, the "stolpersteine" embedded in streets to mark the lives of individuals murdered and persecuted by the Third Reich.
Nonetheless, for many Germans, discovering how members of their own families may have been involved in the Holocaust is an altogether more unwelcome prospect and one to be avoided.

An increasing number of Germans, however, take a different view, wanting to know just what their uncles, grandfathers, and other ancestors did during the war. Spohr's "Present Past" workshops help those wanting to research their Nazi-era family history learn how to dig into records held by the country's archives and institutions, as well as how to interpret their findings. The Berlin-based historian also undertakes bespoke research projects for individual clients.
Spohr, 43, admits that, when it came to his own grandfather, "the suspicion was always there." A copy of "Mein Kampf" sat on the bookcase at his grandparents' home, while a Wehrmacht uniform hung in the closet. National Socialism, he tells The Times of Israel, was "somehow present in my childhood," but he also knew that, by and large, it was not a topic to be openly discussed.

"My grandmother would only say the war was a 'very cruel time,'" says Spohr, "but she didn't say for whom it was cruel or what she meant by it."

Two or three stories about the war — one involving his grandfather accidentally meeting his brother in Italy and enjoying a day together on the beach — were frequently recycled. He later discovered that this use

of a small number of oft-repeated anecdotes to fend off further discussion was common among many other families.

When Spohr occasionally pressed the subject, Rudolf would usually portray himself as an opponent of Hitler who had opposed the war and had reluctantly been forced into the Wehrmacht. He told others that his reaction to the unsuccessful attempt on Hitler's life in July 1944 was to ask: "Did they get the pig?"

After his grandfather's death, Spohr — spurred by the discovery of documents, photos, and Nazi-era artifacts in Rudolf's home — began his research. He was helped by an internship at a concentration camp memorial, where he learned how to make archival requests and interpret pictures.

Spohr's investigations turned up his grandfather's Nazi party membership — Rudolf and his father joined up on the same day, soon after Hitler came to power — and an ultimately aborted attempt to join the SS in 1933.

Was Rudolf a true believer? Spohr says it is impossible to tell, but he suspects that he was more of a conservative nationalist who was neither an opponent of the regime nor a fanatical supporter. Instead, he believes, he was "an opportunist" who knew how to get on in society, whatever the prevailing political winds.

Inescapable horrors

Germany's military archives provided clues as to Rudolf's wartime service. Spohr found that his grandfather served in France in 1940, rising through the ranks of the Wehrmacht to the Army High Command. By 1942, he was posted to the East, where, as an adjunct officer, he undertook inspections in Ukraine, Crimea, and the North Caucasus at a

time when the Nazis were committing widespread atrocities. He doesn't know that Rudolf participated in war crimes, but he can prove that he was present in Ukrainian cities such as Vinnytsia when massacres occurred.

"They were all around him; he couldn't have seen any of it," Spohr says.

Massacres 'were all around him; he couldn't have seen any of it.'

Correspondence also proves that Rudolf was aware that Jews were being murdered in mobile gas chambers, while Spohr also notes that the high command in which his grandfather served was responsible for Soviet prisoners of war, half of whom died in German captivity. In Italy, too, where Rudolf was posted in 1943, questions linger: He served as a captain in a general commando of a Panzerkorps of which some units were later found to have participated in massacres of civilians and partisans.

Rudolf may have come to privately question Hitler's leadership, Spohr believes, but there's no evidence he opposed the Nazis' "war of annihilation," which he likely viewed as a struggle against Bolshevism.

Spohr says that he did not struggle, as some do, to reconcile the man he knew with the potential crimes he committed. "I had distanced myself from the family quite a lot, and from the conservative world it was for me," he says.

How to process culpability

The historian also experienced firsthand the reaction of local people in the North Sea coastal town of Nordenham, where his grandfather, a founding member of the local Goethe society and successful businessman after the war, was a respected figure.

“Some were really aggressive,” he says, “and some said everything they could to defend him.” Others, however, reacted in a rather more positive way.

Spohr’s own experience places him in a good position to help other Germans navigate their families’ complex and difficult histories. Interest is growing, he says. Those who attend his workshops are diverse, ranging in age from 20 to 90.

While most are, like Spohr, members of what historians and sociologists term the “third generation,” whose grandparents were adults during the Nazi period, “second generation” Germans, who were born during or shortly after the war, also participate.

The workshops aren’t just educational: they also offer many participants a sense of solidarity. It was often common, says Spohr, for only one member of a family to be interested in examining its past.

‘They want to know where they come from and how it is connected to [Germany’s] violent history.’

“They often felt really uncomfortable and that they might be wrong for wanting to do [the research],” he says. The workshops enable them to bond with others in similar situations.

A relatively new phenomenon, says Spohr, is the interest shown by “fourth generation” Germans.

“I remember having been in similar workshops 15 years ago when I was the only one of the ‘third generation’ present, but now the ‘fourth generation’ is also actively involved,” he says. “That’s very interesting because they usually didn’t know the person that they’re researching,

they've maybe just heard of them, and sometimes don't even know their names."

Their connection to the past, he adds, has the perspective of distance.

"They are usually not so emotional about the research. It is not as personal as it is for the second or third generation, but rather more social or political. They want to know where they come from and how it is connected to [Germany's] violent history."

Layers of history

Spohr notes that the four-decade-long postwar division of Germany has left its own legacy.

"You have different layers of history in the east and the west," he says. "In the former [German Democratic Republic], the interpretation of World War II and national socialism was very ideological and [imprinted with] the myth of a very strong resistance [to the Nazis]. The notion of the average person as a perpetrator never existed in the GDR."

Many Germans from the east of the country, moreover, continue to work through their families' relationship with the former socialist regime and its crimes. Of course, Spohr adds, while access to archives was nonexistent in the GDR before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the situation wasn't straightforward in the former Federal Republic — a situation which was itself massively influenced by former Nazis. From the late 1960s, for instance, the United States government wanted to return archival materials it had gathered after the war for war crimes trials; the West German authorities dragged their feet, ensuring the papers weren't given back until 1994.

Those with whom Spohr works have different motivations for digging into their family's Nazi-era history, he says. Some have a suspicion that the stories they were told about the period when they were growing up were "not the whole picture or maybe a false picture. They have the feeling that there was something strange about it." Others approach him knowing nothing at all, but have maybe "filled the gap with unhealthy fantasies," fearing without evidence that relatives took part in the worst of the Third Reich's crimes.

But there are also wider contemporary factors, most especially the rise of the right-wing populist AfD party, which have increased the number of Germans interested in understanding more about a previous era when the far right was on the march. The war in Ukraine has also played a part, sparking questions about relatives who may have served on the Eastern Front during the war.

"People connected it to their family history. Towns and cities [mentioned in news reports] would somehow sound familiar," Spohr says.

The historian recognizes that some of those he works with are "shocked and very emotional" about what is unearthed. It is, he says, "very rare" for them to attempt to reject or deny findings; those who attend his workshops or commission research are naturally open to hearing the truth, however harsh.

The process also inspires some to become more politically active. One man who asked Spohr to look into his grandfather's past ended up becoming more involved in his trade union's campaigning against the far right.

Spohr acknowledges that, for some, there will be no, few, or insufficient answers.

“People really want to [know] motivation and feelings and why someone did something and what exactly they did, and that is often hard to find out,” he says.

It might be possible, he notes, to discover that an ancestor was an SS officer or a policeman stationed in a particular place but still not know for sure whether they were directly involved in atrocities that occurred there.

“People have to find a way to deal with that,” Spohr says.

The historian also believes that research on victims and perpetrators can be interwoven. Some descendants of the latter, for instance, may want to know more about the forced laborers made to work on their family farm or in a family-owned factory. At the same time, families of the former may be looking for answers about those responsible for the persecution of their ancestors.

“It’s a way for the descendants of perpetrators not to lose themselves in the narratives of the perpetrators,” Spohr says, as well as for victims’ families to grasp “traces of those they lost.”

It is painful and painstaking work, but Spohr believes that those he has worked with benefit from the experience, even if the truth about the crimes committed by members of their own family eight decades ago is difficult to hear.

“In general, I think the response is rather positive; people would rather know than fill the gap with their imagination, which isn’t very healthy,” he says.