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Katrin's choice: how do I tell my son about great-uncle Heinrich. . .?

From Roger Boyes in Berlin

KATRIN HIMMLER'S son is a bright, curious six-year-old. "I'm dreading the moment," she says, "when I have to tell him that one half of his family tried to kill the other half."

Frau Himmler, a political scientist, is the great-niece of Heinrich Himmler, head of Hitler's SS and mastermind of the concentration camp system that murdered millions of Jews.

She is married to an Israeli whose family was confined to the Warsaw ghetto, which was burned to the ground by troopers acting on her great-uncle's orders.

Sometime soon her son will have to be told of the 20th-century tragedy that is part of his heritage. Katrin Himmler, 38, has tackled the problem by writing an account of the family which she will give to her son as soon as he is old enough to read.

She has used the stories of her extended family to produce a fresh portrait of the SS chief who became the Third Reich's second most powerful man.

Die Bruder Himmler (The Himmler Brothers) published by Fischer Verlag, shows Himmler as a member of a normal German family, loved, respected and admired by his relatives who were aware of at least some of his crimes. It supplies the missing link between the man — the lover, hypochondriac and chicken farmer — and the monster.

The book, which was published last week, has already been hailed as an important new way of looking at the Third Reich in which the families themselves tell the story. The first generation of Nazi offspring, growing up in the 1950s, lived in silence. At school they were mocked and bullied as the Germans were taught to hate the Nazis.

Katrin Himmler was forced to confront her family's past when she fell in love with an Israeli - and he with her. "It was as if we were predestined to meet," she told *The Times*.

Both their fathers were born in 1939. The father of Dani — the pseudonym she chooses to conceal her husband's identity — survived the Warsaw Ghetto with his mother using false papers identifying him as an Aryan and Polish. Dozens of other relatives perished in the concentration camps.

Frau Himmler's father was a nephew of the SS leader, the most sinister figure in the Nazi leadership. He could not find the vocabulary to answer his daughter's question: "What does it mean to be a Himmler?" He instead gave her books on the Nazi era. "Then came the television film *Holocaust*," she said. "I was 11. I sat at my desk, crying and crying because, of course, the name Himmler was repeated again and again."

There were three Himmler brothers. Katrin's grandfather, Ernst, died fighting in the closing days of the war. A second brother, Gebhard, was held in an American prisoner-of-war camp.

Heinrich was caught by British troops near Hamburg. He was in a sergeant's uniform, an eye patch replacing his pince-nez glasses. During a body search he bit on a cyanide capsule.

Frau Himmler had to reconstruct the family relationship from these abrupt endings, and as she trawled her family's collective memory she encountered resistance. Heinrich Himmler's daughter, Gudrun Burwitz, continues to cherish her father's memory. She was the guiding spirit behind Stille Hilfe (Silent Aid), a charity which funnelled money to relatives of war criminals and which encourages neo-Nazis. "

Sadly she did not want to make contact," said Frau Himmler.

Gradually, however, the family saga emerged. The brothers plainly profited from their connections with Heinrich.

There was the comfortable Berlin garden house, snatched from trade unionists banned by Hitler. Frau Himmler's grandfather denounced a "non-Aryan" colleague in a letter to Heinrich, surely aware that he was signing a death warrant. Another relative, Richard Wendler, was actively involved in the deportations of Jews.

She still considers her great-uncle "the worst mass murderer of modern times" but, from the letters, diaries and photographs, it became clear to her that he was in no sense isolated. She began to realize that it was a family business.

The research has not been easy for Frau Himmler. The most uneasy moment came when she heard a recording of her great-uncle addressing SS troops near Poznan in which he makes plain that they were being sent on a killing mission. "It was a cold, strong voice and it sends shivers down my spine," she said.

The confusion of victim and perpetrator has made this particular union of German and Jew especially difficult. So far, the closest Frau Himmler's son has got to the book is unpacking the free publishers' copies with his mother.