

A courageous journey

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“The Himmler Brothers: A German Family History” by Katrin Himmler, translated from German into English by Michael Mitchell, Macmillan, 352 pages, 14.99 pounds sterling

The media in the United States recently reported the story of an elderly American Jew, a Holocaust survivor, the resident of a well-to-do California suburb. One day a new tenant, also elderly, moved into the house next door, beyond the small garden. Courteously, the Jewish man decided to call on the new neighbor and perhaps greet him with a warm apple pie. But the moment the door opened, the Jew recalled that he had already seen this person. It was then, back there, more than 60 years ago, on the train platform at Auschwitz - a German facing a Jew, an executioner facing a victim. More than 60 years had elapsed, but the Jew’s heart began to beat wildly.

He was not alone, that Jewish man. As if 60 years have not gone by, almost every week we hear about a woman who suddenly finds her brother whom she had not seen since the war, or about “new” testimony from Primo Levi that had been forgotten in a storeroom, or about a mass grave - yet another one - dug up in Ukraine.

Some of these discoveries are random. Some of them stem from the opening of new archives thanks to the fall of the Iron Curtain. Mountains of documents and papers in archives in the former Soviet Union and throughout the communist bloc have given rise in recent years to a flourishing of historical research on the Holocaust. But sometimes it is not only a matter of circumstances. Sometimes it is a matter of a desire to repress and forget, “not to talk about it,” maybe “it” will go away, even though it is already a matter of the second and third generation afterward. But it hasn’t gone away.

Take, for example, Katrin Himmler. At the age of 15, in the early 1980s, a classmate asked her whether she was by any chance a relative of “that Himmler.” She said yes, she was (Heinrich Himmler was her grandfather’s brother), but she didn’t think about it much. Somehow it seemed reasonable to her that Great Uncle Heinrich had been a Nazi - indeed, the SS commander responsible for the Gestapo and at some stages the No. 2 man after Hitler - but that, apart from him, no one else in the family had been. After all, that is what they had told her at home. She heard that Grandfather Ernst, Heinrich’s younger brother, “wasn’t interested in politics,” and that “of course, he had been a member of the party, but everyone had been a party member.” This information, relates Katrin, satisfied her. She read about the Warsaw Ghetto rebels and even identified with them, but somehow the revolt never entered into her own family’s history.

All this changed one morning in 1997 when her father asked to look at his father’s files in the federal archives, which had opened to the general public after the reunification of Germany. This, in effect, is where Katrin’s journey began - a rare journey that is extraordinary in its courage, to examine the “story” she had been told at home. In her book, “The Himmler Brothers,” recently translated from German into Hebrew (by Dafna Amit), she relates the family’s history chronologically, as it became clear to her after reading hundreds of documents and letters, as well as on the basis of interviews that she herself conducted. Disastrous for the Jews, the precision and order which characterized the Germans played into Katrin’s hands: Members of her family had kept, documented and sometimes even filed every little bit of information - even electricity bills.

Strange discoveries



Himmler's parents, 1st and 2nd from right (photo: USHMM)

First she discovers that Grandfather Ernst joined the Nazi Party in 1931. She notes that it is strange that this happened more than a year before the Nazis came into power, and wonders how this accords with the claim she heard that Heinrich had had to persuade Ernst to join the party.

She continues to read and investigate, diving deeper into the murky reservoir of her family's history, gradually approaching the horror. Katrin discovers that Heinrich's parents, her great-grandparents, congratulated him warmly on Hitler's rise to power in 1933, expressing their wish that the Nazis would succeed, in spite of innumerable enemies surrounding them, to hold and even expand their power; that Heinrich's eldest brother, Gebhard, had taken part in the 1923 putsch; that Ernst had expressed to his brother Heinrich a negative opinion of the deputy director of some factory (the author notes that anyone who said such a thing to an SS commander was undoubtedly sentencing that person to death); and that Richard Wendler, Gebhard's brother-in-law, who according to the family descriptions had not been connected to the murder of Jews, had in fact been a high-ranking SS officer and the governor of Krakow. Finally, Katrin discovers the fact that never, until their deaths in the 1970s, had any of that generation of the family expressed any sign of regret for the disaster they had brought upon their country and upon humanity.

'Good' and 'bad' Germans



Himmler and Hans Frank, 1943 (photo: Library of US Congress)

From the author's hands has emerged a fascinating document reminiscent of Christopher Browning's book "Ordinary Men." Instead of dealing with the institutional aspect of the slaughter of the Jews, Katrin Himmler tries to follow the dynamics and psychology of the ordinary German - the one who was in the party "like everyone else," who perhaps had not been at Hitler's side from the Beer Hall Putsch on, but ultimately impelled him to help make the terrible disaster possible.

Katrin Himmler's achievement is admirable. For a number of years of her life she worked very hard on deconstructing all the knowledge she had about her family, on toppling every protective wall and on divesting herself of the only comfort: the supposedly clear distinction between a "good" German and a "bad" German. For after everything she now knows about her family, how is it possible any more to distinguish between the two types of German?

This story has a fascinating final note: Katrin Himmler is in a relationship with an Israeli man, a grandson of Holocaust survivors, and the couple has a son. At the end of the book, the author writes that she is still afraid of the moment when her son discovers that one side of his family had done everything it could to kill the other side. The only thing that makes this a bit easier for her, she

writes, is the knowledge that she will at least be able to give him a better account of and clearer information about the extent of the blame and responsibility on her family's side.

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