WAS GRANDPA REALLY A NAZI?

Hannover student Till Ewald examines family documents. (Till Ewald)

Some descendants of Nazis are opening the books on their families' dark past. In honor of International Holocaust Remembrance Day today, 'In Jerusalem' takes a closer look

• By ORIT ARFA/Berlin

Till Ewald, 24, a university student in Hannover, learned from his mother that her father had served in the Third Reich's Justice Ministry (a paradox if there ever was one). Upon preparing for a volunteer stint in Israel at a retirement home for *yekkes* (German Jews) in Jerusalem to satisfy curiosity about the Holocaust and the Jewish people, he decided to uncover more about his grandfather's mysterious past. Was he an enthusiastic Nazi supporter? What "crimes" did he handle at the Justice Ministry?

Through family documents, he discovered that his grandfather became a card-carrying party member in 1933 and, subsequently, a Nazi "brownshirt," a member of the Nazi militia. In 1940, he was promoted to the council of the Supreme Court of Berlin and in 1944 served as a judge in the navy. Ewald found his certificate of promotion replete with Nazi symbols, signed by Adolf Hitler. The clear value-based choice his grandfather made to participate in the Nazi regime was crystallized for Ewald at the Jerusalem retirement home when he met the daughter of a former high-ranking German Jewish judge.

"She told me that her father, who was about 20 years older than my grandfather, was a famous and respected judge in the Supreme Court of Berlin," Ewald told *In Jerusalem* over Skype. "In contrast to the story of my grandfather, her father decided in 1933 when Nazis came into power that he couldn't work in the system."

Her father eventually immigrated to Palestine.

MAYA LEVY (formerly Maya Woock), a Berlin resident who married an Israeli last summer, similarly received scant information about her family's Nazi history in her youth.

Growing up in the small town of Eckernförde near Kiel in northern Germany, Levy knew from family testimony that her paternal grandfather was drafted into the Nazi army at age 17. Efforts to track down where he was stationed through Deutsche Dienststelle, a government agency housing records regarding the fate of Nazi soldiers, produced only a letter listing her grandfather's army ID number and tank unit, which was named after Gestapo founder Hermann Goering.

Never close to her grandfather, who died when she was a teenager, Levy never asked him directly about his service, a self-imposed censorship common in German households. It was in her grandfather's old age, when he began to suffer from dementia, that he told her uncle that he had participated in the crackdown on the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, an assertion she could not verify. She recalled a telling moment that gave her some insight into his state-of-mind as a teenage Nazi soldier.

"When he was going through dementia, he was lying on the couch and singing old songs from the Hitler Youth," Levy said from her home in Berlin. "And of course these songs were terrible."

On her mother's side, her great-grandfather claimed

Berlin resident Maya Levy (left) with Israeli husband Micky and his 'yekke' grandmother Lisa. (Maya Levy)

to have been a medic, while a cousin claimed to have seen a picture of him in an SS uniform. Levy has yet to determine the truth.

SABINE AKABAYOV, 41, spent summers in Israel as a volunteer at archeological digs and eventually came back to study chemistry at the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot. Today, she lives in Omer, near Beersheba, with her Israeli husband and son.

She was aware from her father, who despised Nazis, that her paternal grandfather had joined the Nazi party early on, in the 1920s. She knew he worked at a railway station in Austria, but in what capacity and for what "goods" – human or not – she's unsure.

In her hometown of Essen, her family discussed the topic openly, unlike in most German households, but in-depth research requires extensive travel, time and money, and the process of genealogical research as it relates to National Socialism was never encouraged or detailed in school.

"We did learn about the Holocaust; that is a subject that we studied almost every year, but we never made this connection to our own family," Akabayov said from her home. "It was always 'the Nazis' from back then, and there was never this connection about what my family did during that time."

Levy experienced a similar historical-personal disconnect in elementary and high school.

"I've always had a problem with this in history class," Levy said. "We talked about 'Germans' and 'the Nazis' and never connected it to our families. So I asked the teacher: 'What happened here? What happened in this little town?' And he was not from there, and I'm not originally from there, but the kids around me got really offended and nervous and tried to explain that there were no Jews, and their grandparents anyway were farmers and fishermen and didn't know what was going on in Berlin far away."

A Google search turned up no Jewish presence in Eckernförde, but an Auschwitz survivor who spoke at her husband's family reunion in the United States mentioned that she was from her town, raising even more questions whose answers are not simple to find.

Germans undertaking research into their family's probable Nazi past must be brave, independent and often patient self-starters.

DURING CASUAL conversations with a few Germans in their 30s and 40s, this reporter received some typical responses to the often uncomfortable question: "Where was your grandfather during the war?"

"They lived in the countryside and thought it would pass."

"The only way he could realize his dream to become a pilot was to join the German air force. He was a teenager and didn't think about ideology."

"They were pacifists and opposed the Nazis."

Berlin-based historian Johannes Spohr shares family photos: (left) Grandfather Rudolf Spohr, part of the Wehrmacht elite, as an orderly officer in the army high command in 1942; Rudolf and Eva Spohr in Nordenham, March 1942. (Photos: Spohr family)

"They served in the Wehrmacht, so they were clean."

According to *Grandpa Wasn't a Nazi*, a definitive book on the subject of intergenerational examination of family Nazi histories (originally published in 2002 and now in its ninth edition), revisionist oral history towards a family's personal involvement in the Nazi regime has been a marked trend, and published in English as an essay by the American Jewish Committee.

In their study consisting of interviews of German families, the authors found a discrepancy between a general revulsion to Nazi crimes and acknowledgment of wrongdoing on the part of their parents or grandparents. In the majority of cases, interviewees would whitewash or deny their grandparents' roles as supporters and perpetrators, turning them into victims of Nazi tyranny, heroes of resistance, or non-actors ignorant of Nazi crimes against the Jews and other victims of Nazism.

"In general, grandchildren do not research the history of their grandparents in detail," said one of the book's co-authors, Dr. Sabine Moller, a senior lecturer in history at Humboldt University, Berlin.

"You have an unclear image of what kind of people they were. And you have a very clear definition and experience about your grandparents in the present – that they're really nice people who went to the zoo with you, took care of you. It's a psychological process to transfer this image from the present to the past into the historical context of National Socialism."

She believes third-generation descendants of the Nazi period are more amenable to in-depth family research in part because of their physical and emotional distance from the potential perpetrators. Moller has noticed that historical family documents and paraphernalia often emerge when family members clear out personal belongings and boxes of the deceased, which means that the lack of first-person testimonies is compensated by increasing readiness on the part of descendants to examine secondary sources. Moller herself has yet to undertake in-depth genealogical family research.

THE PROCESS should begin with local and family sources, according to Dr. Stefanie Jost, head of the unit at the Bundesarchiv (Federal Archives) that handles records from the period that includes the Third Reich.

"I would advise people starting their research to go first to the place where their ancestors lived to find out within the communal administration if there is information," Jost said, adding that local registries generally keep record of relocations and political party affiliations.

"Of course not all records have survived; especially because of World Wars I and II, a lot of materials have been destroyed. So this is one of the most important things we have to tell people who do family research: there is no guarantee of finding what they are looking for."

She has noticed an increased interest in genealogical research in recent years. On average, she receives 30 to 40 requests daily from Germans seeking information about their parents and grandparents.

"They say, 'Now that my father has died, I'm free to ask questions to which I never got an answer while he was alive.'" As a motivation, some say that they prefer "cruel certainty over this uncertainty."

WHICH RAISES the question: Is there a "crueler certainty"? Is there a hierarchy of Nazi crimes? Is there a moral difference, say, between serving at an army desk job, flying bomber planes over European cities, or shooting a Jew point-blank that might mitigate a family's complicity in the Nazi war machine?

A 1995 traveling German exhibition titled "War of Annihilation: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941 to 1944" shattered the once widespread notion that rank-and-file soldiers forcibly drafted into the army for perceived conventional warfare were somehow less tainted by war crimes than SS and Gestapo soldiers involved directly in genocide. The exhibition, controversial at the time, documented mistreatment of POWs, forced labor and the killing of civilian populations.

These questions accompanied Johannes Spohr, a Berlin-based historian, as he researched his grandfather's service in the high command of the army during the Nazi occupation of Ukraine. Upon his grandfather's death in 2006, Spohr intensified his family research while interning at the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial, which conducts seminars on the topic of coping with a family's Nazi past.

"You could see he was really proud," Spohr said in a telephone interview about his grandfather. "He also wrote that he knew about the destruction of the Jews, and he was part of the elite of the Wehrmacht. For me, it's important to say the Wehrmacht participated in the Holocaust, and they gave orders that were part of a war of extermination. And there was no evidence he had problems doing his job."

Speaking publicly about his grandfather's past generated backlash from residents of the town where his grandfather eventually became a prominent figure. Some people defended him as a resister, arguing he was forced to serve on pain of torture or execution. After the war, his grandfather was able to shed his Nazi image, which Spohr attributes to the same opportunism that propelled him up the Nazi ranks. He doesn't buy the argument that he had no choice.

"It's a very easy excuse to say 'they would've been killed,' but having the evidence, you can see this was mostly not the case. Maybe they were sent to some other unit, maybe they had a harder time at work."

Spohr hopes that future examination of National Socialism will involve bridging the gap between widely known historical information and personal family historical information.

"Today, German society is often seen as the 'world champion' in dealing with the National Socialist past. For me, the first step is simply to recognize this as a myth."

GERMANS MIGHT be afraid to confront family history – not only because of the positive image they would like to maintain of family and relatives, but because of their own self-image. For Levy, however, the process actually contributed to healthy self- and moral awareness, and she hopes more Germans will follow in her footsteps.

"For me it's not only what you did in the war; it's also how you dealt with it afterwards," she said. "If my grandparents had actually seen that it was a mistake and maybe asked for forgiveness and done something

(Left) Berlin's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. (Artfully Media/Sven Christian Schramm)

Memorial at the Grunewald deportation site in Berlin. (Orit Arfa)

to make it up, that would be different, but they never did."

She has forgiven her grandmother, who described herself as a young refugee struggling toward the end of the war, and whose immediate, subsequent concern was raising her family of seven children. But even if older generations demonstrate little or no compunction, she takes comfort in knowing that Nazi crimes are not passed onto the next generations.

"I would tell them that I don't think our generation is guilty, but I think we have a responsibility and this is easier to accept," she said. "Because what do you do with guilt? It's a terrible feeling that blocks you from doing anything. I think responsibility is more positive – you can also choose how much you do."

For her part, Levy volunteered in Israel, where she studied Hebrew with a partner – who eventually became her husband, Micky. In Berlin, she is active in the Germany-Israel Association to promote Israel. She believes acknowledging family participation in the Nazi war machine and particularly the Holocaust would naturally lead to pro-Israel sentiment.

"If you know your family is personally connected to this, you can't deny anymore that Israel is necessary."

Akabayov, a convert to Judaism, agrees that doing family research without ascribing self-blame is crucial to personal as well as national healing. As for her father, he was able to separate his love for her grandfather as a father and his hatred for him as a member of the Nazi party.

"I got rid of the guilt when I came to Israel, and I met a really nice family from Efrat," she said. "The grandmother was deported to one of the camps from Holland, and she actually told me that I'm not guilty. She told me her story; she was so nice and I saw that it's not me. I saw that if people affected directly don't blame me, then I could detach myself from this guilt and be more open about it."

Ewald is going back to Israel this March to visit the friends he made during his formative year volunteering at the retirement home, where he was warmly welcomed.

"I think people have this fear," he said, "but for me, I make a clear cut between myself and what my grandfather did, because I say: I'm not guilty for his part, but it's still part of my family history, and as a family member I should know about it."

In March, at the Levy extended wedding celebration in Israel, Levy's grandmother will for the first time meet Micky's grandmother, the German-Jewish Holocaust survivor. The grandmothers are both looking forward to it.

"My grandmother said she had no problem with me marrying an Israeli," Levy said. "Actually, she loves him."