

Willing to face the past

How some Germans use albums to close the pages of Nazi-era family history
Text and photos by Orit Arfa

AT THE weekly antique flea market in Berlin, Christoph Kreutzmueller, a Holocaust historian and curator for the new permanent exhibition of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, picked up a Nazi-era family album at random from a book stand, fascinated not by the black and white pictures that were there – but by those that weren't.

"They're all torn out," he said, pointing to a page consisting only of tear marks whose residue reveals the side of a tank and soldiers posing on a Mercedes. The "war" page?

The album, however, opens with a picture of paradise: a German couple with their nude toddlers are picnicking in a lush forest. As for the rest, most photos have been rearranged, out of order.

"There's the innocent reading that [the album owner] hated the war and didn't want to think of it anymore," Kreutzmueller said of the reason for the missing pictures. "The biased, 'mean' reading is that perhaps they showed murder. I think that he really didn't want to think of war anymore because the remnants that you see are not of fighting."

In another album from the same vendor (collected from an apartment liquidated upon the resident's passing), photos are neatly organized and labeled. They, too, open with "paradise" – a Nazi government-sponsored outing amid beautiful landscapes in May 1938. In October that same year, the month in which Germany began to deport its Polish Jews, the matriarch and patriarch celebrate their silver wedding anniversary. A few pages later, in 1940, the living room is newly adorned with a radio, the tool for Nazi propaganda nicknamed, "Goebbels' Schnauze" (Goebbels' snout).

"There's another living room where you could see good old Adolf Hitler under the light bulb, so he's lit," Kreutzmueller said, noticing the tiny, mustached figure in the framed photograph on the wall.

Later, grooms appear in Wehrmacht uniforms at their respective weddings, and then from the war front. One son seemed to have sent a photograph from Russia in September 1941 – Kreutzmueller surmised that he had just been awarded the Iron Cross.

According to photo-historian Sandra Starke, who co-curated the 2009 traveling exhibit on Wehrmacht photo albums, "Focus on Strangers," the Nazi regime encouraged amateur photography, in part so Germans could record for posterity how nice life was under Hitler's reign.





Christoph Kreutzmueller views
old albums found at a flea market

“They supported the camera factories, made the prices low, made competitions, courses, training, how-to books,” said Starke at her home in Berlin. She opened such how-to books whose guidelines included: avoid levity while wearing a Nazi uniform; capture various angles of the perfect “Aryan” profile; do not include portraits with “racially inferior” friends. During wartime, the men usually took the cameras to the battlefields.

HOW FAMILY photos from the Nazi-era are being maintained and kept today can give insight into how second to fourth generation Nazi-era Germans come to grips – or not – with possible family involvement in Hitler’s murderous, tyrannical regime. These two flea market albums represent two approaches to the past: torn and “untouched.”

According to Michaela Buckel, project manager for March of Life, an organization that includes descendants of German Wehrmacht soldiers and Gestapo and SS members who seek personal reconciliation with Nazi victims and their descendants, most German families keep albums in their homes ignored. Among some of her friends, portraits of grandparents hang in the living rooms, sometimes in Wehrmacht uniform.

“What you normally won’t find are family pictures in SS uniform,” Buckel tells *The Jerusalem Report*. “In that case, it’s more likely these photos are taken from the album, or the badges and insignia are blackened. Photo albums are rarely hidden. Often you just do not look at them.”

Most German families, Buckel says, often tell stories of their own “victimhood” – air raids, fallen soldiers, prisoners-of-war.

“I’d say from experience that there is definitely a difference between how the national German government commemorates and memorializes the Holocaust and how individual families recognize the role their families played in the destruction/war,” she says. “Today, most people in Germany would agree with the statement that the Nazis were criminals and the Holocaust a genocide without comparison. But they will not likely link that to their own families. Because you learn about the Holocaust in history with all its atrociousness, you can’t



link it to the great-grandfather whom you love and know as a kind man.”

March of Life was founded by Pastor Jobst Bittner of TOS Ministries, which in American terms is a Christian Evangelical ministry, based in Tübingen in southern Germany – a city that once boasted a high concentration of avowed Nazi party members. Several years ago, Bittner encouraged his congregants to inquire into their family’s history during the Nazi era. With the Holocaust generation dying out, most families must rely on family albums for clues if they did not receive firsthand accounts.

UNTIL HE heeded his pastor’s call, Friedhelm Chmell, 40, felt indifference on obligatory visits to concentration camps.

“It never really touched my heart, so I never felt anything,” Chmell, a hospital nurse, said via Skype from his home in Tübingen. “I felt a little bit sorry, but it was nothing personal.”

As a young adult, Klaus Schock, 47, a March of Life member from a small village near Tübingen, never wanted to “touch” his family’s role in the war years.

“In Germany, normally in school, you go into detail about Nazi times and the Nazi regime, and about the Third Reich,” Schock said. “For me, it was like something that had nothing to do with my life. I was wondering why do we learn about this. It was a terrible time, so what? I wasn’t really interested.”

According to the oral history of Chmell’s family, his maternal grandfather worked at an army desk job, literally. Two pictures of him in uniform were assembled as part of a family album arranged by his uncle: one of

A worn photograph in a family album shows a portrait of Hitler hanging over the table in the home of Friedhelm Chmell’s grandfather in Thuringia

him writing a letter at a desk and another of him posing on the balcony at his Antwerp office.

“I always saw this picture with this office and everything seemed so peaceful,” Chmell said. “We don’t want to see behind all these nice stories and pictures they gave us. My whole family didn’t ask further, ‘What did he really do?’”

With the support of his wife, but not his siblings, Chmell became a sleuth. His investigation led him to Antwerp, Belgium, where, through Google Street View, he scoured balconies from the vantage point of the skyscraper in the photo. He eventually found the building where his grandfather posed and soon learned what it had housed.

“During World War II, it was the main headquarters of the Deutsche Wehrmacht in Antwerp, and then I searched for what the Deutsche Wehrmacht exactly did there.”

His grandfather’s department was responsible for summoning Antwerp’s 20,000 Jews for deportation.

“When I found out this fact, it broke my heart,” Chmell said, teary-eyed. “For the first time, I could see the truth about my family. I always thought there was nothing bad in my family, and maybe my family never killed a Jew, but he was one of the main people responsible in this office and he’s responsible for 20,000 Jews. They went straight to Auschwitz.”

Klaus Schock, a physicist, decided, on

Bittner's call, to open the lids of boxes with albums, letters and even army medals that had been shelved in his grandparents' home.

At first, when he asked his parents about his paternal grandfather's service under the Nazi regime, they said, dismissively, that he had been a Nazi Stormtrooper (the paramilitary wing of the Nazi party) for a brief period. Documents and pictures revealed the facts: his grandfather enlisted in the stormtroopers in 1932 and then renounced his Nazi-party membership to become a professional soldier for the next 12 years.

His grandfather's album from France could be mistaken for that of a vacation: he took photographs of the Eiffel Tower and other French landmarks that suddenly became the Nazis' playground. But the war of annihilation and aggression was on full, organized display in the "Russia album."

Via Skype, Schock opened the album and showed neat, labeled titles of images of dead Russian soldiers – some in a ditch, some being hanged.

"I realized he must have seen a lot of things. Normally I'm a scientist and I'm more rational, but it shocked me."

The grandparents of Chmell and Schock are no longer living, but Schock recalls his encounters with his grandfather as a young boy.

"As long as I've known him, he just lived in the house nearby together with my grandma, and so when I had to decide to go to the military or to civil service, he always wanted me to go the military, and he was a passionate soldier," Schock said. "He never talked about, say, Nazi philosophy or ideology; but looking back, I would say he never regretted it, and I don't think he realized what he really did, what kind of murdering he did."

Their respective processes of coming to terms with their families' history, rare among their peer group, have changed both their lives. Today, Chmell and Schock are staunch Israel supporters, fighting modern antisemitism as expressed in hostility toward Israel, propelled both by a sense of obligation they feel toward the Jewish people and their Christian faith.

March of Life members believe face-to-face apologies by the descendants of Nazi perpetrators to Nazi victims, as opposed to

national proclamations, could most effectively facilitate healing and reconciliation. In their marches across Europe, at sites of attempted Jewish genocide they often connect with Holocaust survivors and their progeny, but one of Chmell's most meaningful encounters occurred spontaneously in Israel.

"In May, I was in Jerusalem and went on a tram, and met someone who was the same age as me. His grandparents were collected at Antwerp and sent to Auschwitz, and one of them survived. That is one reason why I could meet him, and we connected on WhatsApp and I said I'm sorry about what my grandparents did to your family. It was such a special moment."

Schock believes he became a "softer," more emphatic person. "Looking into my family's past, it also revealed prejudice, racism and antisemitism inside of me. I realized that I am not better than my grandfather; I could have done the same things. That was shocking for me. But this opened the way that I could repent."

He and his wife of seven years never wanted children – until he visited Israel for the first time.

"Before the trip, I realized something must be wrong with me but I couldn't figure out why I was so afraid to be a father.

When I came back from Israel, suddenly all the fear somehow disappeared."

Back at the flea market, inside the "untouched" family album, photographs become sparse after 1942 and virtually non-existent from 1943, the year in which Hitler's downfall begins with his defeat at Stalingrad. The idyll disintegrates. A downed plane appears in September 1942. Women pose in front of an air raid shelter. Men are back home, holding canes, presumably injured. Finally, the end: a small boy standing in ruins, leaving no progeny, as it were, to safeguard the album and family legacy.

As their WhatsApp profile pictures, Chmell and Schock each proudly display family portraits – their own family albums won't be sold to the highest bidder at a flea market. Chmell loves taking family pictures.

"To show how I love my family, to show that our lives – mine and my wife's – have been changed totally, to remember all our family past but also to say our kids belong to the new generation." ■

Friedhelm Chmell holds up photographs of Wehrmacht headquarters in Antwerp and his grandfather on a balcony opposite

