

“Don’t tell anyone!”

ATLE HETLAND
EN ROUTE

Earlier this month, a book written by Randi Crott, with her mother Lillian Crott Berthung, was published in Norwegian. The original German title of the book is “Erzaehl es niemandem!” In Norwegian, “Ikke si det til noen!”, which in English reads, “Don’t tell anyone!”. The main author is a German journalist, who tells the life story of her mother, who is now 91 years old. Her husband Helmut Crott was a German soldier in Norway during World War II and Lillian became his fiancé, and after the war, his wife. They lived secret lives during the war, although in the small north Norwegian town of Harstad people knew, or suspected the illicit relationship. Even after the war, part of Helmut’s identity was kept secret in his homeland.

In Norway, Lillian’s best friend, the ‘kind aunt’ and other relatives did not want to admit the truth; that two young people had fallen in love, yes, in spite of what was socially and politically acceptable. The Norwegians were all against it; and the Germans did not encourage it.

Helmut Crott’s deepest secret was that he was of mixed Jewish background, which was only revealed when his daughter was a grown-up woman. There were many ex-Nazi sympathizers in high posts that time, and it was safer not to tell anyone about his background. Had it been discovered during the war, he would have been sent home and liquidated.

After the war, when Lillian finally was allowed to travel to Germany, the Norwegian state took away her nationality and she gained a German passport. In the first years after the war, the border with Norway was sealed for visitors from Germany. It took the couple two years to locate each other and Lillian. They then married in 1948, and in 1951, their daughter Randi was born. Over the years, the family visited Norway almost every summer, and restrictions died off in the late 1950s. Today, relations between the two countries are excellent.

Helmut Crott passed away four years ago, and was buried in Norway. After all, that is where they met and that is where they want their final resting place to be. Gone are the days when people in the small town of Harstad spat at the “tyskertoes”, or the German soldier’s tart, as people said in despise. There was indeed injustice and cruel treatment of innocent people, as I will explain below – even in Norway, a land where human rights are held high, and the land where the United Nations found its first Secretary-General from 1946-52, namely Trygve Lie.

In my columns, I write about issues of relevance to Pakistani readers, and often I refer to issues in other country I know well, my home country Norway. Readers may think that that land is the closest you can come to ‘heaven on earth’! Today’s story reveals that that is not the case in all matters.

True, Norway’s economy is good, with good systems for redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poorer segments of the population. The education and health systems are excellent. The justice system is among the best in the world, with fair and humane treatment of everyone, irrespective of who one is, how one lives, and what one believes about religious or secular issues.

All this lies deep in the conscience of the minds and hearts of the people and the institutions in Norway and the neighbouring Nordic countries – as it does in other countries.

But it wasn’t always like that. There are black spots even in Norway’s recent history, scarlet stains on our conscience and our reputation. Today’s story about the way Lillian Crott and her soldier

fiancé shows that – a young woman and young man, who by chance indulged in what was seen as ‘forbidden love’. The young were treated badly during war when Norway was occupied by Nazi Germany from 1940-45. Even the children born to such mothers were treated badly, kept socially apart, even ostracized throughout their childhood into adulthood. There were over 8,000 children born to Norwegian mothers and German fathers during the war, plus the Nazi programme named ‘Lebensborn’, about which a German film has recently been released and the famous Norwegian actress Liv Ullmann nominated for the German ‘Oscar’ award.

It can be useful to know the sad Norwegian war history – especially for the five million Norwegians themselves, but also for the several hundred thousand immigrants in the land today, including almost forty thousand of Pakistani background. It can be useful to reflect on this ‘history of intolerance’ in Norway for people in Pakistan and in other countries, where there is still a long way to go to reach equality and justice for all, and where countries like Norway often point a finger when human rights abuses occur, and when there is lack of equality, freedom and justice.

Good to know then that at the bottom, intuitively, if we are not swayed by political, social and even religious intolerance, human beings everywhere know what it is right and what is wrong. Ordinary Pakistanis know what is right, as do ordinary Norwegians.

But sometimes, like during the war in Norway, people ‘forgot’. Today, the American state and many other countries forget what is ethically and morally right in the ‘war on terror’ – and I fear, even in Syria if bombs will be used there, too. In Pakistan, religious groups sometimes interpret blasphemy and other concepts and laws, especially against women, in ways that are not in line with God’s word. Sometimes, we may get so used to certain forms of injustice that we so no longer intuitively distinguish between right and wrong.

It was easy for Norwegian women to develop friendships with German soldiers during the war. They were victimized more than private businessmen who carried out work for the occupying forces. There were up to three hundred thousand German soldiers and administrators in Norway during the war in a land which had just about three million inhabitants that time. About one-tenth of the Norwegians were members of the Nazi Party (NS) and many more were sympathizers. In areas with high numbers of young German soldiers it was inevitable that some Norwegian girls would fancy them, maybe even feeling sorry for them having to stay in a foreign land for years. Some girls would go out with the German soldiers and some became pregnant at a time when out-of-wedlock births were seen as scandals, not to speak of if it was suspected or known that the father was a German soldier. Abortion was illegal and uncommon. Most girls would give up their babies. In many cases, the girl’s mother would raise the child, or perhaps another relative, while the girl herself moved away to another town or city where nobody knew her.

I was born the same year as the author the book, Randi Crott. My father had been active in the resistance movement and was at the Nazi-prison at Grini in Oslo during the last year of the war. But he never spoke a bad word about the Germans, and I had the privilege of growing up in a tolerant home. When I in 1967 went to Germany for language studies, my parents were very supportive.

I should remind myself, though, that no one can take credit for or be blamed for their backgrounds, positive or negative. It is inexplicable that so many Norwegians were so hard on many Norwegian girls who had ‘stepped wrong’, and indeed, the way children were treated. As late as in the mid-1970s, I remember that a fellow student was pushed out of the university course we were taking because some righteous students suspected that his parents had sympathized with the Nazis during the war. Such intolerance is intolerable!

I am very glad that “Don’t tell anyone” has been published in Norway, and even more, that it has become an instant bestseller. That shows that we are finally able to reflect on injustice in our near past. It comes too late for the victims. Yet, it gives me renewed hope and trust in my fellow human beings. May we all draw the lessons from this piece of history that are relevant to us in the land and community where we live.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid