

How my path grew out of my father's

I was born in 1954. I was born to a father who was an unwelcome displaced person after having lost his beloved homeland of Silesia, without any hope for return, having lost one beloved brother in the war in Italy and the other brother on the Eastern Front, and having lost his father who died out of grief over his lost farm. My father even lost part of his body, one arm. Having seen the atrocities committed in the name of Germany, he also lost his sense of belonging to any kind of German identity. Until his last day, my father would say, 'I am a Silesian, I am not German. Germany has destroyed my life, Hitler has raped me'.

When I was a child, I remember that he was quiet and introvert, sitting over history books in the early mornings before going to work, trying to fathom the terrible German trajectory and understand what made him resist it as much as was in his power from the time he was a youth. He wanted to come to terms with his own fate that he was thrown into at an age when he was not yet able to understand the bigger picture, let alone justify why he resisted. In the afternoons, he worked in the garden with his one arm. He had a prosthesis, but he could not wear it because it was just a painful hindrance for him. The prosthetic technology was not yet evolved enough at his time.

There was no television in the house when I grew up, and the Internet was still many decades away. However, as a teacher, my father had access to a film screening machine and to celluloid movies that were used in the school lessons. During school vacations, he made the enormous effort of bringing this heavy machine and some of the films to the village where my family lived, and this despite the handicap of having only one arm and not having a car. These were profoundly thought-provoking films that deeply influenced the rest of my life. [1]

Many decades later, I came back to my father to interview him directly, to learn to see through his eyes how it was possible for the Nazi regime to take power in Germany. My aim was to get a sense of this historical tragedy as if I had experienced it personally.

Despite his physical disability, my father was psychologically the strongest in the family — in a way, he was mother and father in one person. My mother, also deeply traumatised by war and expulsion, was like his first child, before me and my two younger siblings.

My father read in the Bible daily. All over the world, uprooted people tend to seek refuge from their suffering in religious faith, and my family was not exempt — if dignity is absent on Earth, at least heaven can offer it. Sadly, what was meant to remedy primary war damage led to secondary and tertiary war damage. Four groups emerged in the family that hurt each other, sometimes deeply and existentially. On one pole of the spectrum was a rather dogmatic religious group, in the middle a somewhat less dogmatic religious group, followed by an even less dogmatic group, with a somewhat uninterested group at the other pole of the spectrum.

The first group was formed in Bavaria. My father's eldest sister had been an intelligence officer

in Belgium during the war, and when the American troops arrived in Belgium at the end of the war, she worked for them, following them into the American zone in Bavaria. After the war, at first her whereabouts were unknown to the rest of the family, but in 1946, with the help of the Red Cross, she located her family who had been deported from Silesia to northern Germany.

The eldest sister found lodgings for the younger one in the house of Jehovah's Witnesses, a choice she later bitterly regretted, as three siblings and the mother were successfully recruited into this sect. These siblings formed the first group, which ultimately meant the break with the rest of the family.

My parents formed the second group. Before I was born, my parents had been converted in a so-called *Zeltmission* (tent revival) and saw themselves as born-again Christians, which my mother, however, interpreted more dogmatically than my father.

As a child and adolescent, I formed the third group, alone, which put me into an extremely difficult position. It meant my psycho-social 'expulsion' into extreme isolation, both within my family and outside of it — I was cast out not only from humanity but also from the kingdom of God, such was my sense of self. It was only in the cemetery that I felt at home, at least to some extent. I knew that even suicide would not offer a way out, as I would remain rejected by God even after death. One could call this ordeal a tertiary war injury. I survived my childhood and adolescence only with extraordinary perseverance.

So, where do I come from? Do I come from Silesia? No. Do I come from Lower Saxony? No. Do I come from Poland? No. Do I come from Germany? No. I come from expulsion, from my parents' expulsion from their homeland and from my own personal experience of psycho-social religious expulsion. I come from the stories my father told of his lost farm, of his family's lost agricultural lands and forests — until his last day, he yearned 'to go home'. So, where do I come from? I come from the deep awareness that nothing is certain, that war can destroy what seems to be sure in the blink of an eye. I come from multiple cross-generational experiences of humiliation, from a family who was considered less than human by some when I was young, from the sense that I belonged nowhere, that there was no 'right to return' to anywhere.

I come from boundless grief over a world where competition for domination is being idealised, where mutual care matters little, a world, in which we, as humanity, squander our energy, enthusiasm, and creativity on fighting each other and fighting nature. I come from a deep desire to belong, to belong to people who look at this planet with awe, wonderment, and loving and tender kindness, to people who refuse to live for money or self-righteousness, to people who live for the joy that comes from seeing, nurturing, and taking delight in our existential connectedness with all life.

After graduating from high school, I continued with the geographical expulsion of my family — that is how one might call it — by moving out into the world. For many years, until I was forty-five years old, I did not feel that I was a 'legitimate' human being, I did not feel that I had a place

as a member of humanity. My failure to have children, and a chronic disease compounded this sense. It was not until I had lived globally for more than twenty-five years that my sense of ‘belonging nowhere’ slowly transmuted into ‘belonging everywhere’.

Especially Norway became important for me. I first came to Norway in 1977 and was later married to a Norwegian for a few years. I realised that the Norwegian cultural heritage of *likeverd* (worthiness) and *dugnad* (community responsibility) — both in the form of local and global responsibility (see Nansen Passport) — is my home. I learned to see that this cultural heritage is more valuable than all the oil Norway possesses. *Likeverd* and *dugnad* reflect the motto of the French Revolution — *liberté, égalité, fraternité* — a motto that is also expressed in the ideals of human rights.

My life has turned out to become a project, a calling, a mission, a mission for equal dignity for all in mutual solidarity. I feel proud of all cultural achievements that humankind has ever attained, and at the same time, I also feel ashamed of all the atrocities humans have ever perpetrated in the world, be it atrocities committed by Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, or any other oppressor. I feel what philosopher Karl Jaspers called the metaphysical responsibility to work for ‘never again’, and this not just in one locality, I feel this responsibility everywhere on our planet, and on behalf of all of humanity — never again mass destruction through systemic and systematic humiliation, be it through war on people or on nature.

After almost fifty years of global living, I feel that what I call *big love* is the only way out of the erosion of social cohesion and the destruction of ecosystems — *big love* meaning communal responsibility embedded in respect for equal dignity for all, in freedom to engage in mutual solidarity.

So, in the end, my various displacements have given me a home — I am at home in the values of community responsibility and solidarity, embedded in loving respect for the dignity of all living beings on the entire planet.

Just saying ‘never again’ is nozeltt enough, what is needed is ‘wehret den Anfängen’, ‘resist the beginnings’, this was my father’s continuous warning. It is too late when the ‘Hitlers’ of this world, the ruthless dominators, have gained power. Their ascendance must be prevented, not just individually but systemically. My global life arose from the insight that it is our responsibility to use the lessons of the past to do everything in our power to help the world turn around in the future. My father gave everything in his power, and he did not give up even though he was painfully aware that his efforts were insufficient. I follow him. I sacrifice my entire life and I, too, continue even while being painfully aware that my efforts might be wasted.

[1] These are the films that would deeply influence my entire life:

- *Der Schlaf der Gerechten* (‘Thesleep of the just’), a film showing how the persecution of Jews became ‘normalised’, and how a butcher’s wife tried to fight back. See

www.imdb.com/title/tt0056453/.

- *Meine Ehre heißt Treue* ('My honoris loyalty'), a film showing the methods of the SS. See youtu.be/jsfn0YDa5jw.

- *In jenen Tagen* ('In those days'), the rise and fall of the Nazi regime told by following the owners of a car. See

youtu.be/1DukQ5tlfGU.

- *Ein Tag* ('One day'), a film about one day in the concentration camp. See

youtu.be/94_gvbFGdg0.

- *Hunde, wollt Ihr ewig leben* ('Dogs, do you want to live forever?'), a film about the Battle of Stalingrad (23rd August 1942–2nd February 1943). See youtu.be/SG98ZvMvuM0.

- *Die Brücke* ('The Bridge'), a film about a school class who was ordered to defend a bridge in the last days of the

war. See youtu.be/t-z0-dFst4c.

- *Die Wunderkinder* ('The wonderkids'), a film about two schoolmates in the first half of the 20th century. See

youtu.be/SGBVB3KBpN8.