

Ursula Hien, Hamburg

A balancing act between memory and knowledge

Review of

Norbert Lebert, Stephan Lebert, „Denn Du trägst meinen Namen“. Das schwere Erbe prominenter Nazi-Kinder. [“Because you are Bearing my Name.” Children of well-known Nazis and their Difficult Legacy], München, Karl Blessing Verlag, 2000. 224 p.

“You have a difficult path to follow, for you bear my name,” wrote Hans Frank, former Governor General of Nazi-occupied Poland, to his oldest son Norman in a letter written before Frank himself embarked on his most difficult journey. In the night hours of 15/16 October 1946, Frank was executed as a Nazi war criminal.

More than fifty years later, these words reappeared in a different place: “*Denn Du trägst meinen Namen*” is the title of a book about the children of prominent Nazis published in 2000. The volume brings together two collections of reports. The first, authored by journalist Norbert Lebert, is based on interviews conducted in the 1950s with the children of high-ranking Nazis and was originally published in that decade under the same title as the present volume. The second is a collection of texts written by Lebert’s son Stephan, who resolved to continue his father’s interview work in the late 1980s and to undertake “a trip in time, through a good handful of fates”.

Flashback, 1959/60: It is 13 years since the end of the Nuremberg War Trials; the Auschwitz trials will begin in six years and finally trigger a public debate in Germany over the country’s Nazi past. In the period between those two dates, the West Germans are mostly preoccupied with their economic miracle and don’t care to be reminded of what preceded it.

Norbert Lebert, born 1929, is one of the many who would prefer not to remember. Once an enthusiastic leader in the Hitler Youth, Lebert perceived the end of the war as a “great defeat” and as a young adult, he avoided confronting the truth about the Nazis’ program of annihilation and crimes against humanity with the help of “diversions and money.”

Nonetheless, Norbert Lebert knows that “had the war ended differently, I would have had a promising career under the Nazis.” Perhaps it is his horror at realizing how close he came to himself becoming a perpetrator that led him to investigate the biographies of people who, like himself, were indoctrinated as children with Nazi ideology.

In 1959, at the age of thirty, Lebert began contacting the children of Nazi war criminals. Writing in the magazine *Weltbild*, he described his visits and what had become of Gudrun Himmler, Martin Bormann, Robert von Schirach, Wolf-Rüdiger Heß, Edda Göring, and Niklas and Norman Frank in the fifteen years since the end of the war.

These portraits create a lasting impression of the rupture which split the lives of these young people into two parts. At first there was their childhood during the “Third Reich”, during which their well-known names guaranteed them wealth and security and the feeling that they were someone special; then, the years after 1945, the loss of their fathers, of family wealth and property, the separation from their mothers, who were in prison for various lengths of time, and last but not least the experience that their family name now evoked rejection or even aversion, as in the case of the daughter of Heinrich Himmler, the former head of the SS.

Long stays in prisons and camps and the repeated experience of having her applications for admission to job training or for employment rejected because of her name turned Gudrun

Himmler into an extremely distrustful young woman, according to Norbert Lebert in his 1959 portrait. But she had also become a woman who refused to question the father she “tenderly” love; a woman one who had vowed to fight for his rehabilitation and who insisted, in a mixture of rebelliousness and stubbornness, on keeping the name that often proved to be to her disadvantage.

Finally, she did give up the name, but not the father. Masked behind the name of her husband, she today heads the “Stille Hilfe” [Quiet Aid], an organization which has devoted itself to helping former Nazi war criminals go underground or get off with light sentences if brought to trial since the early 1950s.

Stephan Lebert decided to contact his father’s former interlocutors

Stephan Lebert was quite familiar with the story of Gudrun Himmler, at the time thirty years old. “Of all the interviews he made, my father only ever talked about the one with Gudrun Himmler (...) He had felt sorry for her, sitting there in front of him (...), so thin and transparent.” When the journalist heard what had become of the woman known to her brown comrades as the “princess” and read his late father’s manuscript in 1999 for the first time, he decided to contact his father’s former interlocutors. The question that formed in his mind was: “What does it mean for this country called Germany that the perpetrators, freeloaders, accomplices of the Third Reich have children and grandchildren to whom they have passed on their aggressive feelings, their cowardice, their cruelty, their silence, their mechanisms for repression?”

Not all of the “children”, now themselves between sixty and seventy, were willing or able to recount how they had dealt with the heritage of their fathers. Robert von Schirach, for example, died in an automobile accident in the early 1970s. Gudrun Himmler ignored Stephan Lebert’s request and Edda Göring informed him through a third party that she “was at present not available (...) for a long interview. One should leave her in peace and instead take care of the relatives [of those persecuted] under the dictatorship in the GDR.”

The interviews with Wolf-Rüdiger Heß, Martin Bormann, and Niklas Frank reveal very different ways of dealing with the past. In the forty years between the two interviews, for example, Rudolf Hess’ son had become “sick, bitter, and pigheaded” a “burning admirer of Adolf Hitler,” one “who doubts whether the organized Holocaust ever took place. An anti-Semite.” Wolf-Rüdiger Heß was three years old when his father fled to England and thirty-two years old before he saw his father again, in the Allied prison in Berlin-Spandau. When Hitler’s former right-hand man died there in 1987, Wolf-Rüdiger Heß’ decades of effort aimed at effecting his father’s release shifted to efforts to portray his father’s suicide as murder. “I had no free time, my free time was all used up for my father,” was the way he summarized his life, a life devoted to “Rudolf Heß, the martyr for peace,” as he likes to call his loved, honored, and admired father.

Martin Bormann also is adamant about the fact that he has a right to love his father: “That is the image I have, as his child, I will not let that be taken away from me.” But for Bormann, in contrast to Wolf-Rüdiger Heß, childhood memories do not mean that he denies his father’s deeds or glorifies the past. As a retired teacher of religion, Bormann travels “throughout Germany, holds talks in schools and elsewhere about the dangers of National Socialism.” And he accompanies groups in which the children of Nazi perpetrators and the children of Holocaust survivors can meet. The former pupil at a Nazi *Napola* school “put himself at a great distance from his past” as early as 1959, as Norbert Lebert writes. “He became a

Christian, a priest, and a missionary. He prays (...) for his father.” For the orphaned son of Martin Bormann, his Catholic faith offered the only opportunity for tolerating the balancing act between memory and acknowledgment, between love to the person to whom he “owed his life” and the realization of his father’s guilt.

“You cannot run away from your parents, whoever they may be” is a conclusion formulated by Martin Bormann but one which also might apply to Niklas Frank. Norbert Lebert portrayed the law student, at the time twenty-one years old, as a critical young man with one central wish: to get to know his dead father. In a series of articles published in the mid-1980s, Niklas Frank presented his “day of reckoning” with his father, as the ruthless attempt to rid himself of his father’s overpowering shadow. At night, he wrote, he “often dreamed of the piles of corpses in the KZs” and not a single day went by during which he “was not forced to think of [his] father,” as he reported to Stephan Lebert. He went on: “Without a doubt, I hate my father so much because, again and again, I discover him in myself.”

Hate as a reaction to the difficulties encountered in trying to separate oneself from one’s father and from the traits which contributed so much to his career as a perpetrator. Hate also as a reaction to the fact that one is involved in the history of Nazi crimes, by virtue of one’s father. In his “reckoning”, Niklas Frank describes situations in which he was taken to the ghettos or the camps by his parents and was more than an innocent, merely observing child. So, for example, when exhausted camp prisoners were repeatedly forced to mount a wild, bucking donkey, to amuse the child—“my laughter rang out shrilly.”

An ambitious confrontation with Germany’s past

This scene illustrates a fundamental deficit of Stephan Lebert’s publication. The author’s basic hypothesis—the children of Nazi perpetrators were “connected to Germany’s bloody history by virtue of a single characteristic: their name”—falls short of the mark. It prevents Lebert from posing more in-depth questions; for example, in what ways might the children have been involved in the anti-Semitic reality of daily life in the Nazi period.

What also proved to be problematic was the fact that Stephan Lebert advocated applying a perspective based in family psychology to explore the “emotional conflict” of the children of perpetrators but did not take into consideration the role of the mother and of siblings or the entire family environment.

Lebert’s language is also double-edged. His tendency to dramatize his account and play on readers’ emotions is evident when he refers to Hans Frank as a “devil” and a “man from hell”. The use of this kind of language inadvertently promotes the demonization of the National Socialist period. In other cases, Lebert’s choice of words has a positive slant that can be quite disconcerting in this context, for example, when he characterizes the biographies recounted here as “enthraling fates” or notes that the National Socialist period is a “treasure trove” for writers and filmmakers.

But readers can also profit from Lebert’s penchant for dramatization when he retells numerous anecdotes about the links between the children of Nazis and their fathers’ former followers and thus reveals in his text how these networks spun by Nazi “old boys” continue to function.

“*Denn Du trägst meinen Namen*” is a stimulating documentation of an ambitious confrontation with Germany’s past; the author has the courage to describe how he began this undertaking rather belatedly and to re-examine his relationship to his own father’s life. And

the book is also a fitting place for Norbert Lebert's forgotten reports, especially since they represent fascinating evidence of an unusually early interest in what is now called the second generation. This interest was not rekindled until the mid-1980s, when Peter Sichrovsky and Dan Bar On conducted interviews with children from Nazi families.

In taking stock of the biographies of these "children", Stephan Lebert's conclusions are bitter. "Some exist as if they were fossilized; others, those who admit the doubts, the anger, the powerlessness, the truth, have begun something that one might call a dance on a trapeze without a net above a deep abyss. A dance for which no one knows, when and how it will end." Norman Frank, for one, has decided that he does not want to have children. He feels "that the name Frank should say goodbye to this world".

Translation from German: **Paula Bradish**

Short biographical note

Ursula Hien, M.A., studied literature, history of literature, German literature and empirical literature in Tübingen and Hamburg. She has published on the history of Jews in Hamburg and on the history of the publication of the works of Edgar Hilsenrath (including his novel "The Nazi and the barber: a tale of vengeance"). She is currently an editor at the German weekly magazine "stern" [see TRN-Newsletter 1, July 2000, and TRN-Newsletter 2, June 2004].

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