

„Run, Shifra, run!“ by Günther Schwarberg

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It is 27 years now since my wife Barbara Hüsing and I entered the cellars of the school in Bullenhuser Damm for the first time. When we came out again, a little old woman took Barbara in her arms and said: “Weeping won’t help. One has to fight.” We have never forgotten that lesson. The woman in question, Ille Wendt, is long since dead; she was a resistance fighter.

This cellar was the place where 20 Jewish children were hanged. They had been brought from Auschwitz and were aged between five and 12 years. Ten girls and ten boys. Experiments had been made on them in Neuengamme Concentration Camp near Hamburg by the SS doctor Kurt Heißmeyer. Their skin had been cut open and tuberculosis bacilli rubbed into the wounds. Later he had their lymph glands removed by operation, to discover whether antibodies had developed against the Tbc. bacilli. All this took place during the ultimate period of the war. To eradicate the living evidence of his crimes, Heißmeyer had the children hanged on 20 April 1945 and their bodies incinerated.

After the war, the school began teaching children again. Nothing was said about the murders in the cellar. The infanticide appeared forgotten. Once a year a small group of resistance fighters met to remember the children in the cellar of the school. Every year they were fewer.

I asked myself: why are you a journalist if you don’t document this story as accurately as possible? There may be parents or siblings somewhere in the world who do not know what happened to the children and are still searching for them.

Since then, we have been doing the searching. I found a list of the children’s names, their ages and their countries of origin that had been secretly compiled by another prisoner of war from Denmark. I discovered photographs of the experiments, made by an SS man. But I did not know which name belonged to which image. I had posters printed with the names and photographs of the children in several languages which I sent to the home countries of the children and to Israel.

There, in Tel Aviv, Ella Koslowski, who worked in the public prosecutor’s office, opened the package: “That’s my cousin,” she exclaimed. She wrote to me, came to Hamburg, and told her story, which leads from Berlin via Warsaw, to Auschwitz; from Bremen to Israel – and that of her six-year-old cousin Riwka Herszberg from Zdunska Wola, Poland.

Her father, Mosche Jakob Herszberg, had a small clothing factory there. He was murdered in Auschwitz. Her mother Mania survived Auschwitz and emigrated to the USA, where she remarried. When Ella Koslowski wrote to her to tell her where her child Riwka had been killed, she had just suffered a severe stroke. She was no longer able to recognize her daughter. She died soon afterwards. But Ella came to Hamburg again and again as long as she was still able to see; she became our friend. Once she brought with her a woman from Bremen, Henny Brunken, who had always slipped bread and other food to her when prisoners had to clear the rubble from the streets after a bombing raid on the town.



Ella Kozlowski, the cousin of Riwka Herszberg, with Günther Schwarberg at Riwka Herszberg Stieg

In Hamburg, Felicja Zylberberg saw the photo of her little niece Ruchla Zylberberg from Zawichost on the Weichsel, daughter of Nison Zylberberg, a shoemaker. When German troops occupied Poland, Felicja, who was pregnant, fled with her husband and with Nison across the frontier into a Soviet-occupied area. As soon as feasible, they wanted to go and collect Ruchla and her sister Esther and their mother Fajga.



Ruchla Zylberberg

But on the day they received permission, the Germans invaded the Soviet Union. The Zylberbergs were transported far away to Usbekistan in the east. There was scarcely anything to eat and Felicja's baby son died of starvation on the journey.

The Zylberbergs returned to Poland after the war. Fajga and her two children had been deported to Auschwitz. Anti-Semitism was still rife in Poland, however, and they were driven away. Felicja and her husband went to Hamburg; Nison left for New York. Forty years after the murders of the children it was there that he discovered what had happened to his daughter Ruchla. He came to Hamburg and stood silently in the place where his child had been murdered; he remained silent, silent. Three years ago he died.

Coincidences sometimes helped us. In 1983, Hamburg friends told us about their neighbor: she and her son Georg had been deported to Auschwitz with the little Italian boy, Sergio De Simone, who was on our list. Georg and Sergio had played together there.



Two women show each other numbers tattooed onto them on their arrival at Auschwitz Concentration Camp in 1944: **Gisella De Simone**, Sergio's mother, has the number 76516 and **Margarete Wilkens**, 76515. (Some publications give the mistaken numbers 765516 and 765515.) © KZ-Gedenkstätte Neuengamme, Collection Günther Schwarberg, 2002-0957

Eventually we found Sergio's mother in Naples. On 19 April 1984, we welcomed her with a bouquet of flowers at Hamburg main station. A delicate old lady descended from the sleeper car. Do you know this woman? I asked Sergio's mother, pointing to Georg's mother. She looked into her face. No, she said. The two old women pushed up the sleeves of their dresses and showed the Auschwitz numbers tattooed on their arms. Georg's mother had the number 76 515 and Sergio's mother 76 516. On 20 April 1984 Gisella de Simone stood in the place where her son died, accompanied by many German and Italian friends. When she set off back to Naples again, she said in farewell: "I do not want to believe that he is dead. I want to become very, very old, so that he has a mother, when he returns." We were very sad when she died in Naples in 1988.



Sergio De Simone with his cousins Tatiana and Alessandra on Sergio's sixth birthday, 29 November 1943. The two girls were deported to Auschwitz with Sergio in 1944.

But now we come to Sergio's two cousins, Andra and Tatiana who never wanted to speak to Germans again after Auschwitz, never read a German newspaper, never use German technology. Last year when they came to Hamburg, Andra told Barbara and me, two Germans: "We love you."

We are still finding more relatives, with ever more unbelievable stories. The story of Shifra Mor, for example. When she read about the children of Bullenhuser Damm in the Israeli newspaper Maariv, she discovered the name of her sister, Bluma Mekler. In 1998 she came to Hamburg and told us that her parents had run a country hotel opposite the town hall in the provincial town of Sandomierz in southern Poland. Her family was very pious. So pious, that her grandmother, Esther Chaja, née Adler, refused to emigrate to Argentina because it was not certain that there would be kosher food. So the Mekler family remained. Just one of Shifra's uncles emigrated and escaped the Holocaust in Argentina.



Shifra Mor in the rose garden of the memorial, 2009
© Silke Goes

In October 1942, when Shifra was five years old and her sister Bluma eight, there was a German raid in Sandomierz. Her mother screamed out: "Run, Shifra, run!" She ran. And she never saw her family again. A Polish neighbor hid her in a hole in the ground in a stable. The child remained in her damp hiding place for two and a half years, evading a second raid. After liberation, she was taken in by a Soviet officer who was Jewish and treated her as his own daughter. She weighed only eight kilos. He wanted to take her with him to Moscow and adopt her, but it was not allowed. So he brought her to a Jewish orphanage in Lublin. From there she went to the Israeli kibbutz Mischmakr Ha'emek. A German Jew, Hanna Wolf, cared for her like a mother. She was given the Hebrew name Mor, meaning myrrh.

She was almost unable to enter the cellars in Hamburg. "I thought I was a strong person and that life had made me hard. But when I stood in the cellar, I felt as if I was falling to pieces. The impression was so strong, that my whole body shuddered." The next day she was invited to a Red Cross kindergarten which is named after her sister. It was an incredible experience for her: the children asked her about her life and her brothers and sisters, they sang her Hebrew songs, and had painted pictures for her. "I said to myself: children who ask questions like that are the generation who will prevent any man-made horror like the Holocaust from ever happening again." Now scarcely a year goes by in which she does not visit us in Hamburg.



Ans van Staveren

One relative who was never in Hamburg is Ans van Staveren from Utrecht. She is the aunt of brothers Eduard and Alexander Hornemann from Eindhoven. They were deported to Auschwitz with their parents; none of them returned. Ans hid in a pig shed in a village and later in a convent. When she heard from us that her two nephews had been hanged in Hamburg and we invited her to come to the remembrance ceremony in Hamburg, she declined. "I will not travel to the country in which the murderers of my nephews remained unpunished for their murders," she said.

The man in charge of the murder squad in Bullenhuser Damm, SS Obersturmführer Arnold Strippel, was never brought to trial. Hamburg's justice system came up with a thousand explanations why. In justifying why the murders were not classified as "brutal", came the outrageous sentence: "Apart from being deprived of their lives, the children were not subjected to any further evil."

We could understand Ans' decision. But we visited her instead, on birthdays, for celebrations. She became "Tante Ans" to us. We are invited by her again for 25 July, with very many other people. Then Tante Ans will be 100.