

The Errors of Mankind

Mistaking the True Conditions for Our Well-Being

Curt A. Canfield

I no longer have the luxury of believing there are evil people and good people: these two possibilities lie very close together and this means we are all much more defenceless. You cannot simply 'screen out' the evil people. The important thing is to make sure you do not create the circumstances where this side of human nature can thrive.

~ Dan Bar-On

Extract from *Grief Encounter* by Christine Toomey

www.christinetoommey.com/2004/grief-encounter

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Table of Contents

CYCLE I: THE PATH TO REDRESS	1
~ 1st Visit ~	2
Chapter 1: The Unexamined Life	2
Chapter 2: Core Curriculum	9
Chapter 3: Bad Blood	14
~ At Home ~	19
Chapter 4: Insights	19
Chapter 5: A Matter of Terms.....	25
Chapter 6: The Beast.....	30
Chapter 7: Prelude	36
Chapter 8: Revelations	40
~ 2nd Visit ~	46
Chapter 9: Johann's First Point	46
Chapter 10: Uprooted	52

Chapter 11: The Needs of War.....	55
Chapter 12: Things like that Happen.....	58
Chapter 13: <i>Das Biest</i>	61
Chapter 14: <i>Biên Hòa</i>	65
Chapter 15: An Uncomfortable Sense	69
~ At Home ~	74
Chapter 16: Don't Screw with Us	74
Chapter 17: Self-Deception	79
CYCLE II: THE WAY OF PRIDE	86
~ 3rd Visit ~	87
Chapter 18: Exploring Common Ground	87
Chapter 19: We're Only Human	92
Chapter 20: Lena.....	96
Chapter 21: Things May Get Interesting	103
Chapter 22: Leon	106
Chapter 23: Reparations.....	112

Chapter 24: We're All Flawed	115
Chapter 25: Making Distinctions	119
Chapter 26: A New Friend	124
~ At Home ~	128
Chapter 27: Red-Headed Stepchild	128
Chapter 28: Alicia	131
Chapter 29: Larry the Lawyer	135
Chapter 30: Lulu	141
Chapter 31: Good Night	145
Chapter 32: A Lack of Integrity	148
Chapter 33: "Too Sanctimonious A Fraud"	152
~ 4th Visit ~	155
Chapter 34: Auggie	155
Chapter 35: German Socialism	159
Chapter 36: American Capitalism	165
Chapter 37: "Corporate Socialism"	169

Chapter 38: Ungloved.....	174
Chapter 39: "War is a Racket"	177
Chapter 40: A Guaranteed Annuity	181
Chapter 41: Pick Your Poison	184
Chapter 42: A Loss of Standards	187
Chapter 43: People Need to Know	191
~ Driving Home ~	195
Chapter 44: The Horror	195
Chapter 45: Dead Silence	200
Chapter 46: Down from the Mountain	203
CYCLE III: DIE NIEDERLAGE.....	208
~ At Home ~.....	209
Chapter 47: Fact Checking.....	209
Chapter 48: Abstract Difficulties	214
Chapter 49: Practical Difficulties	219
Chapter 50: False Flag	223

Chapter 51: <i>Ouroboros</i>	226
~ 5th Visit ~	231
Chapter 52: Bearing the Sins of Others	231
Chapter 53: A Lot of <i>Mishegas</i>	235
Chapter 54: Social Compression	239
Chapter 55: A Separate People.....	243
Chapter 56: Nobody in Their Right Mind.....	247
Chapter 57: Uncovering the Beast.....	250
Chapter 58: Infarction	253
Chapter 59: Invasion	256
Chapter 60: <i>Intermezzo</i>	260
Chapter 61: Ida.....	263
Chapter 62: <i>Generalplan Ost</i>	267
Chapter 63: Russia.....	270
Chapter 64: The Devil's Choice.....	274
Chapter 65: Purgatory.....	281

Chapter 66: Initiation.....	285
Chapter 67: Ring of Truth	289
Chapter 68: Square Pegs & Round Holes	292
Chapter 69: Unfinished Business.....	295
CYCLE IV: TRUTH.....	299
~ At Home ~	300
Chapter 70: A Legal Sham.....	300
Chapter 71: An "Inherited Bias"	304
Chapter 72: A "Heavy Silence"	308
Chapter 73: "Whither Goest Thou?"	311
Chapter 74: "A Sorry Scrub"	315
~ 6th Visit ~	319
Chapter 75: <i>Ausgelöscht</i>	319
Chapter 76: In Reverse	324
Chapter 77: <i>Der Letzte Seiner Art</i>	327
Chapter 78: The Needs of Others.....	331

Chapter 79: <i>Wu-Wei</i>	335
Chapter 80: A Lesson to be Learned.....	338
Chapter 81: A Spiritual State.....	342
~ At Home ~	345
Chapter 82: A Believer	345
Chapter 83: A Sinner	350
Chapter 84: Amen and Alleluia	353
EPILOGUE	356
END NOTES.....	357

Cycle I: The Path to Redress

*Great Lords, wise men never sit and wail their loss,
but cheerily seek how to redress their harms.*

William Shakespeare, Henry VI, Act 5, Scene 4

~ 1st Visit ~

Chapter 1: The Unexamined Life

We first met in 2017. I had recently retired and was compiling my mother's genealogy when a branch led me to Johann, a distant relative who I later learned was a 91-year-old World War II German veteran. After spending time with him, I realized that Socrates was correct when he said that an unexamined life is not worth living. However, he should have added that it could prove fatal to the lives of others.

I planned to take notes on our family history when I first visited him. But after one visit turned into several, they read more like an accounting of human nature than any type of genealogy. After my last visit, I was inspired to write this book. It was no easy task to reconcile his history with mine.

I almost gave up when a friend of mine read an early draft and wrote me a convincing note to finish the work: *Anyone who reads this from the position of a Nazi sympathizer is doing the work a disservice... For whatever reason, we as a society have lost our ability to listen and appreciate points of view that conflict with our own ... Your book presents the complete opposite of that by putting people together who should hate each other but have come to appreciate a different facet of the story and events that have led to that expected 'hatred.*

Johann was born a year earlier than my mother. He had the same first name as her great-grandfather. Both men were born in Silesia, which was then part of Germany.

I had never heard of Silesia before. In fact, before I started my family history, I never knew my mother had German roots. She never spoke about it, and we rarely interacted with her side of the family while I was growing up.

Her descendants left Europe in 1852 from Schlawentzig, a village about eighty-four miles southeast of Breslau, which was then the capital of Silesia, a province within the Kingdom of Prussia. Prussia later united with other German-speaking states to form the modern state of Germany.

Breslau cannot be found on a map today. It is now called Wrocław. Schlawentzig cannot be found either; it is now called Sławięcice. After World War II, the Allies carved off the eastern part of Germany and gave it to Poland; all things German, including the people and place names, were removed.

When I found that Johann came to America in 1956 and lived only ninety miles away, you could have knocked me over with a feather. I quickly arranged to visit him to get information about my mother's line, but I was also interested in hearing what it was like to grow up in Nazi Germany.

I didn't know how our first visit would go, so I didn't prepare much. I spent the two-hour drive thinking about my introduction and what questions to ask him. When I arrived at the entrance to the assisted living facility, I was pleasantly surprised by the well-manicured grounds leading up to a sprawling, one-story building. Both sat inside of a luxuriant forest that circled the property.

I went inside to the reception desk, asked for him, and they escorted me to the Garden Room. They said he spent every morning there. He was sitting there reading a book. The title was *1924*. There was a picture of Hitler on the front cover. A cup of coffee was placed on the table next to him.

The nurse approached him and said he had a visitor. He stood up quickly and had only a slight slouch for a man his age. He presented a deadpan expression and extended his hand to shake mine with a firm clasp. We were about the same height. Unlike me,

he had a full head of hair and a slender build. I looked down and saw he took his coffee as I did – black.

“Mr. Knoske?” I asked with what I hoped was a disarming smile. “My name is Will Barnes. My mother is Emma Knoske, and I’m researching her family history. I believe you two are related.”

He looked at me nonplussed. “Have I met you before?” There was no mistaking his German accent.

“No. I found your name while researching the family tree and thought I would come up and visit you.”

He told me to have a seat but didn’t appear interested as I rattled off dates, places, and names. After a while, his eyes began to wander around the room, always returning to his book on the table.

It was beginning to feel like this might be a short visit when a thought occurred to me. I told him that my father was born in 1926, the same year as he, and went to Europe in late 1944 during the closing days of the Battle of the Bulge. I asked if he also served in the war.

He looked at me carefully; his eyes were clear blue and piercing. They looked as if he questioned my intentions in switching to a discussion about the war. He finally answered, saying he joined the German army when he was seventeen, fought on the Western Front and then on the Eastern Front until the war’s end.

And then he clammed up. He gave no further details. He sat there and waited, eyeing me carefully. The silence became heavy between us until he leaned forward. “Were you ever in the military?”

I suppressed a chuckle. Was I ever in the military? I was in it right up to my ass, enlisting right out of high school. “I was in the Marines for three years. I served in Vietnam and came out a sergeant.”

“A Marine?” He looked at me with a surprised expression, and his eyes lit up. “Your motto was *Semper Fidelis*. Always Faithful, *ja?*”

“That’s right. The few. The proud. That was us.”

He suddenly sat up straight while his eyes engaged mine. He turned to grab his coffee cup, took a sip, and then swiveled back to face me. “How would you like me to address you, Mr. Barnes? You can call me Johann.”

I must have hit paydirt. “You can call me Will. Most people do.”

He thought about that momentarily, then cocked his head and smiled. “How would it be if I called you Willi? That was the name of a comrade of mine.”

“No one’s ever called me that before.” I was pleased that he suddenly was taking an interest in me. “I wouldn’t mind that one bit.”

“Well, good. It was meant to be a compliment.” He paused a moment before asking his next question. “Tell me, Willi, are you religious?”

“I believe in God if that’s what you mean.”

“That’s exactly what I mean.” Johann put the cup back down on the table, smiling at me. “Did you know what the German army had inscribed on its belt buckle, Willi?”

He knocked me off balance with that question. “I have no idea.”

“*Gott mit Uns*. Do you know what that means?”

I shook my head.

“No? Ach, you don’t speak German—shame on your mother. Well, Willi, it means: God is with us. Does that surprise you?”

He paused, waiting for my reaction. He was right. I was surprised. I was also taken aback by it.

He quickly followed that question with another. “Tell me, do you think that a country that has been portrayed as so evil would put that on all their soldiers’ belt buckles?”

I was still too confounded by his first revelation to answer. Besides, I saw it was a rhetorical question and decided to turn it

around by asking him a simple question. “Was that on your belt buckle as well, Johann?”

“Well, I was not in the army *per se*,” he said hesitantly. He leaned forward and whispered, “I was in the Waffen-SS, Willi. Our belt buckles had the party’s insignia.”

An image of the swastika appeared in my mind, and my skin began to crawl. His tone or expression was not sinister, but there was something ominous coming on that I knew couldn’t be undone. I had the same queasy feeling when I signed my enlistment papers, and that experience didn’t end well for me.

He sat back and continued in a normal tone. “But, even so, most of us did believe in God. Do you see any contradiction between the two, Willi?”

It was my turn to eye him carefully. I assumed he was talking about the coexistence of Good and Evil, an internal struggle that had plagued me for years. I instinctively drew away from him. I wasn’t about to let the presence of evil shadow my life again.

He must have seen my face tighten up in reaction to his question. “Don’t let the SS fool you, Willi. The Waffen-SS had nothing to do with the camps. We were purely a military combat unit.”

I didn’t care. I was disgusted with his being part of the SS and looked away, but he continued. “You know, I can already tell that we are related. We both enlisted when we were teenagers, and we both joined the best fighting units. I even became a sergeant just as you did; I was an *Unterscharführer*. And we even had a motto like your Marine Corps: *Meine Ehre heißt Treue*, which translates to My Honor is my Loyalty. It’s awfully close to Always Faithful, don’t you think?”

His comparison repelled me, and also that he was proud of serving in the SS. He was watching me and must have sensed my feelings. His smile vanished, and his eyes latched onto mine. “We

were not part of the *Totenkopf SS* if that's what you're thinking, Willi. They were a separate branch of the SS and the ones in the camps. We were on the front lines."

I never knew there were separate parts of the SS. I had brought along my notebook to record family history, but now I began to write a list of things to check out after I got home.

He watched me write as he took another sip of coffee. After I finished and looked up, he tapped his book.

"In the end, Hitler had neither loyalty nor honor, Willi. He only thought of himself." He squinted as if he had painful memories. "But, in the end, none of them did...not Churchill, not Roosevelt or Stalin."

I raised an eyebrow at his inclusion of Churchill and Roosevelt, but I didn't object; I wasn't too fond of politicians either. "I know what you mean, Johann. In Vietnam, we were left high and dry by our government. Any honor or loyalty left in that war was gone by the time I got there."

I was surprised by the bitterness that came out in my reply. I paused for a moment to let it dissipate. "Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon ... none of them did our country any good in pursuing that war." A swell of bile began to rise in my throat, and my eyes moistened. Feelings returned that I hadn't had for many years, and it was unsettling.

Johann became strangely quiet. I paused to watch his face change from one of engagement to one of reflection. He seemed to be looking back on his past and I suddenly empathized with him. "Was Willi with you during the war, Johann?"

He nodded. "Yes. We were like brothers. We trained together and fought in Normandy. We were in the 12th SS *Hitlerjugend* Division. Our division was formed in 1944 from Hitler Youth

groups all around the country. All the recruits were only seventeen years old.”

He leaned back in his chair and slowly exhaled his memories. “Our division commander wrote a book about the 12th and mentioned one episode during the Normandy campaign when Willi was ordered to serve as the forward observer for our company’s command post.

“He was placed on a slight rise under a clump of trees; he had good cover and a wide view of the ground in front of him. He took an armor plate from a destroyed Panzer to shield him. He used an opening in it to steady his rifle. He shot a number of English that day. His company commander was watching him with scissor glasses. Our division commander wrote that thirty dead British were lying in front of Willi before he ran out of ammunition. He watched as Willi stood up, smashed his rifle against a tree, and then placed his arms up to surrender.”

He paused briefly to rub his eyes. “After that, the English came out. One of them went right up to Willi. He grabbed Willi’s jacket in his left hand, pulled out his pistol with his right, and shot Willi in the head.”¹

Chapter 2: Core Curriculum

I was leaning forward, listening in rapt attention, until he spoke about the fate of my namesake. I fell back into my chair, momentarily stunned, and started writing. This was far more interesting than any family history.

“Ach, Willi, he was a good man. That was no way for a soldier to die.” He sighed and looked away for a moment.

I sympathized with him, but that’s war. It’s hard not to get pissed off when some guy shoots all your buddies and then comes out with his hands up, expecting to be treated well. But Willi was only a young kid. He probably didn’t know any better, so I kept my thoughts to myself.

“There is a song in Germany used at all military funerals: *Ich hatt’ einen Kameraden*. I don’t suppose you ever heard of it?”

“Sorry, no. I recognize the word *Kamerad* though, that means ‘friend,’ doesn’t it?”

“*Richtig*.” His head bobbed up and down, which I took as confirmation. “I haven’t heard that song for some time now, but it leaves an impression that you don’t soon forget. Let me try and translate for you.”

His voice slowed and became melancholy as he read: *I once had a comrade; you will find none better. The drum called us to battle; he walked by my side, in the same pace and step.*

He paused to gather his thoughts and, it seemed, his dead comrades as well. *A bullet came flying; is it my turn or yours?* His voice dropped in volume. *He was swept away; he lies now at my feet as if he were a part of me. He still reaches out his hand to me while I am about to reload. I cannot hold onto your hand. Rest you in eternal life, my good comrade.*

He brushed away the tears that began to well up in his eyes. “The music makes it even more moving, Willi. You must look it up when you get home.”

I did listen to it later. It was in German, and I couldn’t understand a word of it, but the pace and mournful singing made it sound like a dirge. I was almost moved to tears myself.

He knitted his white brows. “You know, Willi,” he said softly, “we were always painted as evil, but we were only human, trying to save our country as best as we knew how.

“Germany was devastated by the Allies after the First World War. They took away our lands and handed them over to foreign governments. The German left behind were disenfranchised and persecuted for years. The Allies also occupied our country for several years. The 1920s were a terrible time of disruption for us until Hitler showed a way out with National Socialism. The party gave us purpose and restored our country during the Thirties while the rest of the world suffered from the Depression. Our progress was so rapid that we felt God must be with us. We had no hint of what was to come.”

I didn’t know how to respond. I had never heard anyone associate God with Hitler, and a cold wave of caution washed over me. I thought again about leaving before he dug any deeper into this vein.

“You look puzzled, Willi. Here’s something for you to write down: *Volksgemeinschaft*. It’s the term we used to define our culture and our way of life back then. It’s like you saying the ‘*American Way*’ to describe what makes you proud of your country. We used that term during the Thirties to give us unity and a sense of purpose as Capitalists started coming in from the West and Communists from the East to threaten the stability of our society, our government, and our economy. We had to sacrifice and work hard to keep them from overcoming our country.”

I raised my eyebrows in disbelief. It seemed he was trying to pull me into supporting his argument for Nazism.

Johann winced as he saw my expression. “Ach, you may think I’m getting out of line here, Willi. You tell me if you think so.”

I smiled in deference to his apology. “I never heard it put that way before, Johann,” I admitted. His display of thoughtfulness was unexpected. It made me feel comfortable enough to stay a while longer. “Anyway, that’s why I’m here, Johann, to hear your story and learn as much as I can about my mother’s roots.”

“Ha!” he laughed. “You remind me of my son Auggie. He is always plugging me for information about the old times.” He pulled something from under his book. “Do you see this, Willi?”

I couldn’t quite believe my eyes. He held up an iPad. I looked at it and couldn’t help but return the wide grin on his face despite my lingering sense of discomfort.

“Surprised at the old man, huh? Auggie gave me this as a Christmas present. When I retired twenty-five years ago, I devoted myself to understanding what brought about the war. I always felt we were good people, but when I came to America, we were portrayed so badly in all the history books, television, and movies. I wanted to understand what happened to our people. I gathered so many notes and copied so many documents over the years that it became hard to find anything!”

“So, Auggie bought me an Apple Mac to help me organize things. He taught me how to use it, and I took a typing class. Then, he helped me move everything over. But most importantly, he introduced me to the Internet. And then, this year, he got me this iPad!” He brought it back down to his lap and patted it lovingly.

“He set it up so when I come here to read and find something interesting, I can look it up on the Internet and download it. Then, when I return to my room, it syncs up with my Mac.”

He leaned back with a self-satisfied expression. “So, anyway, everything I found is stored in this iPad. This is my story. Would you like to hear it?”

I nodded a cautious assent, and he slapped my knee in affirmation.

“*Gut!* Well, as I mentioned earlier, Willi, when I was growing up, Germany was in terrible condition after the first world war. Foreign systems from the East and the West were coming into our country and ruining us! Speculators from the Capitalist West squeezed whatever profits they could from our depressed economy and caused crippling inflation, while Communists from the East came in and tried to overthrow our new republic and our culture with revolution.”

He leaned forward and whispered in a low, conspiratorial tone. “You might also be interested to know, Willi, that FDR was one of those speculators. He was involved in all the profiteering at our expense during the Twenties. He and the other Western investors came here, bought properties from impoverished families for a steal, and then rented or sold them at an exorbitant profit. Their activities fueled the hyperinflation that caused so much civil unrest after the war.”¹

I was jotting down notes and underlined the part about FDR profiteering from the destitute German people. This was an interesting piece of history, if true. I knew he was from a wealthy family but had no idea what he did before becoming governor of New York.

“Well, you can understand that if we were ever to rebuild our economy and hold onto our culture, then both of these foreign systems had to be brought under control. Hitler said as much, but no one noticed him during the Twenties. The National Socialist party only got six percent of the votes in the 1924 national elections, which fell even lower in 1928 to two and a half percent. The Nazis

didn't get anywhere until the Depression hit, and even then, they only got 18% in the 1930 elections, but we'll talk more about that later."

Later? Was he thinking that I would be coming back? While Johann paused to look at something on his iPad, I noticed an older woman in a wheelchair. She was glaring at us over her reading glasses. There was a book on her lap, and our conversation distracted her. She did not look pleased.

I quickly looked away from her. I didn't want to get drawn into any scene in an old folk's home involving the ramblings of an old ex-Nazi. It was then that I began to realize why we never spent much time with my mother's side of the family.

Cycle II: The Way of Pride

*The Lord detests all the proud of heart.
Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished.*

Psalms 16:5

~ 3rd Visit ~

Chapter 18: Exploring Common Ground

When I arrived the next morning, there was no sign of Lena. However, Johann was sitting in the Garden Room at his usual spot. His eyes were closed, and wires dangled down from his ears to the iPad. He hadn't graduated to earbuds – yet.

I touched his shoulder and said hello. He opened his eyes and looked up as he tore off the earphones. “Willi! Good to see you. How's the boy today?”

“Fine and yourself, Johann?”

“*Sehr Gut*...just resting and listening to Enya. She has a very relaxing voice.”

I had to stop myself from laughing. “Enya?”

“Have you ever listened to her, Willi?”

“I have. I have all her recordings and play them while I'm writing.”

“What are you writing, Willi?”

“Our family history, and now, I'm focused on your life and mine as well.”

He chuckled. “Well, mine will be more work than yours, my friend. Twenty-five years more!”

“I know. That's why I'm here.” I sat down and opened my notebook. “Listen, Johann, I went back and read more about the 12th. I discovered your unit was involved in two big war crimes: one was at Ascq where civilians were rounded up and shot; and the other was at the Ardennes Abbey, where POWs were executed. Were you involved in either of those?”

He raised himself in the chair and leaned forward. “No, I wasn’t, but I heard about them. At Ascq, one of our trains was attacked by partisans. The French Resistance fought a vicious guerilla war against us. They weren’t trained in wartime conventions or military law. They were savages. You should understand, Willi, you were in Vietnam.”

I nodded. We were trained on what to expect in Vietnam. We were told stories of guys who died after swallowing ground glass in Coke bottles, about prostitutes who were infected with the “black” syphilis to take us out of service, and the dangers of being isolated from our units both in and out of combat.

“I understand what you’re saying, Johann, but that doesn’t excuse your soldiers for grabbing and shooting people.”

He gave me a harsh look. I remembered what he said about the fate of my namesake and quickly continued. “I read where your division went around the village gathering up people and then just shot them. Is that true?”

“Let me tell you what I heard about this shortly after it happened. The troop train pulled into the station, and then the explosion went off. Several cars were derailed, and then the partisans began shooting. There had been a similar attack there two days earlier, and guards were stationed to prevent another, but that didn’t stop them.

“Hubert Meyer, our division commander, wrote about this after the war, and his words follow what I heard. Our troops were ordered off the train and worked with the local guards and police to detain every male found near the station. They were lined up and searched, but nobody was hurt.

“However, several men broke loose and tried to escape. The guards opened fire, and a panic broke out.¹ After it ended, eighty-six civilians were killed and eight more wounded. And that is what happens when civilians take up arms against the military, Willi. It’s

impossible to separate the partisans from innocent civilians, and it all becomes very tragic.”

He got out of his chair to stretch. His account was more complete than I had read, and it sounded more likely. “You’re right, Johann. It is tragic.” I wouldn’t say anything more because I knew our troops committed similar war crimes in Vietnam.

“I’ll tell you, Willi; it doesn’t surprise me at all that you only read how our troops lined up those civilians and shot them. The West never had anything good to say about us. They never wrote how hard we worked before the war to expand our social services, to provide parity for our workers, and to rebuild our country. At first, I wondered why that was, but then I realized it’s just human nature. We did the same with our propaganda.”

He sat back down and then leaned forward. “The fact of the matter is that the crimes we committed during the war were no different than those committed by America, England, France, and Russia for years before the war and years after, as well. But you never read or see movies about that, do you?”

He didn’t wait for me to respond. “And this brings up my second point, Willi: at the end of the day, all men are alike. Remember what I told you at our first meeting? This was an ideological war. It started years before any shooting began. The Allies were discrediting National Socialism as soon as the party came into power. The Allied government leaders were never objective about our system. They feared it would be an attractive alternative to their system and cause a revolt during the Depression. So, all the history books and movies painted us as evil while they portrayed themselves as shining knights.”

He leaned back into his chair to take a sip of coffee. I stopped writing to think about the truth of what he just said. Somehow, it didn’t seem unlikely.

“I see you’re thinking, Willi. That’s good. And here’s something else for you to think about. Did you know that the Allies tortured German prisoners to provide self-incriminating testimony at Nuremberg? Or that the Allies submitted forged German documents and photographs as incriminating evidence to the Tribunal? Tell me, Willi, why do you think they needed to do that?”

The impact of what he said hit me squarely between the eyes. I never heard anything about torture or forgery being used at Nuremberg. I thought of all the photos taken at the death camps and took a hard shot at him.

“You’ve been saying since our first visit that the two of us are alike, and our two countries are as well, but I think you are way off on this, Johann. What about everything Nazi Germany did to the Jewish people? You can’t begin to compare our two countries.”

He stared at me with that familiar, focused look in his eyes. “If you feel that way, Willi, then you’re not familiar with your own American history or ours.” He said this calmly and took another sip of coffee. You won’t like what I’m going to say, Willi, but the Western powers invaded North America and then murdered, massacred, and pillaged the native people from the first day they arrived.

“American leaders continued to do the same until they reached the Western shore. After that, they began expanding beyond their shore by entering a questionable war against Spain. Very few historians questioned the morality of this nation-building. Instead, most of them praised America’s pioneering spirit, the bravery, and vigor which grew your nation.”

My hackles were rising as his voice grew louder. “But not all of us were involved in that, Johann. You can’t blame all of us. Most of us were just trying to carve out a life and survive.”

“That may be so, Willi. But it was all done at the expense of others. Consciously or not, your people benefitted from the actions

of your leaders as they orchestrated all those crimes in the name of civilization. Those leaders provided the land and resources that your people needed to grow and prosper and then they supplied the security to maintain it. Your people benefitted from that genocide and from the forced removal of those people. It was okay for America to do it, but not for Germany. What arrogance!”

Chapter 19: We're Only Human

“Genocide? What the hell are you talking about, Johann?” I blurted that out, expecting him to counter in kind, but he only went back to his iPad and kept scrolling until he calmly tapped open a document.

“Well, here are some estimates. One source says the population of Native Americans living in North America in 1492 ranged from a low of two million to a high of eighteen million. Don’t ask me how they made these estimates, Willi. But by 1900, the U.S. census showed only two-hundred and fifty-thousand left. If you use the midpoint of that population range in 1492, which is ten million, then that means that over nine million were eliminated over five hundred years. That sounds like genocide to me, and this doesn’t consider the number of Blacks who died from slavery and its legacy, nor all the Chinese who died building your railroads. There are literally millions of victims who died so you Americans could build your *lebensraum* from shore to shore.”

I was uncomfortable with where he was going with this, but I wasn’t quick enough to counter him; my brain didn’t work as fast as it did before the stroke.

“Willi, your government did the same type of evil things that we did during the war; they removed and executed Native Americans just like we did with the Jews. Our *Einsatzgruppen* did the same thing in Russia that your cavalry did in the 1800s. While one unit was out fighting the braves, another went into the villages and murdered the women, children, and elderly and then burned their villages. You must have heard about the incidents at Sand Creek and Wounded Knee.”

I nodded. I read *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* after returning home from Vietnam. It left me wondering what sort of people we

were after learning our troops were doing the same thing in Vietnam a hundred years later.

“And listen to this. I found this quote from Colonel Chivington, who ordered his troops at Sand Creek to execute over a hundred Cheyenne and Arapaho, most of whom were women, children, and babies: *Damn any man who sympathizes with Indians! I have come to kill Indians, and believe it is right and honorable to use any means under God’s heaven to kill Indians ... Kill and scalp all, big and little; nits make lice.*”¹

Johann continued, “There were no movies or photo magazines on the frontier to document these atrocities for the world. Not that it would have mattered anyway. Nobody ever asked the Indians for their side of the story. They had no advocates. You know the old saying that the only good redskin is a dead redskin. Right?”

He was right. The glory of conquering the West was passed down to us kids through movies and television. Everyone cheered when the Indians were mowed down, and we never thought twice about it while playing Cowboys and Indians.

Johann cooled down after he took a sip of coffee and began speaking in a steady, well-modulated tone. “After I came here and read all your history, it was hard to understand why Germany was so maligned. I knew in my heart that we, in the twelve years under National Socialism, had behaved no better or worse than America did over the last several hundred years. Our cause in building our nation seemed just as righteous to us as yours was to your people.”

I looked up from my notebook and saw Lena wheeling into the room. Talk about timing. I turned my head and gave her a brief wave. She acknowledged with a nod.

Johann saw me wave and turned his head in her direction. He nodded to her but quickly turned to continue his lecture, raising his voice to reel me in. “When America’s military invaded the West,

they had the same problem as we had in invading France and Russia; they not only had to defeat the braves in battle, but they also had to eliminate the others who helped them to fight, including the women, the elderly and young children. With non-uniformed enemies, you never know who to trust or who might shoot you in the back. You lose all humanity in that type of situation.” He sat back, scratched his head, and said softly, “We have no monopoly on wartime atrocities, Willi.”

He stretched back in his chair, rubbed his eyes, and sighed as if to signal an end to this topic. “*Ach*, but what’s the difference? We lost the war. We were punished for what we did. It’s all water under the bridge. But America,” he said with a rising tone as he sat up in the chair, “was never punished for its crimes. It always had the luxury of winning its wars.”

“But we never won in Vietnam!”

“That may be the case, but you didn’t lose either; you just picked up your bags and left. No one held you accountable for what you did there. You were never defeated or occupied.” He paused for dramatic effect as he let his words sink in. “Or judged.”

My thoughts returned to all the devastation we imposed on Vietnam and elsewhere during our many wars. There was a trail of bodies leading all the way back to the pilgrims. Undoubtedly, our system had been good to us, but what about everyone else who lived outside of it or got in our way? Did they have to suffer and bear the burden for our benefit?

Johann must have seen my expression change from anger to pensiveness and quickly seized the opportunity to interject one more thing. “I’m not proud of what my country did out of desperation during the war, but I am proud of all the good we accomplished before the war. What do you think?”

“I don’t know what to think, Johann. Maybe, the Allies wanted to make an example out of Germany, so people would focus on their

crimes and forget about the past. Maybe, they wanted people to concentrate on the future and the new world order.”

“I’m sure they did! Why would they want to do otherwise?” He looked tired and started to rub his eyes. He opened them wide and then said sternly, “But I’m equally sure the people on the losing end haven’t forgotten what was done to them. They’re probably still waiting for a chance to recover what was lost to the imperial powers.”

His tone of voice and choice of words became threatening. He paused for effect, waiting to see how I reacted. “How about you, Willi? Have you ever done anything in your life that you wished could be whitewashed or rationalized away?” He stared at me like a hawk before diving in for the kill. “Wouldn’t that be nice?”

I was caught like a deer in headlights. There were a few things that I wished could be erased. They weighed on me like millstones around my neck.

Johann saved me from responding. “Ach, you shouldn’t worry about it. As I said, we all make mistakes. After all, we’re only human.”

This discussion drained me. I no longer knew what to think about him. He was hard as nails one moment and compassionate the next. His insights were compelling but also repelling. If the last two visits had shocked and uprooted me, then this visit had planted me on foreign ground without any bearings.

Something caught my eye. Lena was wheeling over to us. Johann caught my glance and watched her approach with a wary expression.

Chapter 20: Lena

Lena was by our side in no time and greeted me warmly. “Hello, Will.” I was about to greet her when she abruptly turned her gaze over to Johann. “My name is Lena. You must be Johann. Will told me about you, and I thought I’d introduce myself.”

I quickly chimed in to allow Johann some time to respond. “Johann, Lena comes from Poland. I promised to introduce you two, but she beat me to it.”

He smiled warmly at her and stood up. “I’m pleased to meet you, Lena. You may have guessed I’m from Germany. My accent gives me away.”

She kept her poker face. “*Ja, ich kann sagen.* Will told me.”

“Ah! You speak German!”

“Yes, as well as Yiddish.”

The smile dropped off Johann’s face. After a moment, he regained his composure. “Well, let me welcome you to our community,” he said graciously. “I’ve lived here for seven years. I came after my wife passed. I sold my home since I didn’t want to keep it up anymore and didn’t want to burden my son and his family. He visits every week, and now Willi comes to see me as well. Do you have any relatives who visit you?”

“No. I’m alone.”

“No, you’re not... you’re here with us now.” His smile came back.

She managed a brief smile, which quickly vanished. “So, you were in Germany during the war, Johann? I hear you two talking quite a bit about it.”

“Yes, I grew up there but came to America in 1956.”

I could sense that some initial sparring had begun between the two. I watched silently from my neutral corner as Lena took an initial jab at Johann.

“Were you in the war?”

“Yes, I was.” Johann glanced over at me, but I kept a blank face, offering him nothing. He was on his own. “I joined in 1944 when I was eighteen years old. When did you come over here?”

“I came over in 1948. I was also eighteen in 1944.” She held out her thin left arm to show several faded blue numbers. “I was in Auschwitz at the time.”

Johann stared at her arm, and silence descended on all of us.

It was time for me to jump into the ring and break up the clinch. “Johann grew up in Breslau,” I said. “That’s where my family came from as well. He’s been helping me write my family history,” It was a weak effort, but she was gracious enough to let it work.

“I was raised in Łódź, Will. It’s midway between Warsaw and Wrocław, which was then Breslau.” She swung her head over to face Johann without missing a beat. “Did your family survive the war, Johann?”

His expression changed from surprise to sadness. “No, they did not. Did yours?”

“I lost thirty-two members of my extended family, which is only a small fraction of the Jews who died. I used to wish I hadn’t survived as well, but as I got older, I learned that life has a mind of its own.”

“Yes, it does,” Johann replied. “Those were terrible times, and I often feel guilty about surviving them. I told Willi that, since I retired, I’ve been trying to understand what led up to the war, and that’s what we’ve been discussing.”

I smiled. “I majored in history.”

She looked at me with a dubious grin. “I heard. And you were in a war, as well?”

“Yes, ma’am. I was. In Vietnam.”

“Hmm.” Her brief acknowledgment left us wondering where she would go next.

“What about you, Lena? What’s your history?” It just came out of me; the silence was becoming too oppressive.

She ignored me and looked over at Johann. “How about you, Johann? Are you interested in hearing about my history?”

He pulled himself up as straight as possible in his chair as if to defend himself. “I have never spoken to a Jewish person about what happened, but, yes, I would like to hear your story.” He relaxed a bit, and so did I.

She asked for a water bottle, and I jumped up to get it. Once we all settled in, she started. “As I said, I was born in 1926 and grew up in Łódź. My father’s family left Spain in 1492 after the Alhambra Decree. It was Queen Isabella’s way of forcing the Jews to leave Spain or convert to Christianity.

“So, they left for central Europe and settled near Łódź. They lived in a *shtetl* which grew into a vibrant community by the time I was born. I had a happy childhood there, even though there were a great many things that a Jew could not do, but we had strong ties within our community, and I had a loving family. My father was a teacher, a gentle soul, and I went to a girls’ school before the war began.”

She paused to shift her position, and a look of pain came across her face. Johann asked if she felt all right. She nodded, took a sip of water, and continued.

“All that changed in 1939 when the Nazis invaded. I was standing on the sidewalk when the Germans marched into the city. The occupation started, and my whole world crumbled. First, they removed the intelligentsia. Then they imposed rules for controlling

the Poles, but it went worse for us. We were immediately forced to wear an armband, which soon had the Star of David patched on it. By the end of the year, we were all moved into a ghetto. You could only take what you could carry on your back. Everything else was confiscated. We were there for a while, and then they moved us to an even larger ghetto still within Łódź. There were about two hundred thousand of us.”

She paused to take another drink and had a faraway look in her eyes. I knew this story never ended for her, and I wasn't about to interrupt her. Neither was Johann.

“I was fourteen when my mother, father, sister, and I were moved into the ghetto. It was surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards. We were gradually separated into two groups: those who could work and those who couldn't.

“I am only here because I was considered strong enough to work along with the rest of my family. We never knew what happened to the others who weren't, but at some point, their clothes returned, and we were made to clean them and check for valuables. Occasionally, we found bullet holes and blood.

“I was lucky. I was young and healthy. The SS wanted to kill us, but the army needed our work, and, for a time, the army won. Don't ever think that we worked willingly; without work, you couldn't get your food ration, and without a ration, you wouldn't survive for more than a day or two.

“One day, we heard rumbling in the distance. Shortly after that, the commander of the ghetto told us the Red Army was coming. He wanted to protect us by moving to another camp, so we were sent to Auschwitz in August 1944. When we arrived, men with shaven heads started yelling at us to get off the trains and pushed us into separate lines of men and women.

“My mother, sister, and I came up to a long table with German soldiers who looked us over and pointed either to the right or left; right meant death, but I didn’t know that. All I knew was young women and girls were moved to the left. Crippled people, lame people, and emaciated people were moved to the right. Before I knew it, I stood in front of another table, and an officer asked how old I was. I said, ‘Eighteen.’ And he said, ‘Old enough’ and sent me to the left. My mother and sister were sent to the left, too. I don’t know what happened to my father; I never saw him again.”

She paused, her chest heaving to contain her emotions. She let out a long sigh and went on. “After that, they lined us up each day to examine our bodies. They placed the emaciated ones to the side, and we never saw them again. My mother gave half her rations to my sister and me to keep us going, but one day...”

She stopped as her eyes teared up. Johann and I looked at one another, knowing we had to hear her out. I wondered how he felt about hearing all this, but he only presented a long face that didn’t express guilt as much as sadness.

“My sister and I were finally led over to Birkenau. We were sent to the showers, and thankfully, water came out. We were told to sleep on a pile of coal dust. The next day, I looked up at the sun and saw a red circle surrounded by black smoke. Next to me sat a couple of women. I asked them what all that black smoke was. They said, ‘they are burning the dead. They die after they go to the showers; instead of water, gas comes out. And then they carry them out and burn them. Consider yourself lucky because you will be working. We wish we could go with you.’

“After that, I was sent along with several thousand others to work in Breslau. I don’t know what happened to my sister. I ended up in an underground airplane factory. We worked twelve hours at night in that factory. We were expendable. When someone died, they got a replacement.

“By the start of 1945, we could hear the guns in the distance and knew the Russians were closing in. The guards forced us to leave on foot before they arrived. For food, we had nothing, and for drink, we had snow. For three days, we marched. Whenever we rested and had to perform our necessities, they watched us, both men and women, together. Some would sneak out and escape, not even afraid of the bullets.

“After those three days, we came to a small town and saw a train full of prisoners. They were trying to move everybody into the center of Germany to liquidate us. We were packed into the train like sardines. I was in the last detachment. We got off in the darkest of night and walked several kilometers to a concentration camp. I couldn’t read where I was because it was so dark.

“We were given a shower. Again, it was water, not gas. They took some of our clothing, considering us too well-dressed. We were then shoved into an overflowing barracks and left to die. We had a minimum of food and a maximum of lice. Pretty soon, I couldn’t get up anymore. There was little compassion left because everybody was in the same boat.

“The miracle happened on April 15, 1945. The British came and freed us. They told us to stay in the barracks, and they would distribute food. They gave us a tin of pork and some biscuits. I was too weak to open the tin of pork. I would have been a goner in a couple of hours if I had eaten it. Our stomach linings were shot by then. Bodies were stacked up two stories high between the barracks. Bulldozers came in to perform the only burial ceremony they would ever have. I learned later that they killed twenty-thousand Jews a day there.

“I don’t know where my mother or sister lies. Later, I found my father had died of malnutrition and exhaustion in January of ‘45. I

was finally freed from the camps but not from my memories. I had seen the worst things a person could ever see.”¹