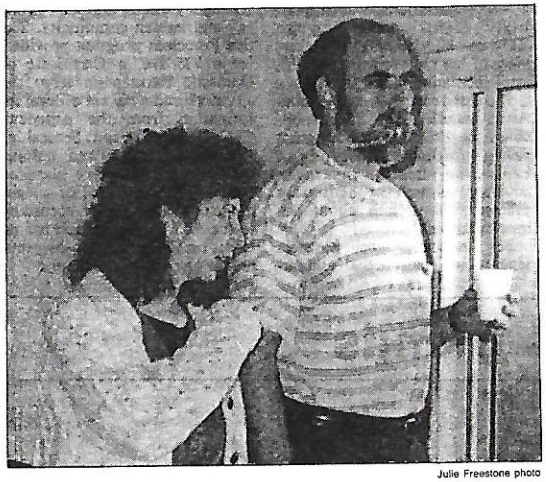
Taking on history: confronting Holocaust horrors

By Julie Freestone

A group of Bay Area Germans and Jews, including a number of Berkeley residents, participated in an unusual effort recently to examine the past and find ways to heal the damage done by the Nazi Holocaust.

Led by Oakland therapist Armand Volkas, a dozen children of Holocaust survivors and a dozen Germans born after the war explored their family histories, probed the capacity people have to enslave others, and began to identify positive ways to remember their past together.

At the two-day workshop, held at the Headlands Institute in Sausalito, Volkas took the group through a variety of exercises and discussions. The program, called Acts of Reconciliation, was sponsored by the German Consulate and Generation to Generation, a support group for children of Holocaust survivors.



Julie Freestone photo

Therapist Armand Volkas and Anna Minders at workshop

"I'm here to make amends," said Elke, a German woman whose father was in the Waffen SS and died on the Russian front.

"I'm here to make peace," said Carolyn, whose German-Jewish father still lives in Germany and hides his Jewish roots.

"I'm here to reconcile the German and Jew in me," Lucy said, describing her German-Jewish heritage and the death of her relatives in concentration camps.

Both Germans and Jews said they wanted a safe place, like the workshop, to ask questions they had never dared to ask about the past.

"I have a fantasy in my mind every time I meet a Jewish person about what happened to their family during the war. I want to ask them, 'Do you hate me because I'm German?' said Susanne, a young German woman whose parents were teenagers during the war. She said she is afraid to bring up the subject with Jews that she knows.

"I can't talk to my German friends about this because it will ruin our relationship," said one Jewish man. "I want to know what their families did during the war."

There were other common themes evident almost immediately, as the group broke into German-Jewish pairs, interviewed each other and then came back, in a role reversal, and introduced themselves.

Many of the Germans and Jews said somewhere in the description of their background, "No one ever talked about the Holocaust very much." Or, "I didn't know much about it."

There were lots of tears, on both sides, as the participants remembered their families and the pain of the past.

"I never got to mourn my father (after he died on the Russian front)," said Elke. "To the world, he was just one of the swine."

"I could never be proud to be a German," said one man, whose father was a high ranking Nazi.

Some of the Germans cried as they spoke, telling their Jewish

> **'It's difficult to take responsibility for things that happened before I was born...'**
>
> —Susanne
> Workshop participant

"The world isn't going to let Germany forget. We need to remember in some way, but the key is to learn to remember together,"

A former actor who uses improvisation and psychodrama to explore the Holocaust issues, Volkas is a child of survivors who were active in the resistance. Both his parents were in Auschwitz. Several of the Germans apologized to Volkas and other Jewish participants for what had happened to their families at the hands of the Nazis.

The group returned a number of times to the questions of guilt. "I don't want to build up guilt or resentment. I want acknowledgement. The silence is hard to deal with," said Michael, a Jew whose parents were survivors.

"It's difficult to take responsibility for things that happened before I was born. Sometimes I would give anything to be anything but a German," replied Susanne, with tears in her eyes.

In an exercise, the group was asked to show real or imagined mementos that related to the theme.

Tania offered her name. "It was my aunt's. She died in a concentration camp."

Peter brought a post card, the last one received from his grandparents before they disappeared in Poland.

One Jewish man "brought" an imaginary suitcase and told the story of his grandparents, who could have escaped Paris before the Nazis invaded, but wouldn't leave without their luggage. They were trapped, deported, and killed.

Elke brought items she had never looked at, found recently in her mother's house. Included were pictures of her father as a soldier, his shooting record, and a

There were some upbeat contributions. In tears, Uli, a young German woman, said, "I show a blonde blue eyed child who can now be named Sarah. I hope we can work on making it so no one ever has to die again because of a crazy man."

Stefan offered a booklet he bought at Auschwitz 10 years ago. "It was the first time I came close to understanding what the Germans did to the Jews," he said.

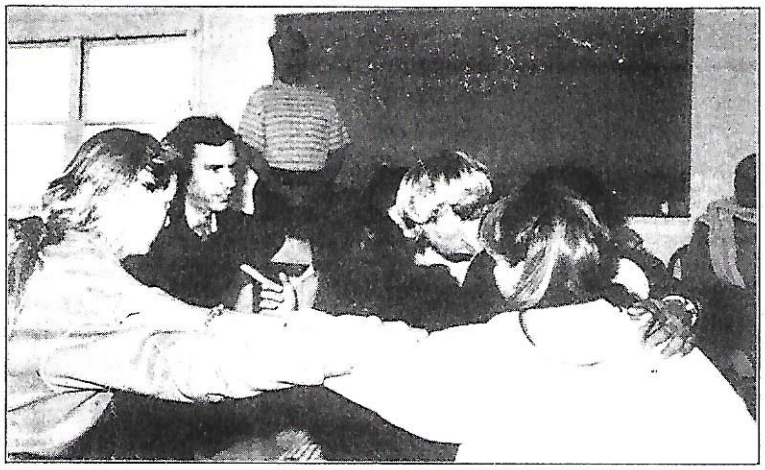
Kevin, studying to be a rabbi, offered the model of an old Volkswagen van. "It somehow reminds me of Germans who were good and offered to help the Jews." Later, encouraging people to bring out into the open their questions to each other, he said, "We've had 45 years of silence. That's enough."

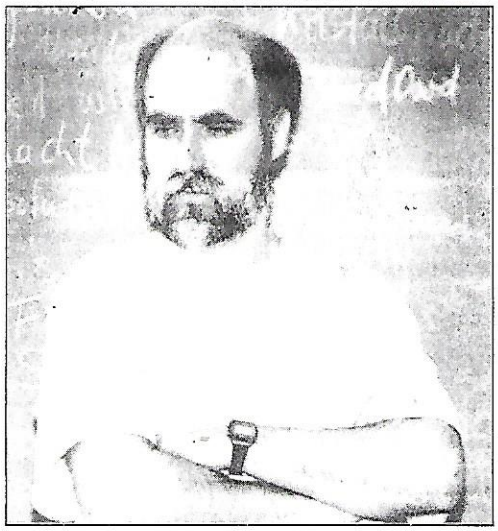
Karin, a German, brought a photo of a rainbow and suggested that the group look at the Old Testament story about the rainbow appearing after the flood. "The rainbow is for reconciliation. It could be a symbol for all of us."

After an exercise to examine the fascist in each person, the group designed a number of rituals to serve as a combined German-Jewish remembrance of the Holocaust.

Standing on the shore in the Marin headlands in one large circle, the group recited, "We are the children of the Holocaust/We are both Germans and Jews/We are the children of the victims/We are the children of the oppressors/We started out on opposite sides/but the memory of the Holocaust will combine us forever/We shall never let the victims be forgotten/For if we do, we will forget that/The perpetrator can be in all of us.

MARIN/SONOMA/NAPA





Photos by Cesar Rubio

Oakland therapist Armand Volkas (right) is backed by a chalkboard full of relevant words connected to the Holocaust; above, workshop participants confront the generation past.

Germans, children of survivors confront guilt, hatred

By JULIE FREESTONE
Bulletin Correspondent

The Jews acted suspicious and hostile, the Germans reserved and hesitant at the start of a program designed to help them come to terms with their parents' past.

But ultimately, these children of survivors and Germans born since World War II ended up dedicating themselves to healing wounds and finding ways to remember.

"The world isn't going to let Germany forget, and we need to remember in some way, but the key is to learn to remember together," explained Armand Volkas, the Oakland therapist who led the two-day session titled "Acts of Reconciliation."

Sponsored last month by Generation to Generation, a support group for children of Holocaust survivors, and the German Consulate, the workshop at the Marin Headlands Conference Center used psychodrama, improvisation and discussion to help the two dozen participants bring their feelings to the surface.

Volkas, the son of survivors active in the resistance, said he conducted the program to help Germans and Jews develop rituals for remembering. "I see this as a way of modeling for other people on how to build bridges," he said.

To help begin that process, Volkas prescribed an exercise to help "humanize" the participants, dividing them into pairs — one German and one Jew — to learn each other's histories. Returning to the larger group, each partner in a pair took turns adopting the other's identity and describing his or her background.

"My mother lost her whole family in Auschwitz," said one young German woman in tears, speaking for her Jewish partner.

Tears were never far from the surface as the participants told why they had come to the workshop. "I want to make amends," said Elke, a German woman whose father, a member of the Waffen SS, died on the Russian front.

At the same time, a number of Jews with German roots said they had come to resolve the conflict between their two identities.

"I want to make peace," explained Carolyn, who said her father lives in Germany and denies his Jewishness.

Others simply wanted to lift the veil of secrecy about the war. "When I meet Jewish people, I fantasize a lot about their pasts," said 29-year-old Susanne, a German now married to an American. "I wonder whether they hate me because I'm German. I wonder what happened to their families in the war. There's such a blanket of silence. I'm afraid to talk to my Jewish friends about it."

That fear is what many at the workshop seemed interested in challenging in themselves. But "we need your help to force us to confront this all," said Thomas, a German.

The "blanket of silence" he referred to became a familiar theme as the stories unfolded. "We never talked much about it" and "we were never told about it" were statements both Jews and Germans made about their pasts.

In sharing mementos related to the workshop's theme, participants offered pictures of their families, some of whom perished in the death camps. Others "showed" imaginary items.

"These are the pictures of my grandmothers [who died at the hands of the Nazis] I wished I had," said Malka. Tania contributed: "My name was my aunt's. She died in a camp." Volkas brought pieces of the Buchenwald cell block where his father had been interned.

Watching Susanne and another young woman named Ooli cry, Elke, who said she was old enough to be their mother, told them: "It makes me mad that you still suffer; you don't deserve it. We are new Germans, nice Germans, different Germans."

But the younger women disagreed. "We do [deserve to suffer]," Susanne said. "It could have been me. I don't think I would have stood up and helped. Sometimes I would give anything to be anything but a German."

Michael said, however, "I don't want to build up guilt and resentment. I just want acknowledgement. I don't hold the Germans of today responsible."

In the closing session, participants were asked to create rituals for remembering.

In one exercise, the participants gathered in a large circle on the shoreline, where they intoned:

"We are the children of the Holocaust/We are both Germans and Jews/We are the children of the victims/We are the children of the oppressors/We started out on opposite sides but the memory of the Holocaust will combine us forever/We shall never let the victims be forgotten, for if we do we will forget that the perpetrator can be in all of us."

Rudi wrote this

Holocaust panel tackles tough issues

By Julie Freestone

A panel of experts appearing at the International House in Berkeley last week took on the question of how to remember the Nazi Holocaust, what lessons could be learned from the genocide and whether activities occurring in this country and the world today could lead to another similar disaster.

The event, sponsored by the International House and the Oakland-based Acts of Reconciliation Project, featured Mother Jones editor Jeffrey Klein, UC Berkeley Professor Richard Buxbaum, writer and feminist activist Susan Griffin, Berkeley psychotherapist Hans Stahlschmidt, East Bay resident Rudi Raab, psychologist Stanley Keleman and Claire Nuer, a French woman who was a "hidden" child during the Nazi years.

Introducing the panel, Oakland therapist Armand Volkas, who founded the Acts of Reconciliation Project, said the purpose of the discussion, a week-end encounter workshop that followed it and a public commemoration on Sunday, was to transform pain into constructive projects. "(It is) to break the taboo against speaking to each other, about hearing each other's stores, about what to remember and how to remember and to explore whether Germans and Jews can remember together," Volkas said.

Klein repeated a number of times during the almost-three-hour program his concern about current conditions in this county. Saying there were not necessarily warning signs to predict another Holocaust and that economic despair wasn't the only cause, Klein nonetheless warned the gutting of the middle class could lead to scapegoating similar to what occurred in Nazi Germany.

"It's happening now. The people who are suffering are (being blamed) as the cause of our misery. It's blinking a strong yellow," he said.

Three of the panelists were Berkeley residents born in Germany, each with a different perspective on the impact

Mel Silverman

Panelist Rudi Raab's father was a Nazi official.

of and message of the Holocaust. Raab, son of a high-ranking Nazi, urged "grassroots" solutions to avoiding the kind of hatred that led to Nazi atrocities."We have to learn to live with each other, to go on from here and not stereotype each other. We have to get to know the enemy, evolve and appreciate our diversity," he said.

Buxbaum, Dean of International Studies at UC, was born to a Christian father and Jewish mother, married a German woman and lived in post-war Germany. Although he acknowledged there is no way to "immunize," against Nazi-type actions, he said there were lessons to be learned that could minimize such behavior. Stahlschmidt described his own evolution, beginning as a German child ashamed to say he was German and feeling guilty, a situation he says is dangerous even now.

"We knew something was wrong, a big dark cloth lying on the country. We were in a prison of shame and guilt. Many Germans are there today. That is not a safe German, with very little self-esteem, no pride, no identity. We should not try to prolong that state," he said.

Stahlschmidt likened the efforts to come together, talk about the Holocaust and find ways to heal to a "endless journey," in which he takes in the information, makes it his own story and uses it as a change to grow.

A number of the panelists and audience members grappled with the question of whether it is possible for Germans and Jews to remember together and whether establishing such a dialogue would lead to forgetting the atrocities. "If you reconcile, does it mean you forget?" asked audience member Odet Meyers, a Holocaust survivor. She told of a group of survivors who have been meeting regularly since 1987 to come to terms with their history. "If it's taking us that long, it isn't a simple questions. We have to go profoundly together to heal. To persist in this kind of honesty."

Speaking through her daughter who was translating, Nuer described being hungry and frightened during the war, separated from her family and how that and a more recent bought with cancer led her to develop a philosophy about speaking about the unacceptable while keeping the vision of s omething better. "I want to believe if us human beings could create such a level of perfection (for destruction), why shouldn't we create such a perfect positive one," she said.