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WHERE GERMANS MAKE PEACE WITH THEIR DEAD

Through a practice that is part therapy and part séance, children of war come to terms with their history.

By Burkhard Bilger

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My great-grandmother Luise Gönner had a keen eye for dead people. She would see them sitting by the side of the road sometimes when she worked in her garden in the morning, or waiting by the village crossroads at dusk, a look of mournful reproof in their eyes. Whether the sight alarmed or consoled her, I can't say. Luise was born in 1871 and died six months after my mother's birth, in 1935. I know only the stories about her that my mother heard growing up. She says that Luise was in most ways a sturdy, commonsensical soul, so I like to imagine that she took her visitations in stride: old friends and neighbors stopping by to pick up the conversation where they'd left off.

Herzogenweiler, the village where Luise was born and spent nearly every day of her life, lies in the heart of the Black Forest, hemmed in on three sides by dark ranks of pines. The land belonged to the Prince of Fürstenberg in Luise's day and was worked by tenant farmers not much better off than serfs.

Although the people of Herzogenweiler were deeply devout, theirs was a pre-Reformation sort of Catholicism—a murky brew of folklore, superstition, and pitiless religion. Even the boldest farmers hurried home before nightfall, lest some dire spirit overtake them, and the Devil was more than an idle threat. He was the dark stranger who might come knocking at your door some windy night; the man with the hooded eyes at the end of the bar, lazily flipping a coin in the air.

Luise was the village midwife, so mortality was never far from her mind. The closest doctor was in Villingen, two hours away on foot in the next valley, so she took care of all but the most grievous injuries. The villagers cut lumber for added wages, often in the depths of winter, so mishaps were common: falling timbers, piercing splinters, blades that skipped off bark and bit into ankles and thighs. Luise got used to sending bodies large and small to the walled-in graveyard in the meadow below the village, only to meet them again later on the road.

My mother and my eldest daughter owe Luise their middle name—a keepsake of the Old Country, like a lock of hair or a finger bone. Although they haven't been known to socialize with the dead, a strain of second sight is said to run in the family. My great-aunt Regina, who was born in Romania, worked as a fortune-teller in Herzogenweiler during the Second World War, scanning coffee grounds and tarot cards for news of fallen soldiers. My mother, too, has had her share of strange premonitions: accidents foretold, telephones answered before the first ring. She's a historian by training and a sober thinker by nature, but she has never quite shaken her belief in ghosts.

It's an old German habit of mind, this mixing of the mystical and the scientific. You can see it in medieval sages like Meister Eckhart and Hildegard von Bingen, and in the aisles of any German drugstore, where modern pharmaceuticals sit side by side with homeopathic tinctures. "To our modern way of thinking, this all sounds quite insane," Rudolf Steiner, the patron saint of organic agriculture and alternative schooling, declared in 1924. He had just urged an audience of Silesian farmers to fertilize their fields with cow intestines stuffed with chamomile blossoms, and stag bladders filled with

yarrow root (stag bladders being "almost an image of the cosmos"). Steiner claimed that he, too, could see spirits in his waking life. "Just as in the body, eye and ear develop as organs of perception," he wrote, "so does a man develop in himself spiritual organs of perception through which the soul and spiritual worlds are opened to him."

To my mother, the best evidence of this was a story she often told about her grandmother. In the spring of 1918, Luise was asleep one night in the upstairs bedroom of her farmhouse when she woke to the sound of footsteps outside. The village was deserted at that hour, her daughter and husband asleep. But she knew that shuffling gait and heavy footfall. It could only be Josef, her eldest son, home at last from the war in France. She lurched up in bed to greet him, then stopped and listened again, more intently this time. No. It wasn't him after all. It was just his spirit come back to pay them a last visit. She lay down and shook her husband by the shoulder. "*Jetzt isch de Josef gstorbe*," she told him, in her soft Black Forest dialect. "Now Josef has died."

A week later, they received word that he'd fallen at Flanders—on the same day that his ghost had passed by.

I thought of that story one morning last year, sitting in a small drawing room in Berlin. It was on the ground floor of an ornate prewar building in the heart of the old western zone, along a leafy side street off Neue Kantstrasse. The room was bare of furniture aside from a dozen mismatched chairs and a dresser of figured maple. One tall window let in a wintry light. The chairs were occupied by a circle of silent, seemingly spellbound men and women, their eyes pinned on a woman at the center of the room. Her name was Gabriele Baring, and she was there to help them make peace with their dead.

A man across the room was telling Baring about his family history. He was a therapist like her and a veteran of this type of gathering, known as a *Familienaufstellung*, or family constellation. Ulf, as I'll call him, was a bearish man in a lumpy burgundy sweater. He wore suède sandals with dark socks and had a child's bright, confiding eyes—a face not made for sadness, somehow, though he couldn't seem to escape it. He and his wife had lost their home of

twelve years, on a beautiful farm, when the owner gave the property to his son. "It was like being driven from Paradise," Ulf said. He'd twice been hospitalized for depression and panic attacks since then, and he'd lost twenty-five pounds. "I'm wondering if this has something to do with my parents' history as refugees during the war," he said.

Baring jotted some lines in a black Moleskine as Ulf spoke, and sketched out the first branches of a "genogram"—a kind of overgrown family tree. Ulf's paternal grandfather had died in a Russian prison camp in the First World War. His father enlisted at seventeen, in 1939, and was sent to a boarding school for élite Nazi officers in training. He wound up in a Russian prison camp as well. By the time he got out, in 1946, his family had been driven from East Germany. Ulf's mother was also a refugee, from Kiel, on the Baltic Sea. It was a lovely city before the war, Ulf said, laced with canals and bridges. But it had a naval base and a submarine factory, so Allied bombers reduced it to rubble. His mother was nine when her family fled.

Baring looked up from her notebook and held Ulf's eyes for a moment. At sixty-two, she still had the wholesome, high-spirited look of the German poster

girls of the nineteen-thirties—apple cheeks and white-blond hair. But her voice had a smoky, conspiratorial warmth. Her own father had lost a leg on the Russian front and never truly recovered, and her home town of Hanover was nearly as devastated as Kiel. “This country had fourteen million refugees,” she said. “The fact that we were able to absorb them has been called one of the great accomplishments of postwar Germany. There were all sorts of problems—prejudice, ostracism—but there was no civil war.”

Her listeners shifted in their seats. Most were middle-aged Germans like her, unaccustomed to self-pity and allergic to national pride. Theirs was a country responsible for history’s bloodiest war and most efficient mass murder: sixty million killed, including two-thirds of all European Jews. They were here to wrestle with that guilt, not to make excuses for it. Yet Baring believed that there’d been more than enough suffering to go around, and not nearly enough compassion. Of those fourteen million German refugees, some were colonists in Nazi-occupied territories. But the great majority were civilians fleeing bombed-out cities, or ethnic Germans who’d settled abroad long before the war. They and their children had the same psychological issues as the refugees flooding into Germany from Syria today: depression, alienation, no sense of place. “I’ve led whole sessions filled with nothing but people like you,” Baring said.

She asked Ulf if he was ready to start, and he nodded, gathering himself. Then he stood up and looked around the room. His eyes paused on each of us in turn, as if tapping a tuning fork and assessing the pitch. When he’d gone the full round, he pointed at a tall, wiry man with a penetrating gaze. “Will you be me?” he said. He asked another man to be his uncle and a woman nearby, with a pixie cut and sharp, birdlike features, to be Fear.

What happened next is hard to categorize. It was part theatre, part therapy, part séance—a measure of just how far Germans will go to come to terms with their past. Ulf walked around behind each of his stand-ins and laid his hands on their shoulders. Then he closed his eyes and slowly pushed forward. “Just stop when you feel like they’re in the right spot,” Baring said. Soon the center of the room was filled with people, frozen in place like statues in a war

memorial. For the next hour or so, they would try to channel the person or emotion they'd been asked to represent. To let their spirits speak.

Ulf was about to sit down when his eyes lit on me and he did a double take, as if seeing someone there for the first time. "Will you be my father?" he said.

Like the others in the room, I was there to untangle a knot in my mind. I'd come to Germany to research the life of my grandfather Karl Gönner, Luise's second son. I'd known him a little when I was a boy. My parents emigrated to the United States in 1962, but we still spoke German at home and often went back to see relatives in Weil am Rhein, the village along the French and Swiss borders where my grandfather lived. He always made me a little nervous. Tall and gaunt, with a shock of peppery blond hair, he had a glass eye that would swivel disconcertingly out of line as he spoke. He would ask me questions in a grave voice, like an anthropologist interviewing a Pygmy, and he sometimes gave me a piece of beeswax with honey to chew—strange, like him, with its chambered secrets, but also sweet. I remember watching him tend to the hives behind his house in the mornings, never flinching as the bees swarmed over his neck and arms.

The older I grew, the more of a cipher he seemed. I knew that he'd fought in the First World War like his brother Josef, and that he'd lost an eye to a piece of shrapnel in the Ardennes. I knew that he was sent to Occupied France in the next war, to work as a schoolteacher in a village in Alsace, while his wife and four children stayed behind in Germany. But I also knew that he'd joined the Nazi Party in 1933, and that he eventually became the village's *Ortsgruppenleiter*, or Party chief. My mother rarely talked about his years in France, but she was well versed in the atrocities committed by men in his position. She wrote her doctoral dissertation on the Vichy regime. It must have been a torment to her, trying to square what she learned with her memories of her father. How could he have been both the man she knew and the monster history suggested?

I'd put off answering that question for a long time. Family history is an uneasy topic for a German-American. You can hear it in people's voices when you

mention where your parents were born. “How old are they?” they ask, then count back silently to 1939. A sense of guilt by association hangs in the air, even for people of my generation. More than once, I’ve had friends or students confess that it took them a while to completely trust me, given my background. To be German, it seems, is still to be one part Nazi. In my case, that part is my grandfather.

When I first arrived in Germany, the sheer quantity of research material—the inexhaustibility of the past—seemed overwhelming. The two world wars had papered the Continent with scraps of their history, scattered across hundreds of archives in Germany alone. Seventy miles of files in the Bundesarchiv, in Berlin; nearly a hundred miles of files and microfiche in the Stasi archives, across town; thirty million documents in the Holocaust archives in Bad Arolsen—letters, diaries, and reams of statistics, maps, blueprints, and bills of lading. I felt as if I’d stumbled into Borges’s Library of Babel, its shelves stretching infinitely in every direction. It was hard to know where to start.

Yet wherever I went the archives were full of people. They tottered past in the reading rooms, arms piled with leather-bound volumes, or sat hunched over handwritten documents, the pages yellowed by the acid in their fibres. Berlin is home not only to the Bundesarchiv, where the fastidious, half-mad files of the Nazi Party leadership can be found, but also to the Deutsche Dienstelle, where many of the German military’s records are kept. At the latter, the wait time had grown from six months to fifteen months within two years. “We’ve just been flooded with inquiries,” one archivist told me. “War veterans and their wives have priority—they’re often dying. But even their children aren’t so young anymore. After that, who’s to decide who comes first?”

They rarely liked what they found: an uncle in the Gestapo, another in the Waffen S.S., a family fortune built on confiscated goods. I spoke to Matthias Neukirch, a successful actor in Berlin, who’d spent years researching his mother’s father, Hans Schleif. A noted architect and archeologist, Schleif had tried to steer clear of politics at first. But then he came under the patronage of Heinrich Himmler, the supreme mythmaker of the Nazi Party. Soon Schleif was excavating ancient Germanic sites in Poland, trying to help justify Hitler’s

invasion there, and overseeing the looting of the Warsaw Archeological Museum. When Neukirch requested Schleif's files at the Bundesarchiv, the cart came back with folders stacked two feet high. Buried inside were architectural drawings for underground munitions plants, to be built by concentration-camp inmates.

"I went through a phase where I just wanted it all to go away," my cousin Karin told me, when I visited her in Bavaria. "I hated that whole wartime generation." Born in 1957, Karin grew up in the wake of the '68ers—a generation of Germans fed up with their parents' denials and willful amnesia, and intent on exposing and atoning for their country's crimes. By the time Karin was in school, that meant field trips to Verdun and Dachau. It meant hour after hour in darkened classrooms with clattering projectors, watching cities burn and grave sites filled with corpses. "Three times a week, we had Guilt," as the German comedian Michael Mittermeier has put it. "On Fridays, we had Shame." When Karin, at sixteen, walked into the crematorium at Dachau and the guide wrenched open the oven door, she fainted. "I just wanted all those old soldiers to go ahead and die," she told me. "When the last one is dead, I thought, I won't have to feel guilty anymore."

And, of course, they did die, in time. But then a strange thing happened. As the

generations turned and the war loosened its grip, people began to realize how little they knew about their parents' and grandparents' lives, and how much that silence had shaped their lives. They needed to hear those terrible old stories after all, and the last eyewitnesses were passing away. Germans of the *Tätergeneration*, or generation of perpetrators, were nearly gone. But their children—too young to have fought or to understand the fighting but old enough to have been traumatized by it—were still alive by the million. *Kriegskinder*, they called themselves: children of war.

The drawing room in Berlin was one place where they told their stories. Baring's sessions grew out of the work of Bert Hellinger, a German psychotherapist and former Catholic priest. Hellinger worked for sixteen years as a missionary in South Africa, where he became fascinated by Zulu ancestor worship—the belief that the spirits of the dead guide the living and must be consulted through the intercession of a *sangoma*, or diviner. When Hellinger returned to Europe in 1969, at the age of forty-four, he studied psychotherapy in Vienna and eventually left the priesthood and married. But he never seems to have lost his religious belief. He just incorporated it into his practice.

Hellinger's method is reminiscent of psychodrama—an early form of Viennese psychotherapy in which patients act out traumatic memories, often on stage or with props. But it's closest to family sculpting, a type of group therapy developed by the psychologist Virginia Satir in the early nineteen-sixties. In Satir's method, patients take turns posing one another in groups to depict key moments in their lives. How and where people stand—whether a wife faces her husband or has her back to him, or a son is alone in a corner or encircled by siblings—embodies their relationship.

Sometimes it helps people see that relationship clearly for the first time. A *Familienaufstellung* is both more impersonal and more weirdly intimate. The people in the room take turns posing one another, as in family sculpting, but rather than work with actual family members, who might inhibit one another, Hellinger and his followers work with complete strangers. None of the people in the room with me had met before that weekend. We knew nothing about Ulf's family aside from what he'd just told Baring. Yet somehow we were

supposed to intuit his deepest feelings and most painful family relations—to reveal things about his past that even he didn't know.

Baring's retreats usually last two days and include ten to fifteen patients, who take turns working with her and acting as stand-ins for one another. Each session follows roughly the same order, like a religious ritual: confession, supplication, revelation, reconciliation. A malfunctioning family is wrenched into working order. The whole process takes less than two hours—a quick fix as therapy goes, which may account for some of its appeal. Hellinger's books have sold more than a million copies and have spawned thousands of practices like Baring's. "Bert Hellinger is Germany's most prominent family therapist," the newspaper *Die Zeit* declared, with some alarm, in 2003. "He is a kind of Dalai Lama of the psychoscene."

Baring first met Hellinger in 1999 and trained with him off and on for more than ten years. She has become a well-known figure in her own right, a frequent speaker at conferences on post-traumatic stress and war survivors and the author of a book titled "The Secret Fears of Germans." She works with the crisp professionalism of any mainstream psychologist, yet there is a mystical element in her work that would mark her in America as an outlier among therapists, if not a kook. "There is a kind of family consciousness we share," she told me. "Why does a mother go walking along a beach and suddenly know that her daughter in Canada or Asia just had an accident? Why does a dog know that his master is coming home? There are no coincidences. They have information we don't have. That's what we're trying to uncover—the family secrets that lie hidden in our cells."

When Ulf was done arranging his stand-ins, Baring began to wander among us. She peered at this person's expressions and that person's body position. Most of us were standing upright or slouched on one leg, our hands on our hips or hanging at our sides. But Ulf's uncle was bent in half, as if racked by cramps. "What are you feeling?" Baring asked. "I don't know," he said. "There's just this tension in my gut." Then he straightened up and pointed at me. "Why were you always so distant, so cold?" he demanded, his face flushed and twisted.

I stared at him, not sure what to say. The thought crossed my mind that I wasn't the best person for this sort of thing. If second sight runs in my family, I don't seem to have inherited it—I can barely predict what I'm doing the next day. I'd hoped to come to this retreat as a neutral observer, quietly taking notes in the corner. But Baring wouldn't hear of it. I was either in or out, she said—anything else would disrupt the group dynamic. So I did the best I could. When Baring asked what I felt, I told her that I wasn't sure. "What he's saying isn't really registering," I said. "I just feel numb." If Ulf's ancestors were in the room, they weren't talking to me.

I glanced over at Baring, a little sheepishly, but my comments only seemed to have redoubled her interest. Why was I numb? Was I repressing something? Were those my own feelings or Ulf's father's transmitted through me? As Baring moved on among the others, they joined in with their own thoughts and sensations.
"My left arm has no feeling."
"I'm shaking inside. I can hardly bear it."
At first, their exchanges had the cryptic, insinuating quality of lines in a Pinter play. But as the session wore on, a few clear story lines emerged. The uncle and father had suffered a terrible rift, some people sensed, perhaps over a woman they'd both loved. Others suspected that the uncle was hiding something much worse. While they talked, Ulf sat slumped in his chair to one side, his face wet with tears. From time to time, Baring would ask him what he thought. Did these stories ring true? Ulf would nod or shake his head. But even when he disagreed—"I don't remember my uncle and father fighting like that"—Baring would ask him to keep an open mind. "I trust what your stand-ins are feeling."

Baring's role in the session had shifted by then. Instead of just asking questions and stirring up memories, she was actively shaping the story, suggesting lines for the stand-ins to tell one another: "It was your pain I was trying to escape." "I accept you, despite what you did." The uncle was a war criminal, the group eventually decided—though Ulf had made no mention of this earlier—and the rift in the family lay at the heart of Ulf's rootlessness and depression. Baring took a blanket from one of the chairs and had three people

lie on top of it, as if in a mass grave. “I feel so cold all of a sudden,” one of the women said. “It’s as if there’s a scream caught in my throat.”

“I’m Monet. Who the hell is Manet?”

This wasn’t playacting, Baring insisted later. She had warned us not to try to assume a role or analyze our characters’ motives. Don’t think, just feel. When I asked how her patients could know so much about total strangers, she admitted that it was a mystery. She mentioned quantum theory and the notion of “morphic resonance,” proposed by the British parapsychologist Rupert Sheldrake. Just as two particles could affect one another across long distances or members of a species might inherit a collective memory, she suggested, so two strangers might communicate through time: “Our minds are energetically bound. Our unconscious is connected.”

If sessions like Baring’s have found such a passionate following, it may be because her country’s secrets run so dark and deep. Communing with your ancestors is more than a matter of mystical belief in Germany, Baring thinks. It’s a practical necessity. How else can a people so bent on silence for so long ever learn their true history?

Two months before the *Familienaufstellung*, I went to a national congress of *Kriegskinder* in Cologne. The congress was held in a Lutheran church not far

from the city's Gothic cathedral—one of Germany's oldest pilgrimage sites, where the bones of the Three Wise Men are said to lie. More than twice as many people had requested tickets as were available, and the church was packed to a third over capacity. The tight quarters and meagre rations would help set the mood, the organizer, Curt Hondrich, told us. "It will remind us of our theme," he said.

Hondrich was one of the founders of the *Kriegskinder* movement, and a war child himself. Red-faced and roundly built, with a bald pate fringed with gray, he looked like Freud's jolly younger brother and had worked as a student pastor and journalist before becoming interested in psychoanalysis. Born in 1939, Hondrich spent the war in a state of vague alarm, or so he imagined. His mother was Jewish by Nazi standards (one of her grandparents was a Jew). His father was a Party member who manufactured munitions cases for the Wehrmacht in Cologne; he used his work and political connections as a smoke screen to hide his wife's identity. "You can hardly imagine what it's like to live in a family where there is a time bomb sitting inside it," Hondrich told me. "My mother knew that at any moment she could be taken away."

The memories sometimes came back to him in flashes: Cowering in a concrete bunker with other neighborhood kids, their parents too hysterical to pay them any mind, the ground above them shaking from phosphor bombs. The sky afterward flaming red, flecked with white as British bombers bailed from stricken planes and drifted down to the burning city. The bodies splayed like black puppets on the sidewalks. Then later, after the family had fled to northern Germany, bathing in the Weser River on a summer afternoon. Scrambling for cover as a squad of enemy fighters appeared above the trees, turned and dived and strafed him as he ran, the sand flying up to either side where the bullets struck. "It stayed with me," he told me, "that deep experience of fear."

What to do with memories like that? Tamp them down in your chest. Bury them so deep that you forget they're there, betrayed only by your hammering pulse. Hondrich had always been afraid to swim, but never connected that fear to his experience on the Weser. Then one day in 1990, when he was working

as a culture editor for Westdeutscher Rundfunk in Cologne—the West German NPR—he saw a report on television about the Gulf War in Kuwait. Ever since the fighting began, elderly Germans had been hoarding food and water, as if preparing for an attack. The war was five thousand miles away, yet they could already hear boot steps approaching. What are they thinking? Hondrich wondered as he watched the footage. It was a while before he noticed that he was crying.
Hondrich went on to assign a story on *Kriegskinder* to Sabine Bode, a reporter in Cologne who'd been investigating her own family history.

Germany still had more than fifteen million inhabitants born between 1930 and 1945 (they're now dying at the rate of a third of a million a year), but Bode had trouble finding any who would talk about the trauma they'd experienced. "If I was on a train to Hamburg and saw a person with gray hair sitting alone, I'd ask if I could take a seat beside them," she told me recently. "It wasn't hard to get them to tell stories about the war. That was very easy. But when I asked how it affected their lives—they couldn't answer this question. 'No, no, no. It didn't do us any harm,' they'd say. 'We were just children—it was normal for us.' "

The *Kriegskinder* belong to a generation raised with *Schwarze Pädagogik*, the German version of "Spare the rod, spoil the child." Bed-wetting, stuttering, slumping your shoulders: any deviance was swiftly corrected, any whining dismissed as weakness. (In "Der Struwwelpeter," the most famous German children's book of that era, a character's thumbs are chopped off because he won't stop sucking them.) One of Bode's respondents remembered her mother scolding her after a bombing raid: "Why can't you be happy for once? Just be glad you're alive."

It took Bode ten years to gather and prepare the stories for her first book, "The Forgotten Generation." Published in 2004, it sold poorly at first. To speak openly of German war trauma—to play the victim in a country that had victimized so many—was still taboo. "*O, das bischen Krieg! Andere hatten es viel schlimmer*," Bode's respondents would tell her. "Oh, that bit of war! Others had it much worse." But then, slowly, word of the book began to spread, and

the *Kriegskinder* grew older and lost their compunctions. Their stories multiplied and with them their audience. Bode's book is now in its tenth hardcover printing and has launched *Kriegskinder* groups across the country. "The ghost is coming out of the bottle," she says.

They came to Cologne from every corner of the country, pulling their past behind them like rattling oxcarts. They came because they couldn't sleep at night and their marriages had foundered. Because they'd lived in the same town all their lives yet never felt at home. Because they were undone by loud noises and tight spaces, uneasy with intimacy and desperate with solitude. Because they were seventy years old and still waiting for their lives to begin.

"You can cast out a net and catch them," the psychologist Bertram von der Stein declared, looking out over the crowd. They were mostly women, many too young to remember the war but still prone to its aftershocks. More than seven million Germans were killed in the Second World War, as many as three million of them civilians. They died in air raids, ground battles, labor camps, and refugee shelters, from beatings, exposure, starvation, and disease. In the occupations that followed, as many as two million women and children were raped, and suicide and abortion rates surged.

*"Put me on your do-not-call list."*October 13, 2003

Germans now suffer post-traumatic stress at more than three times the rate of the Swiss across the border, and many *Kriegskinder* have "limited psychic latitude," as German psychologists put it. They avoid change and hold tight to their security. It's an instinct passed down for more than four centuries in Germany—an unbroken chain of fear and remembrance.

Hardly a generation has been untouched by conflict since the Thirty Years War, when more than half the population was killed by marauding armies. "That is the ur-trauma of the German people," Curt Hondrich told me. "That is when the German character was formed."

Inherited trauma was the topic of the hour in Cologne. I spoke to one woman who traced her compulsive cleanliness to her grandmother, who lost a ten-day-old baby to infection in 1940. Another woman blamed her emotional extremes on Russian soldiers in Berlin, who molested her mother and her uncle as children. Some Germans see the smiting hand of a vengeful God in such stories. "He visits the iniquities of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation," as more than one speaker reminded us. But the line between war trauma and ordinary angst—between suffering and self-pity—gets harder to draw as conflict and consequence drift further apart. "In my family, there is a competition to see who suffers most," one young man told me, with a rueful smile. "My mother is on pain and migraine medications, my father has a heart condition, and my sister is going blind. She hit the jackpot."

Sabine Bode has published two more books full of anecdotes like those: "Postwar Children" and "War Grandchildren." In the process, she has "almost single-handedly begotten a new branch of the psychology industry," a columnist for *Die Welt* complained two years ago. "It allows baby boomers and their children to feel like victims of trauma in the heart of plump, peaceful Germany. . . . Thus the great tragedy of the twentieth century is trivialized, made banal, instrumentalized, and perverted."

Yet the evidence that the effects of trauma can reverberate through generations—that history can be "embodied"—has steadily mounted. Studies at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York have found that the children of

Holocaust survivors are three times more likely to develop P.T.S.D., and they're more prone to depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. Studies of twins have backed this up: they suggest that vulnerability to P.T.S.D. is thirty to forty percent heritable. Rachel Yehuda, the psychologist and neuroscientist who led the Mount Sinai studies, has shown that a pregnant woman's experience of trauma and P.T.S.D. may affect her child's development in the womb. And a study at the University of Zurich has shown that stress in a male mouse can alter the RNA in his sperm, causing depression and behavioral changes that persist in his progeny. "I think of it this way," a psychologist who works with German veterans of the Gulf War explained at the congress. "Everyone who is in the war is probably infected, and they can infect their descendants."

How to break the chain? German pacifism has made a good start—the effects of P.T.S.D. fade with each generation. And psychotherapy, like so much else, is both generously funded and strictly regulated in Germany: public health insurance pays for up to three hundred hours of counselling. There was much talk in Cologne of breakthroughs made after years of analysis. "A dream from the fifty-fourth hour," a speaker from the Institute for Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy in Düsseldorf intoned, while describing one of her case histories. Another speaker noted that she'd needed six hundred hours of counselling just to start to come to terms with her family history.

It was late in the day by then, after many hours of grim statistics and tragic stories, and I could feel the crowd getting impatient. Were these troubles really so intractable? But then the last speaker began to talk about her own practice in Berlin. She used a much more efficient method these days, she said, and it had proved extremely effective. It was called a *Familienaufstellung*. The speaker was Gabriele Baring.

"When I hear some of these case histories, I just shake my head," Baring told me the next morning. "When they say, 'After a year and a half, we discovered . . . ' I think, My God, we do that in three weekends!" We were sitting in a café a few blocks from the church, Baring with a cigarette in one hand and a cup of black coffee in the other. She peered over her small horn-

rimmed frames as she talked, and punctuated her confidences with a low, husky laugh. Before she became a therapist, ten years ago, Baring was a senior editor at *Merian*, a well-known travel magazine in Germany. Her husband, Arnulf Baring, is one of the country's foremost political scientists and the scion of an Anglo-German line that has produced dozens of peers and baronets. Gabriele's patients tend to come from the same élite circles, as does her frank, pungent talk. Her method depends on it. "The grief that does not speak / Whispers the o'er-fraught heart and bids it break," she'd told the crowd in Cologne, quoting from "Macbeth" in German.

A *Familienaufstellung* is a machine for processing grief. It's designed to find the broken parts in a family's history and fix them. Like Catholic confession, it's not about exploring feelings; it's about seeking absolution. Bert Hellinger, the former priest, imbued his method with traditional family values. The father is the head of the household; the mother takes care of the children; the children must honor and forgive their elders. Any disruption in this structure—whether from adultery, abuse, indifference, or abandonment—must be set to rights. Any broken ties, even to the unborn, may haunt the descendants. When I told Baring that my great-grandmother was a midwife in the Black Forest, she nodded gravely: "In those days, midwives also performed abortions," she said. "They called them angel-makers."

Hellinger is now ninety and still leads the occasional *Familienaufstellung*, at home and abroad, sometimes drawing audiences of several hundred. He has become a guru of sorts, and his views have grown correspondingly capricious—even perverse at times. In a session cited by *Die Zeit* in 2003, one of Hellinger's patients mentioned that she'd divorced her first husband, who was a philanderer. "This will have bitter consequences for you," Hellinger told her. "When a woman treats a man this way, she often contracts breast cancer." In another session, in Leipzig, a separating couple reportedly asked Hellinger which of them should have custody of their four children. Hellinger pondered for a moment and pointed at the husband. "There sits love," he said. Then he pointed at the wife. "And here sits the cold heart. The children aren't safe with the wife. They belong to the husband."

"It's crazy," Thomas Fydrich, a professor of psychotherapy at Humboldt University in Berlin, told me when I asked him about summary judgments like these. "If you have a weak person who is very sensitive, you can imagine how much fear it can create." The stories told in a *Familienaufstellung* can define a reality of their own, he said. "They may feel real but they may not be true. That's the dangerous part. You can create a problem that may not be there." The day after the session in Leipzig, the mother reportedly took her own life.

Small wonder that Hellinger's method has yet to be approved or regulated by the German public health-care system. "It's a colorful field," Fritz Simon, Hellinger's first publisher and a former professor of psychiatry at the University of Heidelberg, told me. "You have some very experienced psychologists, and others who are truck drivers who learned to do it over a weekend."

June 25, 2012

Many of Hellinger's followers have distanced themselves from their founder over the years. Baring told me to concentrate on his earlier work—though her approach may be as prone as his to inventing false narratives—while other therapists have tried to put their method on firmer footing. Two years ago, a group of psychologists at the University of Heidelberg published a controlled,

randomized study of *Familienaufstellungen*. They took two hundred and eight participants and divided them into two groups. Half were kept on a waiting list; the other half were divided into groups of twenty-six and participated in a three-day-long session, led by an experienced therapist (a best-case scenario, given the haphazard quality of the field). Two weeks after the session, members of the active group felt better, on average, about their social relations than seventy-three per cent of those in the control group.

A *Familienaufstellung* owes much of its power to the secrets it reveals. It's like a visit to a psychic under the sober auspices of therapy. How does it work, if not by spiritual means? Thirteen years ago, Peter Schlötter, a doctoral candidate in psychology at the University of Witten/Herdecke, designed a study to find out. A former engineer, Schlötter began by videotaping a session and marking exactly where the participants stood and what they said. Then he set up life-size statues in their place and had volunteers take turns replacing them. When asked how they felt at different spots, the volunteers gave remarkably consistent answers. They felt powerful in some places and weak in others, connected to certain people and disconnected from others. When volunteers in a follow-up study were asked where they felt best in the group, they were drawn to the same spots.

Schlötter repeated the experiment last year in China, with employees of the German engineering firm Bosch. (Eva Madelung, the daughter of the company's founder, Robert Bosch, is a *Kriegskind*, born in 1931, and a devotee of *Familienaufstellungen*.) The results followed the same pattern. There is a hidden language in how we stand together, Schlötter told me—a body language writ large that's so rich and specific that even strangers can decipher it.

Schlötter recently led a session in which one of the stand-ins sensed that the patient had a half brother, born out of wedlock. Afterward, the patient repeated the story to one of his aunts, who confirmed that it was true. "The patient had this idea in his subconscious, and the stand-in recognized it," Schlötter told me. No ghosts necessary.

Late this past winter, almost exactly a year after my first *Familienaufstellung*, I found myself back in Berlin, standing in front of Baring's studio off Neue Kantstrasse. A year of researching my family history had done little to convince me that I could communicate with the dead, but I couldn't get the last session out of my head. So much of what the stand-ins had said seemed to strike a chord with the people listening. I'd learned a great deal about my grandfather since then, but there was much more that I would never know, and I wondered what a roomful of ordinary Germans might make of him.

The group in the drawing room included two doctors, a therapist, a seminarian, a computer scientist, and a philosophy student. Some were there to work through their family issues, others just to serve as stand-ins—*Familienaufstellung* junkies, people call them. The intensity of the sessions seems to be addictive, and, according to the Heidelberg study, they're almost equally therapeutic for patients and stand-ins. The very act of empathizing so deeply seems to help people understand themselves.

Still, it's exhausting. Baring's sessions run from nine in the morning till six at night. By the end of the second day, I'd been a brother, a grandfather, Restlessness, and the country of Germany. I'd watched people burst into tears, climb into one another's laps, and pretend to be God. I'd heard a woman scream that she was bleeding from her vagina and that crows had eaten her baby. At times, the sobs and shouting rose to such a pitch that I worried that the police might come. (Germans tend to be eerily quiet at home, at least by American standards.) There were moments, I'll admit, when I would rather have had all my molars pulled than be asked to play another Nazi war criminal. But if catharsis was what was required, then Baring surely provided it.

When my turn came, I felt a twinge of performance anxiety. All the others had ended their sessions in tears. Would I have to do the same? I imagined my stand-ins circling the room for hours, telling dismal tales about my ancestors until I finally broke down. Baring is a canny judge of character and a skilled stage manager. She knows how to strip the nerves in a group and then soothe them, tease out complications and swiftly resolve them. "Let's just see how we can get out of this mess," as she put it in one session. But what if there was no

trauma to unearth? No guilty party to absolve?

The more I'd learned about my grandfather, the more contradictory he seemed. He'd studied to be a priest, but lost his faith on the battlefield. He'd been arrested as a war criminal, but was sent home without a sentence. He'd served as a teacher and Nazi administrator, but seemed to have played a dangerous double game. Among the few personal effects that he left behind when he died, in 1979, was a batch of letters from the village in Alsace where he was stationed. They were handwritten by local farmers and villagers and addressed to the French military authorities in Strasbourg, where my grandfather was in solitary confinement after the war. They were pleading for his release.

"Of the eighteen hundred souls in our village, not one was exiled," a villager named Joseph Merzisen wrote. Another wrote that his son had been arrested while fleeing Alsace and was sent to a concentration camp. "But Herr Gönner, after many appeals, was able to secure his freedom for us." He had even helped the same boy stay hidden from German authorities when he was later drafted. Yet, in other ways, my grandfather had stayed a loyal German to the end. A few months earlier, I'd tracked down some of his former students in Alsace, now in their eighties. They all described him in the same confounding way. "Your grandfather was a good man," one of them told me. "He was a just man. But he was a fanatical Nazi."

The obvious spot to put his stand-in was trapped in a corner, facing the wall. I placed my grandmother behind him—the supportive wife, abandoned for war—and my mother beside her. Then I put my three uncles in a wedge behind them all. They stood there for a moment in silence, as if humming to the same vibration—an arrow shot into an oak. Then everyone seemed to move and talk at once. I remember my mother falling to her knees and laying her forehead on the ground; my grandmother kneeling beside her and putting a hand on her shoulder; my grandfather saying, "You have to believe in something. If not God, then Hitler." But it's hard to recall how it all fit together. There is a kind of dream logic to a *Familienaufstellung* that's lost in the retelling.

It took Baring, as usual, to get us back to the plot. She chose one woman from the group to represent my grandfather's victims, and another to represent those he'd saved. The first stand-in was an elderly therapist with hollow, deep-set eyes. She lay on the ground and pointed a long, thin finger at him. "Acknowledge us!" she said. One of my uncles tried to intervene. "He did better than almost anyone!" he said. But my grandfather shook his head. His stand-in was a pale, ponytailed art-history student in his twenties—nothing like the stern figure I'd known, with his unblinking glass eye. But for a moment I could almost see a resemblance. "I could have saved them, but I didn't," he said. "I passed along their coördinates, and they died."

"Every guy out there is either married, gay, or a human suit zipped around a column of ants." March 10, 2014

Whether it's true, I can't say. I never found any trace of those victims in German or French archives. Like a lot of the revelations in Baring's sessions, this one struck me as a little too convenient. When you're haunted by an ancestor's past, you want nothing more than to hear him confess his sins—to condemn or forgive him once and for all, and then banish his ghost to history. But it's rarely that simple.

What did ring true were much quieter details. The mutual devotion of my mother and grandmother, for instance, and the eerie way that the stand-ins captured my three uncles. I'd positioned my mother's two older brothers side by side, with their little brother behind them, and from that minimal geometry a familiar portrait emerged. The middle son talked about his deep connection to his father, which I'd learned about only recently from their letters. The youngest bemoaned his sense of disconnection, of being cast aside: "Why can't h e see me?" he said. Yet I'd never told the group that my uncle felt this way, or that he was sent from home at age eight, to live with relatives in the Black Forest after the war, when the rest of the family was starving.

A lucky guess, it's tempting to say—the psychic's usual shot in the dark. But any good divination starts with a close study of the seeker, and unconscious cues of the sort that Peter Schlötter documented. That's what has stayed with me most from Baring's sessions: the careful attention people paid to one another—their hunger for these stories and the ardor with which they abandoned themselves to them. These weren't just strangers in a room. They were the Germans I'd known growing up, stoics and stiff-upper-lippers of long standing. How reserved they were on the street, even in Berlin! How cautious with their feelings compared with the average oversharing New Yorker. Yet here they were, sobbing in one another's arms, divided and united, accused and forgiven, reënacting their sorrows with people they'd never met.

Before coming to Berlin, I'd stopped off in Frankfurt to see Sabine Bode. She was giving a talk on *Kriegskinder* at the local health ministry, and the lecture hall was full, mostly with elderly listeners. ("A little louder!" a hoarse voice called out from the crowd.) Bode stood before them with her long, unbound hair and blunt, earthy manner—the very picture of the '68er, come to upbraid them for their sins. But she was there to offer comfort instead. "When we were growing up, we had memories of the war, but we didn't work with them," she said. "We agreed that terrible things happened to us, but we couldn't give them weight. My wish is that in reading my books people develop a sense of community. That they think, I'm not alone. I'm not crazy."

Afterward, over dinner, Bode told me that she could understand why my

parents had emigrated to the United States in 1962: “When I look back at the Germans of the fifties and sixties, they were cold, they were impolite to each other, there was no empathy. I was raised in a climate of silence and fog. But now that fog is breaking up.” The change is easiest to see in the country’s response to the refugee crisis, she said. Anti-immigrant groups have been on the rise since the attacks in Paris and Cologne last year. Yet Germany has taken in well over a million asylum seekers in the past two years and has pledged to resettle more refugees than all other European countries combined.

“When the last wave of refugees arrived from Bosnia in the nineties, they were received differently,” Bode said. “There were a lot of people willing to help back then, and it was very well organized. But it felt like an obligation, a moral duty. There wasn’t this empathy which is so apparent today, and so touching and important.” Only twenty years have passed between the two waves, she said, but the Germans know so much more about their family histories now. Many have learned how their own parents and grandparents suffered as refugees once, and that it was only by taking in that ragged flood of the war-torn and homeless, wounded and despairing, that the country began to heal itself. “Fourteen million refugees! Can you imagine?” she said. By learning to live with our memories, Bode believed, we learn to live with each other.

My session in Berlin ended without undue drama. The stand-ins could tell that I was worn out, I think, and unprepared for any new revelations. Or maybe they were just relieved at the chance for a happier ending. “I think it’s good what you’re doing,” the ponytailed art-history student told me, clasping my arm. Then Baring had us join the others in the middle of the room. We stood there for a moment shoulder-to-shoulder—gathered so close that we left no room for coded messages or forgotten children—and faced forward, smiling, as if for a camera: a family portrait. Then we all took our seats and began again. ♦

Burkhard Bilger published his first piece in The New Yorker in 2000 and became a staff writer the following year.

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