

My name is Harry Schanzer. I am going to share with you a personal story that for me brings up significant connections with the meaning of Yom Kippur.

I was born in Chile In the midst of the Second World War. My father left Germany for Chile in 1938. He lost a brother and a sister who died in Auschwitz. My mother left Czechoslovakia in 1939. She lost both of her parents and a sister as they also died in a concentration camp. I had a very comfortable upbringing, surrounded by love. My parents never spoke to me of their painful past and I never asked them about it. One thing I learned from them, as I will document in one minute: Germans were evil people. They killed 6 million of us. And I resisted until very recently stepping on German soil or even using products manufactured by them.

Just recently, I began to ask myself questions about my family's past. How much would I have loved my parents to be alive for them to tell their histories personally! With the help of some family members who were well versed in genealogy and a website called My Heritage, I began to search the family history.

About 9 months ago, I received a contact in my email. The name of the sender was Jürgen Kollner and he was from the same town in which my father lived in Germany-Leipzig. Curiosity made me respond. And yes, Jürgen was the grandson of my uncle David, my father's oldest brother who died in Auschwitz. An intense email communication started and I learned that Uncle David had had 2 children with a German Christian woman. They never married and the children grew up with their mother and maternal grandparents, and took both religion and last name from them. One of these children, Siegfried, was the father of Jürgen. In 1944, at age 21, Siegfried, my first cousin, was drafted into the German army, serving in a criminal battalion and doing force labor. Upon returning at the end of the war, he found his family decimated. He learned that he had an uncle in Chile, my father, and wrote to him asking for help and trying to learn the whereabouts of his father. Years later, upon moving his father to a nursing home and closing his apartment, Jürgen found my father's response letter. And let me read you a few paragraphs of this long letter:

September 17, 1946.

Dear Siegfried:

Just a few days ago I received your letter. I must let you know that the optimism in your letter is unjustified. I need to tell you that you can no longer count on your father and my beloved brother David being alive.

In the next paragraph my father tells Siegfried about how his father died: living and hiding in Nice France under the Vichy regime, persecuted and not having enough food for survival, he and his sister hired somebody to take them to Switzerland. Upon crossing the border, the Swiss police caught them and returned them to the French police. And they ended in Auschwitz where they were murdered.

My father continues:

Please do not believe that I have any ill feelings toward you. But you will have to understand, as very few Germans do, the magnitude of the crime, as six million Davids were gassed and burned. They were decent and innocent people who never hurt a hair on anyone's head but whose only sin was to be Jewish. And look at the Nuremberg process. Each one of these murderers of millions will claim nowadays that they had nothing to do with it. That they "never knew" about the conditions in the concentration camps while I and every child in Germany were perfectly aware of it in 1938. Yes, if these despicable people do not have the courage to acknowledge their crimes, why should millions of Germans today act and feel any different?

And my father finished the correspondence by saying: I will not close this letter before again assuring you that I have nothing against you. If my lines are hard, it is because I cannot send you a letter without expressing my feelings. I would have to be a machine and not a human being.

Best regards,

And my father signed this letter.

My intense email correspondence made me feel very close to Jürgen. I learned about his past, his upbringing in Communist Germany, his complete lack of knowledge of Judaism, and over all his humanity. And that was enough for me to decide to travel to Germany and get to know him personally.

Five months ago, Helena-my wife, and I went there and spent 5 days with Jürgen and his family. And that was a deep experience. I learned from him and he learned from me. He showed deep interest in learning about his grandfather's roots. And he asked me to help him understand Judaism. And when departing, he told me: "I want you to know that my middle name is David". And I thought to myself: "in normal times, your last name would have been Schanzer".

What does this personal history have to do with Yom Kippur? On this day, we exert Teshuva: we look deep inside ourselves, we acknowledge our sins, we ask for forgiveness, we forgive and we renew ourselves. And in this regard, I have asked myself, can I forgive the Nazis and their generation? No, evil cannot be forgiven or forgotten. We have to fight any individual or group that tries to revive any racist, anti-Semitic, anti-any religion xenophobic ideology, now and ever, here in the United States and in any other place in the world. Do we have to blame the younger generations of Germans for what their parents and grandparents did? The Gemara teaches us that "Descendants are not punished for the actions of their ancestors when they do not adopt the actions as their own". Here is where renewal comes to play a role. I feel that Jürgen has taught me about the new Germany, a country that has exerted the act of self-examination, has acknowledged wrongdoing, has the strongest anti-defamation laws of any country in the world, is educating its young generation about the horrible acts of generations past and

has transformed itself from evil to humanitarian. Yes, there are continuing challenges that are indeed worrisome: a growing number of extreme right groups, skinheads, neo-Nazis, as it was demonstrated in last week's election. But the government, the free press and the huge majority of the population, fight them in an open democratic society, reducing them to a significant minority. It is a model that should be emulated here and there, all over the world. And we Jews should not blame this German generation for the terrible sins of their past generations.d

Have a Shana Tovah and I wish you all to be inscribed in the book of life.