

## **Chayyim – that means Life!**

### **People who are not allowed to live**

Emotional chaos! Rage at my father, how could he participate? Shame, disbelief, guilt, horror and grief alternate in me. So much suffering and death. Why did he never talk about it, damn it. Now it's too late! I think of the people who were not allowed to live out their lives. I am researching names in a memorial book for the Jews of Rovno, see their faces in the old photos, a girl looks at me through the pretty dark eyes, eight years old, her life is taken, before it barely begun. I cannot stand it.

Step by step, I found out several years ago that my father was not simply "at war". He was employed in a unit that was involved in the extermination of the Jewish population of Rovno in the Ukraine, mass murder of thousands of innocent people. It flashes through me over and over again: hopefully he was an outpost during the mass killings; hopefully he did not shoot these innocent people, I so hope that he allowed someone to escape... Did he drive the victims from their homes? Was he a sentry, did he see the fear in the people's faces? Did he look into the faces of the men, women and children on the way to their excavations? He was not a shooter that I did find out but did he stand next to them? I want to love my father, can I still?

I'll never know what exactly, specifically he did, how he behaved in the face of terror. But these "ordinary men" (Christopher Browning) were involved, very few evaded it, and even fewer tried to actively help the people. After our dialogue group this question moved a bit to the background for me. My father is long dead, his "brokenness", his damaged soul and his deafening silence were my childhood companions. Only after his death, did I begin to understand. Although he wanted to teach me the equality of man and the kindness towards strangers, he lived it by example. But he has left me with all the shadows, the unspoken, the guilt, the suffering and the acknowledgment of all the debt and injustice. He had no courage, he took on a great guilt and silenced it, but he was a good father to me.

### **One by One and our Dialogue Group**

I always think of the victims, their life, fear and few survivors. What happened to them? I have reconstructed the events in Rovno, the last hours of the victims. It has occupied me for many years.

I am so sorry.

Rosalie Gerut's music led me to One by One. It was my need to tell the descendants of the victims: yes my father was there at the time, there were real people who have done this to your families, they were not "the Nazis" who have suddenly appeared in Germany and seduced the Germans, but they were our parents and grandparents who supported the "Third Reich". I expected to be confronted in the dialogue group with accusations, rejection, anger or being ostracized – it would not be inconceivable. I hoped that my outreached hand would be seen. Yet so much more happened.

We told our stories, the stories of our families, personal experiences and connection to the "Holocaust". Sometimes apparently 'normal' everyday experiences, our parents and grandparents did live in those times. We also become witnesses of endless suffering, often only hinted at, we hear of tragic fate, and also of amazing luck and almost miraculous ways of survival. Also of courage and willingness to help. Perpetrator stories from their own families, murder, trauma, flight and expulsion. Fathers and grandfathers who never were held accountable, but left their guilt and debt to their families.

I was tremendously moved: I sit across from people who have lost their relatives. He his grandparents. She was never able to get to know her great aunt and great uncle. Her cousin only reached the age of 15. One family survived, 70 relatives did not. Her mother survived, but is internally broken... The names and faces of victims become real for me; it's not this monstrous number of 6 million, but a beloved grandmother and the pain of the person sitting across from me are real.

What a burden for the survivors! Often as the only ones of the whole families why me, they asked themselves. Cut off, devoid of their roots, not dead, not killed. But all that was life, was desecrated and destroyed...They started anew, had children, and reclaimed themselves, their dignity and life. Some say:"Yes, we won!", I hear that many of these survivors would never come back to Germany, would not buy German products, the sound of the German language gives them fear and they begin to tremble involuntarily. For the first time I hear it personally from the children and grandchildren that in the families of survivors also existed the wall of silence, and the hidden pain and uncertainty continued into the next generation. Crying parents at night, nightmares, dark Shadows...

And these children and grandchildren come to Berlin to us, with questions, are interested, maybe they have fears and reservations and also hope. Alone, the fact that they have come to Germany to talk to the descendants of the perpetrators is extraordinary. I feel... honored. I find out that it is not easy for some to explain this step to their families.

We exchange ideas, I tell my story. I am grateful that they see me as a person and not only the son of my father. They show their greatness in spite of this enormous injustice, despite their losses, in spite of their pain, they are able to recognize my pain. Here I cannot hold on anymore, tears are flowing, is that possible? The descendants of the victims feel for the descendant of an offender? Should it not be the other way around? For the first time, in this situation do I recognize how burdened I have been for so many years. A mountain of the suffering of the victims and the guilt of the perpetrators has oppressed me, and now they penetrate this mountain with their humanity and compassion. Of course I bear no personal guilty, so I have always told myself; of course, I was not even born yet. Yet inside I have carried a huge burden, that my father has endowed me. My wife and my kids have felt it. They tell me, that after the dialogue group I seem warmer, more open, more loving. I am trying.

Can it be about my pain? I am shamed by the greatness of the empathy with me. I become aware that something is incomplete here, something is missing. One participant leaves a lasting impression upon me. Repeatedly she is able to give voice to her ambivalent feelings, she is not able to be "nice and harmonious" with us. So many people in her family were murdered. She thought before the dialogue group, it is right for the Germans to suffer! I would probably feel the same, yet she was in reality much

further than me. Through her I realized that the mountain of sorrow and guilt remains, yet today we have received another opportunity. This mountain is inhumanely large. One cannot remove it; one could never wear it out. But it stands in the past. This insight I owe to this one participant, who opened her heart, saw us as human beings, emphasized with us and could no longer be happy about our suffering.

We have to accept this mountain, but even if: the sadness remains. And the participants of our dialogue group too will always look at that mountain from different angles. We are not simply “nice and harmonious”, we cannot be. The mountain throws a shadow, and we have to strive anew for the light. That is how I now understand the expression: “Never Forget”. Never forget, so that the past is not allowed to damage our lives in the present. Never forget, so that the children and grandchildren receive a new chance. Together - Tsuzammen.

### **Chayyim!**

These conversations were the core for me, the foundation. They were of such intensity that I thought after a day that a week had passed and our dialogue week seems, in retrospect, like a whole month. Just as important as these discussions were for me, so also the common breaks, walks, our meals, informal evenings, our excursions. Restaurant meals and even the common shopping in the tourist shops. We could nourish the deepest feelings, share them and talk of the darkest past, still walking across the Gendarmenmarkt in Berlin, suddenly cheerful, arm in arm take photos in front of the Berlin Dom, joke, converse and get to know and respect each other. Laughing and crying at the same time, I cannot explain that. I think anyone who reads this might doubt our sincerity and sensibility. But I have a feeling that we have kicked hate and death in the ass, have said yes to life and humanity. Chayyim!

The members of our dialogue group have given me something great, something almost undeserved, and something I have never counted on: the great gift of their trust, and even their friendship. One does not earn gifts, yet I feel a great desire to do something right for them and my family, to become a better person. For that I am grateful to our “facilitators”, the continuous exchange with the members of the dialogue group. In advance I sometimes thought do I really want to deal more and further with this past. But it's not at all the past, it is mine and our present and future at stake in our group. May I also say “Yes, we won”?

I will find the descendants of the survivors of Rovno. I have something to say to them, something that needed to be said for over 70 years.

Martin, July 2012 Dialogue Group Participant