

- 1 - I was born in Budapest, Hungary in 1955, and grew up in the suburbs of Los Angeles, California. My parents, in their 30's and 40's before immigrating, were never fully comfortable speaking English. So we became part of the expatriate Hungarian community. None of our friends knew that we were Jewish, and on Sundays we would drive into Los Angeles to attend the Hungarian Christian church, I don't even know if it was Protestant or Catholic. When I was a teen-ager, after one of these journeys, my mother remarked that she suspected that just about every man in the church had been members of the "Nyilas," the Arrow Cross, Hungarian Nazis. This shocked me. All these nice men, with whom I had grown up, who had attended my piano and dance recitals, were possibly anti-semitic murderers? The next time we got together, I looked at every man there and wondered what they had done during World War II. Had they killed anyone? Did they kill any Jews? Would they denounce us if they found out we were Jews? Did their children, my friends, know? And how do you go on living a normal life, as if nothing had happened, if you murdered someone? Needless to say, my parents forbade me from ever asking my questions, but I never stopped wondering. The loss of my trust in this social group aggravated the darkening lens through which I was beginning to view the world. My parents were not able to assimilate into American life, and so we were different. As a young teen-ager, as far as I was concerned, being different was not a good thing. The only place I felt comfortable with my parents in a social setting was with the Hungarians, and now that was shattered. Meanwhile, my parents continued to socialize with them. I asked them how could they eat and drink with these people. My mother said that they spoke the same language, had the same culture, and this was the closest they could come to home. While I understood my parents, I could not bring myself to continue socializing with the Hungarians in Los Angeles. The hole opened up by that loss, as well as being a rebellious teenager in the wake of the Vietnam War, left me confused, lonely, and angry. However, as with all things in our family, it ended in silence, so my anger turned into sadness and then later into depression. My parents could not understand what I had to be depressed about. After all, we were in America, no one was trying to kill us, we had plenty of food, and a nice place to live. What more did I want? I also felt that I had no right to be depressed. After all, whatever feelings I had or obstacles I encountered, what was that compared to what my parents had endured? Unfortunately, not dealing with my feelings did not lead to those feelings going away. Instead, it led to pain, anger, mistrust and misunderstanding, not only with my parents, but in my interactions with people in many different situations and settings. By my 30's, with a failed marriage behind me, I decided that in order to move forward with my life I had to reach back. So against my parents' wishes, I traveled alone to Europe for the first time. I met my extended family in Hungary and Germany, as well as many other people along the way in many countries. I looked at every person my parents' age and wondered, "What did you do during the War?" My mother had warned me before I left to never bring up the subject. Her position was that it was a different era then and to leave it alone. Besides, it wasn't any of my business since it didn't happen to me. When I asked my aunts and uncles in Hungary about my mother's position, they agreed with her, as did my cousins. None of them wanted me to rock the boat where they lived. After all, I would go home and they still had to live there.

So I kept silent. After my father died, my mother, never an easy person at her best, no longer had anyone to talk to who could understand her experiences. There was no one with whom she could relieve the pain and tension of her memories. This led to many unwarranted, inappropriate, and embarrassing outbursts. Sometimes it was at the market, or at the doctor's, or the post office or elsewhere, alienating and isolating her as she grew old. Through the negative reactions of others, I recognized my reactions and began to empathize with her. I could see that even after more than 40 years, she was a stranger in a strange land, living among people who could never fathom what the eccentric old lady with the accent had gone through or all that she had lost, from her family to her youthful aspirations to her language to her homeland. In her 80's, she decided to write her memoirs, covering her life from her childhood in Hungary through her old age in America. She asked that we give a copy to all my cousins. So I went around the world and gave each cousin a copy. While I have been unable emotionally to bring myself to read it, my cousins have read and cherish it. Several had their copies bound, and I was told a copy was given to the Holocaust museum in Budapest. After her death, my brother described her as a simple leaf forced to ride the storm of world events over which she had no control, landing in faraway lands where she could never find her way.

- 2 - Now in my 50's, the idea of exploring this topic with the opposite side intrigued me. When I told my family that I was thinking of attending this conference, my daughter's response was, "That's awkward." My brother was completely against my exploring these questions, asking me what good would come of it, either for them or for me. Acquaintances in Germany were against it, feeling that I might sympathize with the Nazi descendants, something they found unfathomable. My husband was against it because of the expense. In June, just a month before the conference, I finally made the decision to go and booked my travel arrangements. Although everyone I knew ranged from lukewarm to negative about my attending, I felt compelled to go, to ask, to voice what I had been wondering about for years. In July I traveled to Berlin with my daughter, kissing her good-bye as she went off with one of my cousin's. Alone and filled with apprehension, I was picked up by Georg and Martina, and met Karla the first night. The following morning the work began. As I listened to the stories from the Germans, I felt sorry that their wonderful memories of their parents and grandparents were sullied by their finding out that they had, in fact, been Nazis. How can you reconcile the wonderful grandfather on whose lap you sat, who kissed you good night, with someone who had been a policeman in Lithuania, where you know that such policemen killed thousands of Jewish people. Like me, they could never ask, living in the silence and wondering. Only through research did they know where their fathers or grandfathers had been. To their chagrin, a few found commendations in the records. This could only mean one thing: that they had to have been part of violent actions of killing people. I wondered how I would feel if I found out my father was a criminal, a murderer, and was grateful that I was on the other side. And then Martin told his story. His father had been one of those policemen, in Estonia. Martin was racked with guilt, starting a foundation there, visiting the country, vowing to never forget, and he "was sorry." I

had never heard anyone say they were sorry. I don't think anyone ever apologized to my parents. Certainly, we were never contacted by anyone from Germany, Hungary, Poland or Austria, countries in which my grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins were murdered. There are a few countries in the world that have taken on a collective responsibility. There are a few countries that have paid some reparations. And all over the world there are the endless commemorations with big speeches about the horrors of the Holocaust. But I had never heard anyone just say they were sorry. And even though that didn't change anything, and even though Martin had not committed the crime, and even though I was not the victim, there it was, the words I had never heard from anyone. And my tears flowed, for my parents, my grandparents, and for Martin and the burdensome legacy that he has had to bare. I left the conference at the end of the week with Karla. The two of us traveling together like old friends to Cologne, where we kissed good-bye and I rejoined my daughter and cousins. And then the fun began, traveling to Paris, traveling back through Germany, and returning to Berlin where we were joined by my husband and son. One afternoon we reunited with Martin and Heike and the six of us went to the Holocaust Memorial. We went through the museum together, and nothing could have meant more to me then sharing that experience with all of them. I returned to California more than three weeks after the conference, feeling lighter than I had in years. Many of my friends are curious, asking questions about the trip. At a casual dinner one very warm evening, a man asked me how I felt sitting in a room with Germans whose parents had been Nazis. And I could honestly say that it was the same as sitting there with him. Through the dialogue, the "other" was fading, replaced by an "us," built one by one.

Priscilla, July 2012 Dialogue Group Participant