CHILDREN OF THE THIRD REICH

In a new film, *Hitler's Children*, descendants of the German dictator's henchmen open up about the legacy left by their notorious forebears. By Felicity Robinson and Di Webster
f old photographs are apassable reflection of reality. Hans-Rudolf Hoess was a near perfect middleclass German childhood. Playing happily inside the solid walls of his family’s villa, the fair-haired little boy splashedin the swimming pool, digs in a stone-walled sandbox, smiles up at the camera from the driving seat of his beautiful toy car, and poses on a step with his brother and sisters, the girls with neatly braided hair and dazzling smiles. A wider, more sophisticated lens, however, would have told a more chilling story. It might have captured the plumes of smoke rising from crematoria chimneys just a few metres from the playful backyard scenes, and the ash remains of murdered human beings falling, irrevocably, on the family vegetable patch.

The son of Hitler henchman Rudolf Hoess, little Hans-Rudolf was growing up next to the运算 of Auschwitz, the largest of Germany’s World War II extermination camps. As camp commander, Benito Mussolini, Italian dictator, lived in the vast and verdant homestead with his wife and children, all of them at the epicentre of the 20th century’s most depraved event – the systematic rounding up and extermination of some six million European Jews.

Hans-Rudolf’s toy car and model plane, the latter with swastika livery, were made by some of the thousands of emancipated prisoners dying on the other side of the garden wall. Largely ignored otherwise, the death camp was an annoyance at mealtimes. “When they picked strawberries, my grandmother said, ‘Please wash them first, they smell of ashes,’” recounts Rainer Hoess, Rudolf’s 47-year-old grandson.

A slim, nerdy man with short hair and an earring, Rainer’s eyes are red-rimmed and his skin grey as he talks about his relationship with his “cold” father, Hans-Rudolf. “The thought never came up to sit on his lap,” he says. “We were never allowed to show emotion.

Whenever we cried, we were perpetrators to talk about their families for his documentary, Hitler’s Children.

While many descendants have hitherto been unwilling to talk, there has been a corresponding reluctance to listen when so many survivors of the Holocaust need to share their testimonies. “The other side, they are monsters, devils without faces,” says Ze’evi. “But to my mind it is not possible to understand the Holocaust without attempting to understand where the root of all the evil came from and how it grew.”

The surnames of these “children” are a rollcall of depravity: Katrin Himmler, the great-niece of Heinrich Himmler, leader of the Schutzstaffel, or SS, the Nazi party’s defence corps; Monika Goeth, daughter of Ian Goeth, the brutal sadist in charge of the Plaszow death camp, who was played with such chilling conviction by Ralph Fiennes in The Pianist; Oskar Gröning, who was educated in charge of the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp, a criminal sentenced to death. It disgusted him.

Katrin Himmler is a little girl when the stench of her family history first became apparent. She’s been sent to stay with her gran, Ilse, during the summer and found that none of the children in the small village wanted to play. “I just got a feeling, you know, that it was because of my grandmother,” says Bettina, now 55. An ardent Nazi, Ilse was arrogant and difficult, there was no warmth or cuddles in her company, only conflict. “Being trucked there was just to say she was my grandmother – that was an experience,” she says, wryly. When Bettina was 11 and her grandmother was living with her family. “We saw a documentary on TV about the Holocaust and she said, ‘It’s all lies! It’s all lies!” We said, ‘How can you say that? Look at all of what happened!’” But, like so many of her compatrionis, Ilse could not accept the reality of the Holocaust, says Bettina, who now lives in the US, in the remote high plains of New Mexico. “If they would have admitted what happened, it would have been terrible,” she explains on Hitler’s Children, “so he kept it away from us. [But even so] they didn’t happen at all.”

Bettina’s father, Heinz, was more conflicted. Herman Goering, a chief architect of the Holocaust and leader of the German air force, the Luftwaffe, was wary of his family background, and he knew his grandfather was involved in it than my grandfather. These boundaries aren’t easy to define. I ask myself again and again at what point does it become impossible to love those parents?”

Admitting that one’s year, even if it may have been complicit in unimaginable Nazi atrocities also raises other, more primal, issues. After all, as Ze’evi notes, “you have the same blood.” So would you behave differently in their situation? What would you have done?

These are unfar questions, and they are fundamentally unanswerable, says Dr Olaf Jensen, director of the Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies in Wiesbaden home when she came across a picture of Hermann. The young, slim man staring back at her share Douglas Engelbach with horror. “That was the first time I realised how much I resembled him,” says Bettina, her voice rising with anxiety: “I couldn’t believe it, I thought, ‘I look like him, but I’m a totally different person. What am I going to do with this?’”

That question would take her a lifetime to answer. In her 20s, Bettina suffered three mental breakdowns that required hospitalisation; on one occasion in Greece she was given electric shock therapy, which she describes as one of the most brutal experiences of her life. At the age of 30, having ended up in the US, she made the dramatic decision to be sterilised. Her fertility had always been a source of inner conflict, she explains. “I was tormented by my family history having influenced her feelings. “My name was always a heavy burden for me. She, [her gran] couldn’t imagine how her family history had influenced her feelings. “My name was always a heavy burden for me. She, [her gran] couldn’t imagine how her family history had influenced her feelings. “My name was always a heavy burden for me. She, [her gran] couldn’t imagine how her family history had influenced her feelings. “My name was always a heavy burden for me. 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A teacher asks, “What would you do now if you were to meet your grandfather?” Rainer Hoess replies, with only a moment’s hesitation, “I would kill him.”

family also perished. Much of Ruth’s art at that time documented her struggle with a deep-rooted anger about what had happened to her family. “We started a dialogue,” explains Bettina, of their initially tentative conversations. “I felt like I had to do this – it wasn’t a choice.”

In 2004, Bettina flew to Australia to stay with Ruth and explore the issues of guilt and rage they had both started to address. “I was afraid,” says Bettina. Ruth was confrontational and focused her pain and hurt on Bettina. “But that was part of my healing,” she adds. “I don’t think, without ‘nasty’ Ruth, that I would have done it.” Their conversations, filmed for the documentary Bloodlines, were a form of therapy for Bettina. “It took me quite sometime to admit that I felt guilty for what Hermann had done because it’s so irrational,” she says. “The whole process was of trying to let go of that guilt – it was holding me back in so many ways.”

As he sits on a train, hurtling towards Poland, Rainer Hoess lookshaunted. Having never visited Auschwitz, he has agreed to travel there with an Israeli journalist, Eldad Beck, for Ze’evi’s documentary. Drinking coffee, staring out of the windows into the evening darkness, Rainer is tormented by a dread that’s almost palpable. “I was nervous,” he says in the film. “I was afraid that ... people will recognise me. That they will see on me that I’m a Hoess, that I’m his grandson. I couldn’t find any peace of mind. Again and again, that damned gate was part of my healing,” she adds. “Sometimes, I feel jealous because the other side of apparently, mental illness). “Sometimes, I execute my parents anew,” he states in Hitler’s Children. “They deserve it.”

Niklas, author of In The Shadow Of The Reich, describes in detail his father’s hanging after he was accused of crimes against humanity at the Nuremberg trials. “Having your neck broken saved me from a shitty life,” he reads to students from his book. “How you might have poisoned me with your brainwashing, just like they did to the silent majority of my generation, those not lucky enough to have had their father hanged.”

The only surviving member of the immediate Frank family – just one of his four siblings supported his activism – Niklas says their mother, Brigitte, “didn’t care about us at all.”

In a powerful scene from the film, Niklas’s daughter tells her father that his books had spared her from his pain. “I think that in many ways you defeated him,” she says, “I thought that when you are descended from bad people, you are also touched by evil. You took that load off of me. For me, you are my fortress.”

From far left: Katrin Himmler, great-niece of Nazi SS leader Heinrich Himmler, was devastated to discover her beloved grandmother was also a Nazi sympathiser; Heinrich Himmler presenting Hitler with a confiscated artwork; the monstrous SS leader was also responsible for setting up and running the Nazi concentration camps.