



Video Story Transcript

Who is a Friend? German-Jewish Reconciliation After the Holocaust

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3oa2onxc0O8>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, I'm Gail Rosen and I'm a storyteller. One of the most important stories to me, that I tell, is the story of a Jewish-German holocaust survivor. Her name was Hilda Cohen. Now I had learned about the Holocaust in high school. I'd studied about it but hearing a survivor story, that made it much more personal, more real.

In 2002, I came across an organization called Compassionate Listening. Their basic premise is that you can't hate someone, if you've really heard their story. And so, they teach listening - listening in a way that helps us to hear our common humanity in the hopes that, that kind of listening can help us to resolve conflicts.

I signed up for the Compassionate Listening Project for German-Jewish Reconciliation, and I went to Germany. I'd never thought about... going to Germany, wanted to go to Germany... but I wanted to go and see some of the places where Hilda's story happened. And I wanted to tell her story to some of the people there, and I wanted to hear their stories.

There were 34 of us. Half of us Jews from the United States and half non-Jewish Germans. And on the first night of the project, we were sitting on a polished, wooden floor on cushions, sitting in a circle in an A-framed, shaped room with glass all around. And we went around the circle. And we each shared our feelings about coming together, to share the wounds that have reverberated through the generations, and into our own hearts, and bodies, and minds, and psyches since that time, since World War II.

One of the Jewish men told about his parents fleeing Germany with him when he was just seven years old. And he told about how they brought him up Episcopalian in northern California. They were too frightened to be Jews, even in the United States. Two other Jewish women talked about their mothers' experiences in the

concentration camps. I spoke about Hilda's story, about the responsibility of carrying that story, and about wanting to share it there, in that place.

But it was the speaking of the Germans that stunned me.

One woman said, "Hitler ripped the heart out of our country. And now you are back."

Another said, "We've been waiting, longing for our Jewish brothers and sisters to return, and finally you are here. Thank you. Thank you for coming."

And they wept.

There was one man in the circle who drew my attention. His name is Ulrich. He's a German man. He's tall, very blond. He held himself very erect. His jaw was tight. And, and, though he held himself upright, when I looked at Ulrich, I had the distinct impression of someone who was doubled over in pain. And in the first days, hhh, of the project, he, he shared with us that he had always suspected that his father had been a perpetrator. Someone who willingly assisted the Nazis in their persecution of the Jews. He told us how frightened he had always been of his father. Now, Ulrich is just a couple of years older than I am. Neither of us was born when that war ended, but as a little boy he was terrified of his father. And even as a grown man with his own children, family, his own career, he was, he was frightened of his father.

During the project, we traveled together to Bergen-Belsen. It's the site of a Nazi concentration camp. Now, in Jewish tradition, we're taught that to attend a funeral is a special mitzvah, a blessing, because you see the dead can never return the favor. And it seemed to me that, that site of Bergen-Belsen is like an eternal funeral.

It's beautiful there; it's park-like. There are aspen trees and moss and wild grasses. There's a large, circular, cobblestone path, and around that path are the burial mounds.

When the Allied Forces liberated Bergen-Belsen, they found tens of thousands, dead and dying. And so, the Army dug huge, rectangular mass graves. And they laid the bodies in, in tight rows, and then stacked them like cords of wood. And covered them over. Some of them are as large as a city block. And they're about chest high.

And on the front of each one is a, a large cement plaque and they read in German, "Here rest 1000 dead 1945." "Here rest 800 dead 1945." "Here rest 2500 dead." "Here rest 2000 dead." "Here rest untold numbers dead 1945." There are many of them.

I walked in that place with Ulrich. And he told me, that after his father died, he and his siblings had found, locked in a safe, hidden away, an old briefcase. And, in that briefcase, were papers that indicated that his father, his father was probably, at least, partly responsible for the deaths of between 10,000 and 45,000 Jewish men, women, and children in small villages in Russia.

He said, "I consider myself my father's son. I do not carry his guilt. I cannot change the brutal past. But I have to find a way, how to deal with this inheritance." And then he said, "But it seems wrong. Wrong of me to talk of my pain in this place."

Before we left Bergen-Belsen, we held a ritual service. We stood in a circle, we lit candles, and we sang prayers. There was, on the edge of the circle, a bowl of wildflower seeds. And after the service, we were each to take a handful of those seeds, and then scatter them among the wild grasses in the fields. The service had ended, and I was standing on the edge of the circle, and I looked across and I saw Ulrich. He was kneeling by

the bowl of seeds. He had taken a fistful of them and his head was bowed over his hand. And I looked at him. His father helped to murder innocent people.

I thought, "How can I look at this man and not imagine his father's crimes. But how can I look at this man, and not see an innocent, frightened little boy."

I walked over. I knelt down. I took a handful of seeds. With my other hand, I pulled Ulrich to his feet. I pried open his fingers, I poured my seeds into his hand, mixed the seeds together, took half, and we went together, and we scattered the seeds in the field.

I've been to Germany five times now. Ulrich and I continue to write. He and his wife came to United States, and they visited; they had dinner at my home. And in January, I'm going back to Germany to tell Hilda's story at Ulrich's syna... at Ulrich's church and a school nearby. And I will stay with him and his wife. We think of each other as friends.

When my father died, Ulrich sent me a card. Now, many of my friends sent cards, and they were lovely. But the one that moved me the most was the one from Ulrich. I want to read you a little of it.

He said, "Dear Gail, your dad has left you. I have never met him, yet, in my mind's eye, I have the image of a kind and gentle man. A thought comes to my mind. The deaths of our parents, makes us the elders. There is no living generation before us. There is a little candle burning in front of me in honor of a man I never knew. I know his daughter. With great sympathy, Ulrich."

I am grateful. I am grateful for people who are willing to share their stories. I am grateful for people who are willing to hear the stories of others, and I am grateful for my friend.