

History Denied

BY DEVON JOLIE



Photo courtesy of the Jolie family

Post War Happiness: Ursula Schroder married British soldier Dennis Rogers in 1948

BORN AND RAISED UNDER THE THIRD REICH, MY GRANDMA LIVED AT THE CENTRE OF NAZI GERMANY. EVEN AFTER MARRYING A BRITISH SOLDIER, SHE HELD ALLEGIANCE TO HITLER, AND HER CONVICTION LEFT ME WONDERING, “WHO WAS SHE REALLY?”

My grandma loved Hitler. You may never understand it. I may never understand it.

Despite the hard numbers, the concrete facts, the hundreds of documentaries that present the truth of the Holocaust, my German-born grandma never believed any of it.

About seven million Germans, including soldiers and civilians died in World War II according British journalists Roger Boyes and William Horsley, some of those were my grandma's own family and loved ones. She witnessed first-hand the death and destruction Hitler brought upon the people, but she loved him.

And while you may be quick to condemn her, please don't.

My grandma was deceived. Like Eve, in the Garden of Eden, she was misled by a serpent. My grandma fell prey to Hitler's silken words, to his promises of happiness and truth. Without her consent, her mind and thoughts were shaped and cast in indestructible steel. No matter how the truth exploded against her mind, Granny could not believe it.

But despite it all, she was as loving as a grandma could be.

My grandmother Ursula Schroder was born in Hamburg in 1926 and lived there until 1948 – the year she married Dennis Rogers, a British reserve soldier. They moved to Bristol, England.

I can count the times I've made the 12-hour journey to Bristol on one hand. The time spent with both my grandparents is the equivalent of two months. And of the time I have been old

enough to remember, maybe three weeks.

And from what I can remember of my grandma, before she passed away almost three years ago, she was as loving as a grandma could be.

She had a glorious garden, filled with juicy red currants and crisp green beans. I can see her in her uniform: cream button-front blouse and a horribly ugly floral skirt, tending to the pruning. She'd yell "Roy" at my grandpa, followed by some command to get a watering can or a basket.

In pictures, I see her holding my hand, my face covered in the ice cream my mom had asked her not to buy for my sisters and me. I'm sitting in her lap, our bleach blonde hair matching and our smiles wide.

The last time I saw Granny was two Christmases past. Her hair was greying, standing up on end. Her blouse hung off her shoulders, having lost all the soft pudginess that made her Granny. Her bright smile was now unsure, her eyes lost. She was sick: kidneys failing, cancer, gangrene.

Her home was still filled with Christmas. A tiny tree adorned with tinsel, a giant nutcracker guarding chocolate and German Christmas music blaring loudly from the television. That Christmas she taught me to make traditional potato salad and somehow persuaded us to let her portion the 22-kilogram turkey from her seat in her walker.

These are my memories of my grandma.

After the funeral, my mom came home with a suitcase full of sepia photographs and parchment documents.

We sat on my parent's bed, rifling through the

pictures and the German papers we couldn't read. Then I saw it.

The eagle and the Swastika. The symbol of the Third Reich.

All of a sudden, everything my eyes touched was from Hitler's Germany. Pictures, documents, letters, medals.

I'd always known the story. My grandma had been a teenager living in Hamburg during World War II. She was a member of Hitler's Youth. Her fiancé, a German fighter pilot, was killed in action.

Then there were the bombings. Bombings. And starvation.

My grandpa, a British soldier, met my grandma while she was working in an office in Germany. He soon left the country and returned to England but they kept corresponding. In a letter she pleaded with him to save her; she was starving. He brought my grandma from the destruction, depression and death of post-war Germany back to England.

And that was that. The ending was supposed to be they had six children and lived "Happily Ever After" in drizzly ol' England.

But with my grandma gone and that suitcase of history before me, I sat there trying to piece together who my Granny really was.

Now, it would be unfair to say that I had never known my grandma's involvement and support of Nazi Germany.

But as is human nature, things are far easier to ignore without tangible proof.

Yet, with the eye of the Reich eagle staring up



Photo courtesy of the Jolie family

The Rogers celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary in 1998.

at me from a pile of papers, I could no longer deny that I was a descendant of a Nazi-lover.

Love. A word I was so hesitant to use to describe Granny's views of Hitler and the Nazis.

Love is how we feel about our families and our best friends. Love is what moves us to sacrifice for them, to do anything for them. Love is what we call mothers who die for their children.

Could I say my grandma, who undeniably loved her family, loved Hitler too?

It took three days to gather the courage to ask my mom.

"Did Granny love Hitler?"

Sad pain crosses her face.

"She did."

Try to pin point that emotion, that feeling. The moment you hear your loving grandmother loved and worshipped a mass-murderer who is reviled world-wide.

Confusion. Disbelief. Denial. Betrayal. All coursing and swirling through my mind and heart, launching bombs at the beautiful memories of my beautiful grandma.

But underneath it all, sadness.

Sadness that Granny, a woman who had Jewish friends is lumped together with those evil men and women of the Reich who destroyed so many lives.

You may never understand how decades after the Holocaust my grandma believed it never happened, how despite all the evidence against Hitler, she still thought he was the sun.

I may never understand it.

My mom says Hitler was Germany's saviour in a time of economic turmoil and the constant fear of war. In all his outstanding and powerful orations, Hitler gave my Granny hope.

Internationally recognized as the leading historian of modern Germany, Michael Kater is a German-born university professor, currently teaching York University. In his book, *Hitler Youth*, he wrote that the Nazi rulers offered a world view that granted status, certainty and power to young people and who, "with their ideals and energies, would have been especially vulnerable to such values in their own search for identity and meaning."

At the age of 11, my grandma signed up to serve her country as a Hitler Youth. Surely, her young mind soaked up whatever propaganda she read or watched or heard, with the naïve belief that it

was pure goodness.

In her history, she wrote she was proud and happy when her SA Stormtrooper father was called to war. Even though her cousin died in the battle her father would soon join.

And years later, living in England, she would call herself a Nazi.

My mom says, "If anyone ever made a comment about how Hitler was a bad person, she would defend him. She would always say it wasn't Hitler; it was other people who were the corrupt ones and were influencing him."

While we condemn those who love Hitler and still uphold his ideals today, my grandma deserves no such condemnation.

Granny was a victim.

In a study published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the German History Society, historian Alan McDougall analyzed the transition of Hitler Youth post-war. "A consensus emerged around the idea that young people had been victims rather than accomplices of Nazism," he writes.

The war victimized my German grandma just as much as it did Jews, soldiers, and those who opposed the Nazis.

It seems like an endless list of Hollywood exposés about the inhumane treatment and the victimization of Jews during the Second World War. *Schindler's List*, *The Pianist*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and many more document the horrendous genocide that has marked our recent history.

But I always thought, "What about my grandma? Wasn't she a victim of the war too? What about the Germans?"

And then I watched *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*.

Never have I felt so ill, so shaken as I did after I left my social studies class that day. I remember the tremble that left my knees weak and my hands grasping for the banister as I stumbled to my locker.

Because for the first time, I saw my grandma's world. I saw the Holocaust through her eyes.

In case you haven't been subject to the movie's horror —though I implore you to watch it—it details the life of a German boy and his ignorance of the treatment of Jews, spawned by black-and-white images of happy dark-haired children, running free in "special camps."

I realized as I took the stairs that day, my

breathing shallow and my heart slamming in my chest, that this is what my Grandma saw every day. Every day she was fed convincing lies of the fair treatment of the Jews in pamphlets, on the radio and in those same black-and-white images.

And with every waking moment of her youth filled with lies, how could she know the truth?

And even after the war ended and the truth surfaced, wasn't the evidence of the Holocaust present in the same way as the Third Reich's propaganda? Pamphlets, news reports on the radio and black-and-white images on the TV.

My mom says that Granny was brainwashed. And I have every reason to believe it.

You make think I'm going too far. After all, she loved Hitler and believed fervently that the Holocaust never happened, even till the day she died.

Yet, I saw her as loving.

The stuffed bunny she sent me one year for Christmas still sits on my book-shelf. The signet ring I wear on my middle finger reminds me of all the money she sent. And 16 teddy-bear birthday cards, one for every birthday before she died.

And it wasn't just the things, the objects that she gave that made her a beautiful soul.

Granny: a woman who fed bees from her hand, a woman who joined the St. John's Ambulance Brigade, a woman that dedicated her life to teaching children, and a woman whose home was always full of chocolate and treats for her grandchildren.

And even in her darkest hour, her abounding love crossed the great divide of ocean and earth. I felt it.

You may never understand it.

But I understand it.

Even though my German grandma was a proud Nazi who loved Hitler, she was also a victim of one of the most heinous crimes of our history. Hitler didn't simply take away her comfort in Germany and the lives of loved ones; he invaded the very thing that makes us who we are. He stole into her mind and branded it with falsehood, leaving her posterity to wonder who she truly was.

While thoughts were tainted, her actions never showed any hate. Hitler, despite it all, could never touch my grandma's heart and the love that filled it. And what is in the heart is what makes us who we are.