



Monika Goeth, daughter of Amon Goeth, who ran the notorious Plaszow death camp



Katrin Himmler, great-niece of Heinrich Himmler, head of the dreaded Nazi SS corps



Niklas Frank, son of Hans Frank, who was responsible for the mass murder of Polish Jews



Bettina Goering, great-niece of Hermann Goering, Adolf Hitler's right-hand man



Rainer Hoess, grandson of Rudolf Hoess, who was commandant of Auschwitz

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

YAD VASHEM; GETTY IMAGES; PICTURE MEDIA



Clockwise, below far left: Rudolf Hoess (on right) ran the Auschwitz death camp and lived with his family in a villa on the perimeter; Rainer Hoess, grandson of Rudolf, feels a burden of guilt for his grandfather's crimes; the Hoess children play in their pool oblivious to the atrocities being carried out over the wall; Hans-Rudolf Hoess, Rainer's father, pictured in his garden by the "gate to hell" that led into the notorious concentration camp; the same gate as it stands today.

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, Rudolph's 47-year-old grandson.

A slim, nervy 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



"When they picked strawberries, my grandmother said, 'Please wash them first; they smell of ashes,'" says Rainer Hoess, grandson of a death camp boss

beaten even more, just for crying, not for what we'd done."

Of all the family photos Rainer inherited, the one that obsessively occupies his thoughts is a shot of his father as a little boy, standing in front of the wrought-iron gate that led from the lush childhood garden to the camp administration building beyond. Rainer calls it "that damned gate ... the gate to hell". "The most pervasive image in my subconscious is going through that gate to see ... What did they see? How much did they see? What did they know?"

The bigger question that has haunted Rainer and other descendants of Hitler's henchmen is this: how do I live with the evil and cruelty perpetrated by a member of my own family? Shame and guilt have shrouded their lives, says Israeli film director Chanoch Ze'evi, who, over three years, persuaded Rainer and four other relatives of Nazi

Himmler, the great-niece of Heinrich Himmler, leader of the Schutzstaffel, or SS, the Nazi party's defence corps; Monika Goeth, daughter of Amon Goeth, the brutal sadist in charge of the Plaszow death camp, who was played with such chilling conviction by Ralph Fiennes in *Schindler's List*; Niklas Frank, whose father Hans was handed control of occupied Poland by Hitler; Bettina Goering, whose great-uncle Hermann was one of Hitler's most trusted confidants and founder of the feared Gestapo; and Rainer Hoess. Each of them has struggled to find a way to live with their heritage - some cut themselves off from their family, while others tried to expiate their ancestor's crimes by researching and questioning their history.

All feel guilt for what their forebears did. "On the one hand, I don't think they have to feel guilty because, rationally, it is fate to be born to a war criminal just as



Clockwise from far left: Bettina Goering, grand-niece of Hitler's closest confidant, Hermann Goering, had herself sterilised, so "there wouldn't be any more Goerings"; her fascist relative speaking at a 1943 rally; Hermann Goering (centre) at a 1937 National Party Congress with Hitler (left) and prominent Nazi Julius Streicher.



it is fate to be born to a Holocaust survivor," says Ze'evi. "But I can understand. I think I would feel the same if I was born as the son of a war criminal - I think I would try to 'fix' something during my life; to try to do something good."

Bettina Goering was a little girl when the stench of her family history first became apparent. She'd 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 stuck there, and made 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 compatriots, 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 the best way to go [was to say] it didn't happen at all."

Bettina's father, Heinz, was more conflicted. Hermann Goering - a chief architect of the Holocaust and leader of the German air force, the Luftwaffe - took him and his brothers under his wing after their father died and, though Heinz had married into a family of anti-fascists, he felt affection towards his notorious uncle. "He obviously loved [his mother and uncle]," says Bettina. "Hermann was a real family man, who

took good care of the three boys and spent time with them." While Heinz read a great deal about Nazism and the Holocaust in an attempt to understand what occurred, he talked little about his own experiences until later in life.

Only when Heinz was dying did the grim reality of Bettina's own inheritance hit her. She was 23 and sorting through family mementoes in her father's Wiesbaden home when she came across a picture of Hermann. The young, slim man staring back at her shared Bettina's high cheekbones and open features, her clear and direct gaze. She was filled 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, but only later did she realise how her family history had influenced her feelings. "My name was always a heavy burden for me," she says now, from her terracotta home surrounded by grasslands and vast empty skies. Having her tubes tied was partly a way of ensuring that "there wouldn't be any more Goerings". Her brother, who lives nearby, had come to the same decision. "He said to me, 'I cut the line.'"

Like Heinz Goering, Katrin Himmler's father was also reluctant to

talk to her about his uncle as she researched her book, *The Himmler Brothers* - a reticence she only started to understand once she discovered the Nazi sympathies of her grandmother. "I really loved her," says Katrin in the documentary. "I was really fond of her. It was very difficult when I found her letters and learnt

that she maintained contact with old Nazis and that she sent packages to a war criminal sentenced to death. It disgusted me. It was very difficult for me."

For Katrin, such revelations set the course of all descendants' relationships with their relatives. "What's it like to love your parents if you want to be honest and really know what they did or thought?" she asks in the film. "Where [do] we draw the line? People like Heinrich; who were almost as responsible as him, or a little less responsible; and people who were a bit more 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 forebear 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 have behaved differently in their situation? What would you have done?

These are unfair questions, and they are fundamentally unanswerable, says Dr Olaf Jensen, director of the Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies in Leicester, in the UK. It is impossible for us, now, to understand the particular context of that time. But they do feed fears among some descendants that they have somehow been touched by evil.

"I was never afraid that I might have inherited something, or that my genes might contain something like 'Himmler's bad blood'," says Katrin. "If I thought that, I'd be confirming what the Nazis believed in their ridiculous ideology, that everything depends upon bloodlines. I don't believe bullshit like that."

But for other descendants, the idea they might have inherited psychological and physical traits haunts them. "I'm more closely identified with them," ►

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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.

says Bettina, whose father suffered heart problems and diabetes (but not, apparently, mental illness). "Sometimes, I feel jealous because the other side of my family is much healthier. It's awful, isn't it? I inherited their shit."

It wasn't until Bettina formed a relationship with a second-generation Holocaust survivor that she started to accept her history. After confiding her desire to write a book about her family, a mutual friend introduced Bettina to Ruth Rich, an artist living in Bangalow, NSW. Ruth's parents were Polish Jews who had survived the concentration camps; their son, Ruth's older brother, had been murdered in the gas chambers, she believes, and many of her extended

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 looks haunted. 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

if you were to meet your grandfather?" Rainer replies, with only a moment's hesitation, "I would kill him myself."

Then, a silver-haired old man named Zvika, standing at the edge of the room, says he wants to shake Rainer's hand. Of all those in the room, Zvika is best placed to know what Rainer's forebears would have seen when they walked through the "gate to hell". He was a prisoner at Auschwitz. The men, both tortured in their own ways, embrace. Rainer begins to cry. "You weren't there," soothes the old man. "You didn't do it." ■

Hitler's Children is premiering in Australia at the Jewish Film Festival in November. Visit www.jiff.com.au for more details.

FRANK ACCOUNT



Niklas Frank has chosen an unusual way to educate his countrymen about the Holocaust. The son of Hans Frank – as governor-general of occupied Poland, he was responsible for the Nazi death camps situated in that country – Niklas, 73, visits



schools and community groups to denounce his late father's role in the atrocities committed by the Third Reich. "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."



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. "It 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

appeared before me. At some point, they must have looked through that gate."

The next day, Rainer visits the garden of his father's youth. It is unkempt, but otherwise little changed; there is the stone pool, the summer house, the gate. This man who was never allowed to cry seems overcome with emotion, but it isn't until later, when he's invited to meet a group of visiting Israeli teenagers in the camp's shiny, modern museum, that he loses the brittle composure he's been clinging onto for years. As her schoolfriends look on, a fragile-looking teen sobs as she struggles to preface her question with a devastating statement: "Your grandfather murdered, tortured and ... exterminated ... he exterminated my family." Rainer says he's sorry. A teacher asks, "What would you do now