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Interview. 'Countries that avoid confronting their own past are the most vulnerable to populism, and that memory work helps to consolidate democracy,' says the author of 'Those Who Forget,' about the Germans who pretended not to know.

Géraldine Schwarz: Then and now, indifference kills

written by **Guido Caldiron**



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the largest segment of the population, who had not killed anyone with their own hands but hadn't done anything to oppose the genocide either, and had even sometimes acted to take advantage of it.

In her new book *I senza memoria* ("Those Who Forget," ed. Einaudi, 334 pages, €21, Italian translation by Margherita Botto), the French-German journalist Géraldine Schwarz tells the story of one of these families, that of her paternal grandfather, Karl Schwarz, in Mannheim during the 1930s.

In this valuable work, Schwarz builds on the foundation laid by the American historian William Sheridan Allen in his *The Nazi Seizure of Power: The Experience of a Single German Town* (1968), which described the advent of Nazism among the inhabitants of the town of Nordheim, reconstructing the web of apathy, conformism and concealed interests that ensured that Hitler had a very widespread and often enthusiastic support.

From the beginning, your book recounts a terrible discovery: the behavior of your grandparents during the Nazi regime.

My grandfather was 30 when Hitler came to power. He was neither a convinced Nazi nor an anti-Semite. He acted out of conformity and opportunism. In 1935, he joined the Nazi Party to better his career, and in 1938, he tried to take advantage of the "Aryanization" measures by buying a business from a Jewish family that was being forced to sell it at a low price.

And there's more. Later on, my father, who was born in 1943, discovered photographs showing the family apartment in 1939: the furniture was much more rustic than he remembered, so he started suspecting that his parents had bought new furniture that had previously belonged to Jewish families. What is particularly shocking is that most of these sales were taking place in the apartments of the Jews immediately after their deportation: the buyers knew very well that the items belonged to a neighbor, to their local baker, to their doctor.

Like most Germans, my grandparents did not commit crimes themselves, but their attitude, multiplied by tens of millions of others just like them, allowed the Third Reich to carry out its criminal enterprise.

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period, it had been impossible to say “no” without risking their lives. This is partly true: the repressive system of the regime instilled fear and discouraged dissent. However, it was also very attentive to public opinion. One episode proves that the population was not as helpless as it wanted to believe: in 1941, the powerful protests by Catholic and Protestant citizens and bishops succeeded in dissuading Hitler from continuing with the T4 euthanasia program that aimed to exterminate disabled people.

It was difficult for the population to intervene during the expulsions and deportations of Jews without being arrested. At the same time, however, no one was being forced to take advantage of the difficult situation of the Jews: one had the option of not accepting the job of a colleague who had been dismissed because he was Jewish, or not buying the company or the furniture of someone who was being forced to flee or deported. The plundering of Jewish property, which didn't only happen in Germany, involved many different circles: the state, private individuals, traders, companies, art galleries, museums, but also middlemen, real estate agents, brokers, banks, notaries, lawyers, auction houses.

This conduct also belies the main excuse invoked by many Germans at the time, who claimed they knew nothing about the fate that awaited the Jews: weren't the people who were dividing up “the spoils” confident that the owners would never return, because they would be dead?

It was the sons' generation and not the fathers' generation that questioned that past. Almost 20 years had passed since the end of the war: why did it take so long?

After the war, Julius Löbmann, one of the few survivors of the Jewish family that sold its business to my grandfather, asked for reparations. There was a correspondence between my grandfather and Löbmann's lawyers: for a long time, he tried to negotiate the amount that was due, but in the end, a court forced him to pay. In those letters, he denied bearing any responsibility and gradually came to take up the role of the victim. It's true that he suffered from the war as well, like the rest of the Germans, but it was the consequence of their irresponsible and fanatical support for the Führer.

But that attitude was symptomatic of the climate in German society: since the majority had supported Hitler, no one had any interest in digging into the past. The people had accepted the Nuremberg trial condemning the Nazi leaders, but they were not ready to admit their

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which German society had plunged. Especially Fritz Bauer, a Jewish judge who returned from exile. He was the one who began the Auschwitz trials in 1963, which revealed to the Germans for the first time the monstrous dimension of the Holocaust. Immediately afterward came the revolt of the generation of the “sons,” like my father, who in the ‘60s began to ask their parents: “What did you really do during the war?”

The question of the past was at the center of the student revolts in Germany in the 1970s. And from then on, the whole of society was put into question and, little by little, it changed. A large part of the Germans used the process of memory work to ensure that democracy would become firmly rooted in the country, making citizens responsible for their role in society and for their weight as a part of history.

Your book points to the urgency of revitalizing the process of memory work to counter the wave of right-wing populism that continues to grow in Europe.

I believe that countries that avoid confronting their own past are the most vulnerable to populism, and that memory work helps to consolidate democracy, as has long been the case in West Germany. I believe that the fact that the far-right AfD party has managed to enter Parliament in recent years is mainly as a result of the success it has achieved in the former GDR, where no process of memory work was undertaken during the Communist regime.

At the same time, we must take into account the fact that there seems to be a certain fatigue among the younger generations with regard to these issues. It is a context that must encourage us to think about the theme of memory in a different, more pragmatic way, so that we can truly learn from the past. And this applies to Germany just as much as to the whole of Europe. Memory is an indispensable weapon for citizens to be able to recognize what is threatening their well-being, their freedom, their identity and peace over time. In countries like Italy and Germany, the history of fascism and the Third Reich provides us today with a particularly useful manual for dealing with “fake news,” the crisis of reason and the return of a dangerous authoritarian thinking that evokes the methods and the undemocratic conception of power that were defining characteristics of the 1930s.

The lack of empathy and the attitude of “minding one’s own business,” which, together with hatred and racism, contributed to making extermination possible, are still forcing us to

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racism and hatred against refugees and Muslims are reaching a climax, we must bear this in mind: mass apathy kills more than individual monsters do. One of the mottos of the SS was, "Empathy is a weakness." Without this memory, human dignity is in danger, and not only that of others. Because once you begin to ride the wave of exclusion, the circle of "enemies of the people" continues to expand under the effect of paranoia and finally swallows everyone up.



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