

# H-Net Reviews

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Sonya Huber. *Opa Nobody*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. xvi + 358 pp. Illustrations. ISBN 978-0-8032-1080-6.

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## Wrestling with the Past

In recent years, scholars have grappled with the specific manner in which recent generations of Germans and Austrians have confronted their own familial complicity in Nazism. The narratives revealed by these studies reflect varying degrees of acknowledging complicity, constructing rather coherent and comprehensive stories of self-victimization, and simple denial.[1] At times, individual writers have even struggled to offer intimate portraits of their very own family history. In *Opa Nobody*, Sonya Huber attempts to connect with her past in such a personal way. In her novel, the author strives to connect with her German grandfather, a coal miner, union organizer, and socialist activist, a man whom her mother had always described as a “nobody.” Huber seeks to delve into the public and private life of a man who died five years before she was born by attempting to imagine his happiness and hopes as well as frustrations and challenges of fighting for the socialist cause while building and maintaining a family. The book emerges as an ongoing dialogue between the author and her grandfather, a conversation offering scenes and insights from the latter’s life interwoven with those of Huber’s as a social activist and mother. While becoming “acquainted” with her grandfather, the author fervently explores her own family’s relationship to Nazism, acknowledging that such a history, despite a separation in time, is still very much her own. The book represents Huber’s effort to bond with her grandfather, not only by relating her optimism and hopes, but also by revealing anxieties and feelings of ambivalence.

In order to imagine, and immerse herself, within her grandfather’s world, the author drew primarily from family stories, anecdotes, documents, and photos. In order to connect her narrative to larger historical processes, she conducted research in nonprofit organizations as well as local, regional, national, and international archives. She found materials relating to her grandfather’s work as well as documentation detailing more generally the history of the German socialist movement in the Ruhr before and after the world wars. Her background sources include not only activist newspapers, newsletters, organization reports, campaign information, and transcriptions of oral interviews, but also personal memoirs of socialist activists. Finally, she examined the scholarly literature on the development of socialism in Germany during her grandfather’s life. In the end, Huber’s narrative thus emerges as a series of snapshots representative of probable, real-life events bolstered by historical research. All along, however, she admits that her grandfather’s life as she relates it must necessarily remain a fiction.

Throughout the course of the novel, Huber works to construct a coherent narrative of her grandfather’s life. Born on April 19, 1902, to working-class agitators (his father was a miner) in the small town of Marl on the northern edge of the Ruhr district, Heinrich (or Heina) Buschmann, Jr. came of age within an increasingly assertive socialist “universe” of workers’ hiking, gymnastics, drama, chess, and women’s clubs as well as a multiplicity of socialist newspapers, cooperative gro-

cery stores, and bars. The Buschmanns moved from place to place, for mine owners, landlords, and governments throughout Germany often blacklisted Heina's father. In 1913, however, for reasons unknown (perhaps an unbearable longing, according to Huber), the family moved back to Marl.

At an early age, Heina engaged in grassroots activities for the SPD. According to Huber, in 1909 and afterwards, Heina assisted his father in handing out pamphlets. Certainly, like other German children of the period, Heina was drawn into the cultural and social sphere of the home front of the First World War, but socialism always remained present. Heina's father prevented him from procuring work in the mines and instead enrolled him in a secretarial technical school in Recklinghausen. Heina became a member of the *Arbeiterjugend*, which opened his eyes to the divisions plaguing the socialist movement, for other boys explained to him how union leadership often actively fought youth organizing, seeing it as potentially too extremist. After finishing his training at age twelve, Heina worked for the Recklinghausen County administration. During the so-called Turnip Winter of 1917, with its severe food shortages and numerous miners' strikes, the split among socialists became critical. Many SPD members (Heina included) resented a party leadership that called upon the membership to support the war. The most outraged agitators subsequently formed their own party, the Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (USPD). Unlike his father, who was sickened by interparty warfare, Heina seemed to embrace the ideas of the more radical party. Whether he stayed in the SPD or moved to the USPD, however, is unknown. In any event, joint efforts were common between the youth in the SPD and the independents.

Heina was gripped with excitement at the militant uprisings that broke out across Germany at the beginning of November 1918. His frustration with the SPD leadership, however, became unbearable when the governing socialists ordered *Reich* troops and *Freikorps* to crush a local miners' strike in February 1919 and later rounded up and executed independent socialist leaders. Throughout the following years, and as a member of the SPD (officially joining in 1921), Heina directed his attention to the building of one of the first socialist youth centers in the Ruhr, which opened in 1924. He seemed to have been energetically involved at every level of the project: leasing of land, construction and layout of the building, correspondence between members, and requests for funds from an often indifferent, terse, and fearful SPD govern-

ment principally concerned with survival. Heina's political activities throughout the 1920s led to tensions between an ever-optimistic, frustrated, socialist youth and a party leadership suspicious of rebellious agitators within its own ranks, as it sought to secure its local and national political position. Heina probably witnessed vicious political street-fighting between rival youth groups across the political spectrum, for his closest friends clashed with communists and nationalists, including members of the SA. In 1932, he joined the Reichsbanner; later he engaged in military training as a member of the Iron Front. Despite his increasing extremism, Heina nonetheless exhibited disappointment when some of his close comrades in 1931 joined the Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands, a left-wing organization formed to oppose the SPD. Such divisions continued to ravage the socialists throughout the last months of Weimar and the final appointment of Adolf Hitler as chancellor.

During the Third Reich, Huber's grandfather experienced government harassment because of his past socialist activism. He was forced to answer questions about his political views, membership in political organizations, and "Aryan" ancestry. His fellow administrators were asked for confidential statements on his political work. Periodically, Heina underwent criminal background checks. Local authorities twice searched the family home. Nazi authorities arrested, beat up, and forced into exile many of his comrades. In 1936, the local SA commandeered the youth center he had established to use for interrogations and torture. Heina witnessed assaults on Jewish stores and stalls in open-air markets by SA men and severe attacks on Jews themselves, culminating in *Kristallnacht*.

Heina coped with the rise of Nazism in a variety of ways. Although he never joined the Nazi Party, he did join some of its auxiliary organizations; he also served in the Reichsarbeitsdienst and, on the day after the Nazis remilitarized the Rhine, shipped off to "Pioneer" military camp #5 in Stettin, where he spent two months. During the latter half of the 1930s, after years of service as a clerk, he finally received a nod to apply for promotion to public administrator, a more secure, well-paid position. Even so, he continued to engage in socialist agitation. Huber indicates that her grandfather became involved in the distribution of banned literature, most of which entered the *Reich* from abroad, even as he sensed the frustration, exhaustion, and apparent hopelessness of comrades remaining in Germany. At the outbreak of war, Heina was drafted into the Wehrmacht and managed to be assigned as a medic. He probably saw service in the campaigns of

1939 and 1940, but in October 1940, he returned to work as a civil servant. At the beginning of April 1942, he received a promotion to *Kreisobersekretär*, or county head secretary. Two months later, he returned to military duty in the Crimea. For the last eleven months of the war, his whereabouts are again unknown. He did make it back home by the end of the war with a bullet wound to the thigh.

With the fall of the Third Reich and the beginning of the occupation, Heina immediately found himself under suspicion from British authorities for the posts he had held in National Socialist civil administration and membership in Nazi organizations. Eventually, the British cleared him and, despite some vague local political opposition, he obtained employment as a civil administrator and justice of the peace at a small city government office near his home in Huels. Heina's extensive political involvement (he immediately re-engaged with SPD youth work as an elected leader, always wearing a party pin on his lapel) before his death in 1966 led to chronic tensions with party leadership.

In order to understand her grandfather's life, Huber engages with the life stories of other prominent figures of his immediate history. The author introduces readers to Heina's wife, Elfriede "Friedchen" Klejdziski, whom her grandfather probably met at a local socialist meeting of youth activists shortly after the 1918 revolution (they would marry ten years later). Never truly accepted by Heina's mother, Friedchen was a committed ideologue herself (during the 1920s, she became an elected socialist youth group officer). While she clearly adored Heina's intelligence, keen mind, and readiness for action, Friedchen nonetheless became increasingly frustrated with a husband who always seemed to be more concerned about changing the world than with attending to the pressing needs of his own six children. Detailing a strikingly different path, Huber reveals how her great-uncle Josef "Jupp" Buschmann, an athletic, energetic, confident left-wing socialist himself, became a member of the Waffen-SS, a move that caused an irreparable rift with his brother. Jupp probably interrogated political prisoners at the youth center and was involved in the expulsion of about a thousand Jews from their homes and preparations for their removal to the Riga Ghetto. After the war, family stories revealed, Jupp used his connections to procure a prime appointment in Marl's central administration that paid more than the post Heina held.

Throughout the novel, the author aims to connect more closely to her grandfather by "telling" him about

her experiences as an American social activist. She wishes her grandfather to know that he had always been a hero to her. Huber explains that, like him, she often distributed pamphlets and flyers in support of a multitude of national and international causes, most recently opposing the America's 2003 campaign against Iraq. She wonders whether Heina experienced the same sense of possibility in demonstrating during the First World War that she herself felt while planning demonstrations at her small private college in Minnesota. She compares Heina's images of far-off battlefields as his father left for the First World War with her own fears throughout the Vietnam conflict in the 1970s. She connects Heina's frustration as he commenced with his secretarial training with her fears that her privilege of attending college made her a "snob" disconnected from the "people." She imagines her grandfather working in his office while wondering about the 1917 revolution raging in Russia and compares his longings with her own search for answers to the questions about the Soviet Union that have preoccupied socialists ever since. She relates her surprise and confusion as a witness to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 to the exhilaration, violence, and political divisions Heina experienced during November, 1918. By relating her own myriad experiences as a radical agitator in college and a subsequent dropout in the radical milieu of downtown Minneapolis, Huber attempts to understand more closely Heina's concerns: fears and pressures as a youth group leader, the formidable work of an organizer, loss of freedom, physical strains, conflicts with "old" leadership, constant concern about militarism from all sides, and the ability to reconcile one's activist aspirations with falling in love and establishing a stable, loving family.

The author reveals a keen awareness that some gaps in her knowledge of her grandfather's life are truly difficult, if not impossible, to fill. Although she made a concerted effort to uncover the unknown, Huber admits that her favorable interpretations might contrast with the unpleasant (albeit hidden) truth about certain events and relationships. At one point, for example, Huber reflects upon a militaristic portrait of an unknown group that includes Heina, Jupp, and their father. Huber longs to imagine her grandfather confidently donning a uniform as a young socialist activist who railed against the growing militarism gripping the country, but knows that any such pride was most likely tarnished by a sense of confusion, frustration, and betrayal. Finding the life story of Stalin and a book of excerpts from Lenin's essays among a stack of her grandfather's books, she expresses uncer-

tainty as to whether such works would have been in the possession of any respectable SPD member, or if they signified that Heina's view of communism was perhaps more complex than one of mere contempt.

The author's uncertainty about the past especially emerges in her discussions of decisions and actions of not only her family, but of other "ordinary" Germans as well, during the years of the Third Reich. Huber constantly raises questions, but honestly concedes that she can only guess at the answers. She reflects upon why a youth socialist ratted to the Nazis that SPD leadership lists could be found at the Buschmann house: had he or she sought to reap personal gain or spoken out of fear to protect family, or believed that the Nazis would have found out anyway? Describing a huge 1933 NSDAP rally that took place on the market square in Recklinghausen, she reflects upon the motivations of the schoolteachers who brought their pupils.

Huber feels particularly in the dark about the precise sentiments of Heina and his comrades at the moment when the Nazis assumed power. Perhaps they rolled their eyes and laughed with weary cynicism; perhaps events simply paralyzed them (and Huber relates her own sense of hopelessness and depression following the September 11 attacks). She wonders whether the government ban on all non-Nazi political activity made her grandfather contemplate withdrawal or voluntary exile. She expresses bewilderment that her grandfather did not simply join the party, reasoning that such a move would have provided increased security for the family. Huber yearns to understand why, despite the immense danger, her grandfather chose to distribute literature against a regime that clearly enjoyed widespread active and passive support. Perhaps such activity countered Heina's feelings of political demoralization.

Huber admits that Jupp's Waffen-SS membership marked him as an active executor of the most extreme Nazi policies, but wrestles with unanswered questions here as well. Indeed, his complicity in Third Reich crimes, and the subsequent family rift was one motivation for the book. Jupp's motivation remains unclear—did he seek to protect his family and save lives, or was he motivated by frustration as a former socialist? Jupp was likely carrying out *Kristallnacht* on the very night his father was dying in the hospital. Huber considers that perhaps he had no choice, or that he believed that such attacks would serve as a wake-up call to Germans concerning the inhumanity of Nazism. All such arguments, however, ultimately remain inadequate for Huber in explaining the

actions of her uncle, which she admits may have been committed out of conviction.

Though Heina expressed unabashed disapproval at Jupp's behavior, Huber questions whether her grandfather (or anyone) had a right to judge. She points out that Heina himself might have enjoyed fleeting feelings of accomplishment within Nazi auxiliary organizations; she is resigned to the idea that Heina was most probably complicit in the assault on local Jewish homes and property in 1941. Although she wishes to imagine her grandfather on the eastern front as a confident activist distributing anti-Nazi flyers, she fears that he witnessed mass death and heard whispers of bodies in ditches. She acknowledges a distinct possibility that his unit might have crushed Polish resistance during the Warsaw Uprising or might have joined other Wehrmacht detachments that led the death marches from Auschwitz. In the end, she knows that Heina probably contributed fully to last-ditch Nazi attempts at survival. Questions about the postwar period confound Huber as well: for instance, Heina never took her mother to any socialist meetings, although he threw himself back into socialist youth activity. She wonders whether Heina had perhaps somehow developed middle-class prejudices. She ponders how he might have reacted to the SPD's reorientation after 1961 as well.

Huber's novel reflects her poignant, sincere, moving effort to connect with a grandfather she never knew and a world she could only hope to imagine. All along, she is sharply aware of the limitations, pitfalls, and possible abuses of her endeavor. Her constant acknowledgment of both the good and bad in the history of Heina and the rest of the family reflects an honest effort to forge a genuine bond with her grandfather. In this sense, Huber's work reflects recent trends in post-unification literature on Nazism that adopt more pluralistic attitudes toward German narratives of perpetration and victimhood instead of a stark portrait of crime and innocence. By allowing for a more complex examination of individual complicity, such works do not necessarily reflect efforts simply to reject the Nazi past and refuse acknowledgement of its crimes, but, as Robert Moeller has persuasively argued, demonstrate instead the successful incorporation of the Holocaust into the national memories of individual Germans (and their descendants elsewhere) and betray a self-reflective, critical engagement with an uncomfortable past in the search for a livable present.[2]

#### Notes

[1]. Harold Welzer, Sabine Moller, and Karoline Tschuggnall, *Opa war kein Nazi: Nationalsozialismus*

*und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 2002); Harold Welzer, Robert Montau, and Christine Plass, "Was wir für böse Menschen sind!" *Der Nationalsozialismus im Gespräch zwischen den Generationen* (Tübingen: Edition Diskord, 1997); Margit Reiter, *Die Generation danach: Der Nationalsozialismus im Familiengedächtnis* (Innsbruck: Studienverlag, 2006); Sabine Moller, *Vielfache Vergangenheit: Öffentliche Erinnerungskulturen und Familienerinnerungen an die NS-Zeit in Ostdeutschland* (Tübingen: Edition Diskord, 2003); Nina Leonhard, *Politik- und Geschichtsbewusstsein im Wandel: Die politische Bedeutung der nationalsozialistis-*

*chen Vergangenheit im Verlauf von drei Generationen in Ost- und Westdeutschland* (Muenster: LIT Verlag, 2002); Michael Kohlstruck, *Zwischen Erinnerung und Geschichte: Der Nationalsozialismus und die jungen Deutschen* (Berlin: Metropol, 1997); and Gabriele Rosenthal, ed., *Der Holocaust im Leben von drei Generationen: Familien von Überlebenden der Shoah und von Nazi-Tätern* (Giessen: Psychosozial-Verlag, 1997).

[2]. Robert G. Moeller, "Germans as Victims? Thoughts on a Post-Cold War History of World War II's Legacies," *History and Memory* 17 (2005): 1-35.

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