



Campus Peregrini g. UG, Hinter den Höfen 10, 37276 Neuerode, Tel.: +49 (0)5651 951360, Fax.: 952144,
Mobil.: +49 (0)172 6315620, info@campus-peregrini.de, www.campus-peregrini.de

The Training Academy of the Eschwege Institute

Reconciliation and shadow work

An article for circles on the mountain issue 2012, from Holger Heiten

My name is Holger Heiten, a German colleague and the head of the Eschwege Institute. Inspired by the depth of a reconciliation council I facilitated during the international Gathering in the Ukraine this fall, I have the wish to share some thoughts about it:

My grandpa had been a farmer and he had to fight in World War II. He was known to be a family man and he did not want to go to war. He shot off one of his fingers by himself, in order to be able to stay with his young family. But the Nazis treated such men very roughly and sent them straight to the East Front.

He was killed in 1944 near Minsk in Belorussia. My grandma, like many others, was in great trouble: Alone with the farm, my mother, and a disabled child. Soon she married her neighbor, who immediately forbids her to ever again mention the name of my grandpa. All photographs of him had to be thrown away. And so life went on without him.

1

Nobody ever visited his grave. Actually, nobody ever figured out if he even had one...

Many years ago I did family constellation work with a brilliant therapist called Monika Keim. The first two days I did not know why; but then, perceiving that every second constellation work had to do with disorders caused by World War II, it dawned on me.

Like when I write poems, I intuitively received fragments of verses saying "I missed your hand on my back and your face on the photographs" and "a bullet took you away from us." First, I had no clue to whom this referred and then I remembered that I had a grandpa, who had been killed in the war. When I did the constellation work and put my family in place, it turned out to be my task to look over the shoulders of my mom, into her unsolved past, where I looked at him.

The man I had chosen to be my grandpa had been a phlegmatic man in our workshop before, but now he seemed to be the happiest man on earth; he almost could not contain his happiness. This had been the first time ever since the war that somebody had spoken to him, to tell him that his beloved family had made it through the shitty times, even though his hand on my back had been missed badly. One could feel how long he had been waiting for this.

Later that day I not only received more fragments to my poem but more visions as well: I saw him, dressed in a rotten uniform, standing ghost-like on the slope of a grassy hill, a hill as I imagine they look near Minsk. He was silently and untiringly looking westward, waiting for information, waiting to be honored. He was standing there, where they had dug his body

Text by Holger Heiten, Eschwege Institut, www.eschwege-institut.de, use only with permission

in. He wasn't buried in a dignified way: nobody closed his eyes with a last gentle touch, and nobody had cried enough over him, a forgotten man in the dirt of a foreign land. In the next image I received, I couldn't see the grass on the hills anymore; instead I saw thousands and thousands of men, standing like him, like a silent forest, facing untiringly westward to where their loved ones continued their lives without them. They were all waiting on us, to finally end the war, that still hasn't ended.

World War II will only then have ended, when we have cried over my grandpa and all the thousands and millions of waiting men, of whichever army, so that they can finally lie down to rest.

Martin Prechtel shared that in his Mayan village they believe that when someone has died, he would sit in a canoe; and in order to be able to make it to the other side, he would need a river of tears, cried over him by the loved ones he left behind. If there are not enough tears, the person gets stuck in between the worlds, just like my grandpa.

Right after the war nobody could afford to mourn for too long; everybody lived in survival mode, and a destroyed country needed to be built up again. But it seems that now the time has come to remember those men, to share the stories and to sit in the grief our ancestors couldn't afford.

Since my childhood I have suffered from tinnitus in both ears and a gap in my hearing spectrum. The ear specialists say this is typically caused by a gunshot, but I never fired a gun in my life. A healer once said that this shot didn't necessarily happen in my life; rather, that maybe I heard the shot that killed my grandpa because nobody else had really listened to it before.

Almost 4 years ago I first went to the Ukraine to support the trainings of Giora and Katja with a Four Shields seminar, it turned out that the venue, a beautiful wild forest at a riverside, had been one of the major Ukrainian battlefields in World War II and is replete with old trenches. It was the place where the Germans were defeated by the Soviet Army. When I set up my tent there, for the first time ever my tinnitus was gone and I was able to hear like never before.

When I shared this and part of the story of my grandpa with the group, it opened the door to a whole universe of untold stories full of the pain, suffering and grief of our grandparents. Without having planned this, the workshop turned into a powerful reconciliation council with me as a German and with Ukrainians, Russians and Belarusians. For the rest of the time we sat, listening to each others' stories and crying over our ancestors. We all felt healed and cleansed afterward.

When everything was done and the cars were packed for driving home, a storm suddenly came over us in just a few minutes. The storm was so strong that some of the 60 to 70 year old trees that had grown on that battlefield ever since the war, were falling around and next to us, with an enormous noise. We still stood there with our coffee cups in our hands, in shock and soaking wet from the rain, when the storm was done as sudden as it had come. Nobody had been hurt by the falling big trees and none of the cars were damaged.

There are beliefs in many cultures around the world that the ancestors live on in the wood of trees, and that if you want to contact them, you make that wood sound. We understood the sounds we had heard and the fallen trees all around us as a sign that we had done a good job and that some of the souls there had been ready to go.

Ever since then I've been convinced that this is one of the ways to end the war, bit by bit. And as my tinnitus came back a few days later, I also understood that as long as I have to hear the shot that killed my grandpa, I also have to talk about it. This is my task.

What can our work do?

We have the way of council, the Four Shields, and our knowledge about rites of passage. With this we can do a lot because it helps to give words and understanding to what happens on a soul level, when traumatized by war.

Even though we might think of it as amoral, our grandfathers went into (what in the model of the 4 shields would be) a west shield, or underworld, journey and they took with them their suffering families at home. It's hard to think of them as being on a hero's journey, especially if they had fought for the Nazi regime, but this is what they did. They encountered being a human from the most cruel and evil side and, whether they wanted it or not, they have been initiated into being a warrior. Some have loaded guilt on themselves, more than one is able to hold.

Meredith Little recently said it so beautifully during her workshop at the Eschwege Institute: that returning soldiers today who come back from Iraq or Afghanistan, for example, need a safe container in which their stories can be heard. They need a container in which those stories, freshly brought from the darkest places of humanity, are not immediately perceived as amoral, bad or evil, but are seen, instead, as an initiation story that needs to be listened to just like any other initiation story. An initiation story that has not been listened to becomes an unfinished Gestalt; and together with its hero, gets stuck in the underworld. No nation can afford to lose its men to such stuck processes, or to have any more psychopathic, ticking time bombs walking around.

The power of our work is that we have ways to embrace the darkness and the shadows of the West Shield. When we mirror such warrior stories, we can point out that nothing can be undone: what somebody did in a war does not require that they live on with such guilt. Additionally, we can also confirm that this person has been initiated into the archetype of the warrior. If that person is willing to take this on, he comes to understand that there are many good tasks that require the qualities of a warrior. It can be useful in the fight for the rescue of the rainforest, or for social projects. Warriors of that type will have no more fear of officials or punishments.

3

Looking at it this way, it becomes clearer why so many of our grandfathers got stuck in the West for the rest of their lives. In their wish not to bother their families with such cruel stories, they themselves got stuck in their shame and guilt and got lost as male role models for their sons, with all the consequences for the health of their lineage.

But also, the untold stories of the families, the wives, mothers and children, kept them stuck in an underworld that would never allow a full flowering, mature North. And, crucially, the forgotten ones like my grandpa, whose stories never were heard, got stuck in a twilight zone between the worlds. We cannot freely move forward into the full potential of our future with our pasts unfinished. If we are not ready to turn back toward them and the darkness of their pain, if we are not ready to sit with it and look at it, we will never have the feeling that the wars are over. They will continue in our souls.

So what our work can do is provide a safe space to listen to the stories that live on in us, to embrace the shadows and the darkness, to give awareness to it. When we do so, stuck wheels will start turning again and healing will come.

The tears that we cry over our ancestors will enable them to make it to the other side. With every canoe that goes, we have tidied the battlefields again a little bit more behind us. The confirmation of a completed initiation into the quality of the warrior will enable and encourage young men to once more try to make it good for their people, but this time in a much more sustainable way.

Holger Heiten