

Holocaust survivor recalls life on the run

Story and photos by Maria Higgins

Journalist

Down to the tiniest detail, Herman Zimmerman's boyhood memories snap with the clarity of yesterday.

The taste of a cake his mother baked, the jingle of coins in a neighbor's pocket, the flash of leg his sister showed as she flirted with a stranger, the ring of the doorbell as soccer buddies came to play. Ordinary snippets all, were they from someone else's life.

But because they are Zimmerman's, a survivor of the Nazi Holocaust who spoke at the 6th Area Support Group's Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony in Patch Chapel April 26, the memories come cloaked in painful context.

It was beef lung that flavored his mother's cake when there was no proper food in the house where the family was hiding.

It was fear that frayed the neighbor's nerves as he paced, hands in coin-filled pockets, outside a police station where Jews were ordered to gather. "We are going to be burned. We are going to be burned," he cried.

It was desperation that fueled his sister's flirting as she tried to distract soldiers demanding to see papers she didn't have.

And it was the greeting, "Hey, Jew, you want to play with us?" that assailed the young Zimmerman when his friends Fritz and Franz rang the doorbell in search of an extra man for soccer - the same friends who, before being instructed otherwise by their parents, had called him Herman.

Sixty years later, such memories compel Zimmerman to spend considerable time telling his family's story to groups of American, German and French schoolchildren and adults. When he spoke for Holocaust Remembrance Day, he presented a picture of the Holocaust from outside the concentration camp walls. While more than 70 of his relatives perished in camps, Zimmerman's immediate family spent several years in a different kind of nightmare: alternating hiding and being on the run in Germany, Holland, France, Belgium and Switzerland. Numerous times the family had to break apart. Numerous times they survived chillingly close calls.

By war's end, the Zimmermans - Peretz and Mali and their children Mia, Leo, Julien and Herman - would reunite, luckier than some six million Jews similarly hunted by Hitler's Nazis.

In his book, "An Angel by My Side," and in his lectures, Zimmerman points to the many strangers who risked their own lives and helped him avoid capture. His nearest brush came one night when soldiers stormed into the French farmhouse where the Zimmermans and others were staying.

In an upstairs bedroom, Herman and Julien thought quickly. Julien unscrewed the room's only light bulb, and then the boys crawled under a bed, pulling suitcases in front of their faces and barely daring to breathe.

The stomp of heavy boots on wooden stairs pounded in their ears. It was only the indignant theatrics of the landlady, Madame Bridoux, that saved the Zimmermans: Put off by her ranting, the soldiers backed down the stairs without searching further - but left with two other screaming Jewish families in tow.

"I am not bitter," Zimmerman insisted to the American audience, "but my memories come to me more and more often."

Though this makes for frequently raw emotions - he railed against those he termed "French traitors," then caught and steadied himself - Zimmerman does not try to bury his past. Rather, he uses it to educate and better the hearts of the present generation, who, he said, "must never forget" the horrors of a time when men forgot how to be human.

Of his many murdered friends, Zimmerman said, "Perhaps they would have wanted to know that today I'm standing here in front of caring people, telling their story, so that their suffering can mean the gift of life for future generations."

Despite efforts such as the 6th ASG's Holocaust Remembrance Day, despite the countless letters of sympathy and support he receives from schoolchildren who have heard him speak, Zimmerman has no doubt that his work is as necessary as ever.

He said that often he will stop in a German coffee house, where he will "play devil's advocate" with patrons by asking provocative questions in fluent German. Recently he met a congenial German man this way, and the two enjoyed a long talk about life and politics, "but not anything involving Israel," he said.

The man, who still had no idea Zimmerman was a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, gave a friendly goodbye and left. Then, rushing back into the shop to make a final point, he proclaimed to Zimmerman, "Whatever is happening in the world today, it's the Jews' fault!"

So Herman Zimmerman will keep telling his story.

Broken hearts, broken bones: Domestic violence isolates, devastates

By Maria Higgins

Kathryn Tull thought she knew who battered women were: They lived in trailer parks. They were poor. Uneducated. Weak. They certainly weren't like her, a comfortable, middle-class woman married to a successful California musician. And there were good explanations for the bruises on her body, the whirls of rage and rain of blows from her husband that a mere word or glance or gesture would unleash - really, there were.

Not until 13 years of her nearly murderous marriage went by -17 years since she began dating him - did she leave. And not until two weeks after she finally fled, after her daughter called the police and they arrived minutes before his hands choked the last breath from her, did it dawn on her that she was, indeed, a battered woman.

As she told her story to 6th ASG community members participating in an all-day violence prevention seminar in the Swabian Special Events Center on Patch Barracks, some in the audience had a hard time grasping how it could have taken her so long to see the light and save herself.

Their incredulity didn't surprise her.

Fooling oneself

As Tull later learned - once she established a new life and began researching what experts know about abuse - years can go by while a spouse rationalizes an abuser's actions, or convinces herself, as Tull often did, that the latest violent episode simply "didn't happen." That the explosive behavior "isn't the real him."

Even when the situation becomes as severe as Tull's did, when, as she said, "everyday life is like walking on a field of landmines, never knowing when one word out of your mouth is going to cause an explosion" - the shame of what is happening becomes too mortifying to share with anyone. Sometimes, even with yourself: "It's very, very painful to acknowledge that you knowingly and willingly are allowing yourself to be hurt, are allowing your children to be hurt," said Tull, her voice breaking at the mention of her son and two daughters.

These days, though her psyche still reels and she admittedly "is so far from being over it," Tull is devoted to healing. She is "setting boundaries and insisting others treat me with respect, and then living my life that way on a daily basis." It is as simple as that. And as difficult as that, as people with anemic self-esteem know.

She is even more resolute in her desire to help others caught in or recovering from domestic violence. To that end, Tull logs considerable miles speaking to

advocacy, survivor and workplace groups to dispel the myths, fill in the many blanks that people (including the very ones in a position to help) have about domestic violence, and carry forth her message that stopping domestic abuse is everyone's business.

"I have to believe there was a reason that I survived almost being killed," Tull said. "If you see [my pain], maybe it'll sensitize you to somebody else's."

The face of violence

'Somebody else,' as Tull learned, could be anyone: Bruises are as likely to hide under mink coats as they are under house coats. Abusive relationships occur in heterosexual partners, between lesbian and gay couples and between spouses from every socioeconomic and racial group the world over.

The "pass" that Tull once believed came with her white, middle-class status never existed, but, as she found out, her profile did make it harder for other people who carried the same misconception to buy her story: "Very few people believe middle-class white women have any problems," she said ruefully, adding that the result can be isolation in place of much-needed intervention.

In a small percentage of cases, the male is the battered spouse. (For this reason, experts in the field attempt to use gender-neutral language, but do acknowledge that the vast majority of victims are female.)

Like those caught up in it, domestic violence itself has many different faces.

In a briefing the night before the conference, members of the Stuttgart Provost Marshal's Office were advised by Tull, "When you go out on a DV call, it's not as simple as a guy hitting his wife."

Under no circumstances, she said, should investigators assume that all is well simply because no wounds are visible.

Less obvious signs to look for and ask about include sexual assault (including incest), coercion, threats, intimidation, humiliation, financial deprivation - all are tools that keep the abused spouse cowering and the abuser feeling the power of control.

"These are not the acts of people who love one another," Tull said. "These are the acts of enemies." Or as Tull came to see it, of a "personal terrorist."

The birth of abuse

Society has, in a way, been running a personal terrorist training camp since the beginning of time, Tull theorized, beginning with cavemen who had to club their supper and drag it home for the child-nurturing, home-tending cavewoman to prepare.

From the start, explained Tull, abuse was condoned even on legislative levels.

She cited writings that quote Rome's first (possibly mythical) king, Romulus, advising husbands to use whatever force was necessary to ensure that their wives conformed to them entirely; a church official in early Siena, Italy, suggested that men "take up a stick and beat her soundly to nourish the soul."

In many parts of the world today, Tull said, women are still considered the property of men. And particularly in America, she noted, there is the tendency to think that what goes on in man's ultimate property - the home - is no one else's business, a tenet that gives pause to friends and neighbors, and sometimes even police, who may suspect abuse but feel hesitant to intrude.

Possibly the most damning contributor is that in America, "we live in a cultural environment that promotes and accepts violence," Tull said.

She suggested that the leap from a pro wrestler's thrashing in the ring to what is acceptable interaction at home is shorter than many believe.

Finally, violence in the form of spankings and yelling have long been allowed within the family in American and other cultures to maintain order.

The end product is something social work professionals used to call "male privilege," but now term "power privilege."

However it is labeled, Tull knows what it means: "My ex-husband," she said, "could give you a list of extenuating circumstances a half-hour long on what gave him the right to beat me."

As the conference ended, Tull challenged attendees: "I implore you to help me reach out to others, to teach them that they are not alone."

If victims can convince themselves that they are strong enough to leave, strong enough to stay gone and strong enough to heal, Tull said, they, too, can learn to "live their lives in more self-respect, and demonstrate and model that [for their children]."

It's as simple as learning to say the magic words that spirited her to a healthier place: "I don't choose to put myself in that position any longer." And it's as difficult as that.

In an emergency, call the 6th ASG military police at 114/civ. 0711-680-114. For details call ACS at 430-7176/civ. 0711-680-7176.

Chairman of the board: Local craftsman works wonders with wood

By Maria Higgins

Walk into the Kelley Barracks Arts and Crafts Center expecting to see a woodworking shop on par with your high-school shop class, and the misconception will smack you in the head like a two-by-four.

The first jolt comes from the works in progress lying about: a beautifully turned leg waiting to become a four-poster bed, precision-cut planks on their way to a star turn as an entertainment center. Some 30 to 40 such projects are underway at any given time.

It's the walls, though, that serve as a sort of annual report on "chairman of the board" Mike Quantrell and the high-end projects he has helped all sorts of folks leverage from their inner craftsmen over the years: Row after row of Polaroid photographs tacked there show wall-length schranks, or German-style storage units; stereo cabinets; bed frames; bookcases; tables and toys - enough stunning furniture and wooden accessories to stock an Ethan Allan showroom. For 20 years, Quantrell has been at the helm - as manager, teacher, mentor - requiring nothing from patrons as a prerequisite except a desire to make something beautiful.

"He has a love and a passion for teaching," said Reservist Irene Miller Zoppi, an Army major who was assigned to U.S. European Command this past summer. When she found herself with nothing to do during off-duty hours - and despite barely knowing a table saw from a sander - she challenged herself to tackle what she called the "traditional male craft" of woodworking and set about making a rocking horse for her two young children back home.

In just 13 shop sessions and for \$44.10 for materials, she had an heirloom-quality toy that she hopes future generations of children in her family will find priceless.

She also had an appreciation for the British-born Quantrell.

"I didn't know I had it in me," Zoppi said, adding that the horse proved easier to make than it was to pack for shipping home to America. "This is the power of a good teacher," she said. "With teachers like Mike, there are no limitations - only limitations of the [crafter's] mind."

"Mike is fantastic, totally positive," said Kate Schultz, a military spouse.

"For my first project, I wanted to make a spice rack, but he told me it was not a good starter project. He was willing to try - he didn't tell me I couldn't do it - but suggested something that would be a better learning experience instead." (She subsequently made a wine closet, a computer desk footrest and a drink stand.)

Zoppi credited Quantrell for also creating an enjoyable atmosphere in which to work. "It was fun, like being with family," she said. "We joked, and it was relaxing and peaceful."

Ida Weiner, who was building an intricate Christmas present for her husband, found the same joy in the shop as Zoppi did. "This is as close to a 'Mom and Pop' shop as you can get," Weiner said. "You feel welcome. That's why people are attracted to this place. It's a home away from home."

Another reason, Weiner said, is that "regardless of your level of expertise, even if it's a 1 on a scale of 1 to 10, you can make something that turns out to be a 10 quality."

This is just the kind of experience that Quantrell hopes to fashion every time. Judging from the weekly phone calls he gets from former woodshop patrons around the world, he seems to be succeeding.

It's important to him that "people can come and have a good time, a laugh and a joke," he said. But he also wants everyone to leave with a project they're proud of, to create one more in a rich legacy of "family heirlooms floating around the States that were made here."

He told the story of a military police officer who turned up at the shop in the mid-'80s, "pretty unhappy" about having been assigned to make shelving for the unit's vast collection of paperwork and forms. To the MP's surprise, he liked the work and came back to make several more projects. On his final effort, a huge TV stand, he erred on the measurements.

"It sagged in the middle," said perfectionist Quantrell, "and it kind of made me cringe." But the night it was finished, the man went home, set up his television and hi-fi on the stand, cracked open a beer, and after two or three hours realized that he couldn't remember what he had just watched on TV: "He told me he just kept staring at his unit the whole time. The sag didn't matter a damn," Quantrell recalls with a laugh. "That pretty much sums up this place."

To foster high standards in their work, "and just for fun," Quantrell bestows a "Project of the Year" award, and keeps a photo of the winner's work on hand to inspire others. One Navy commander who won the award "left here with tears in his eyes," Quantrell said. The officer "had received a lot of honors throughout his career, but he said this one was special" because it was from his wood shop peers.

Quantrell is fond of how at least while they're in his shop, a guy with lots of gold on his shoulders is a peer to a private first class. "It's like fishermen on a riverbank," Quantrell explained, noting that it's not uncommon for a sergeant to lend a hand to a lower-ranking individual, or for a junior officer to make a design suggestion to someone of higher rank.

It's an atmosphere that anyone talking to Quantrell can see he is especially proud to have built.

For more information about the Kelley Arts and Crafts Center call 421-2519/civ. 0711-729-2519.