

Christmas and Forgiveness from 7

My mother seldom talked about her experiences during the war. If you asked her what they were like, most of the time she would just say, "If they give you bread, you eat it. If they beat you, you run away."

A lot of people say, forget it; it was all a long time ago. For my parents, it was never a long time ago.

My parents carried the pain and nightmares with them every day.

When my father was dying in a hospice, there were times when he was sure that the doctors and the nurses were the guards who beat him when he was a prisoner in the concentration camp. There were also times when he couldn't recognize me. He looked at me and was frightened, as if I were one of the guards.

I don't think he ever forgave the guards for what they did to him.

I remember asking my mom once toward the end of her life if she forgave the Germans. She thought for a while.

I'm sure she was thinking about her mother and her sister and her sister's baby. They were killed by Germans who came to her farm house in eastern Poland. My mother saw this and escaped for a while by jumping through a broken window and making her way to a forest. Eventually, the Germans caught her and took to the slave camps in Germany.

What my mother finally said in response to my question about whether she forgave the Germans surprised me. I thought she was going to say what I had heard my father say over and over--that all the Germans were evil. But that's not what she said. She told me a story about when she first was brought to Germany. She was taken to a camp where they worked the women just like they were men, making the women work sixteen, eighteen, twenty hour shifts, six days a week. She said that she knew she couldn't survive that for long. She figured she'd be dead in a couple of days, maybe a week.

She was saved by a German, a guard in a concentration camp.

For some reason, this German guard took pity on her. Who knows what his motives were? My mother often said that Germans thought she looked like a German, a niemka in Polish. Maybe this was what got her saved. Maybe not. Whatever it was that motivated this guard, he succeeded in getting her transferred to a different work area where the work was not killing work. She survived the war.

After telling me this story, she said, "Some Germans were good. Some bad. I forgive the good ones."

All of this went through my head when the student asked me if I forgave the Germans, and here's what I said to him, "I don't forgive the stupid ones, the ones who think that what happened to my parents didn't happen or it wasn't as bad as people say."

And I told this student why I was saying this. I told him how I had gone to an academic conference in Paderborn, Germany, in 1989, and I met a woman, a professor, there. We were chatting, and she asked me if I had ever been in Germany before. I said, "Yes, I have. I was born in Germany in fact, in Vinnenberg."

She was surprised and asked me about this. I told her my parents had been kidnapped by the Germans and brought to work in the slave labor and concentration camps in Germany, and that I was born in a refugee camp after the war.

She said, "Your parents were lucky they were brought to Germany during the war. It was better for them here than in Poland. Here they got good food, shelter. Here they got to escape the chaos of the war."

I looked at her and couldn't believe that she could say such a thing. I thought about my father and mother and what they lost and suffered during the war, and I thought about how their lives after the war never shook off the scars of the war. I thought about my father's nightmares and his dead eye, the one blinded by a guard; and I thought about my mother's coldness, her inability to feel much beyond grief and anger and hatred. I thought about how she directed that coldness and anger and hatred toward my father, my sister, and me.

I didn't know what to say to this German professor, and didn't say anything.

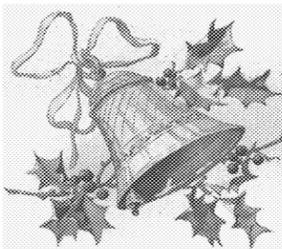
She was not the kind of person I could forgive. She was one of the stupid ones. This is what I told the student who asked if I forgave the Germans. Some I forgave, the smart ones who recognized what had happened during the war. Some I didn't forgive, the ones who didn't recognize what had happened.

But later as I kept thinking about what the student had asked and what I had answered, I started thinking more and more about my mother. With all she had experienced in the war and with all of her coldness, anger, and hate, she was still able to find some human warmth in her heart. She was still able to forgive some Germans.

This makes me think that I should be able to do more than condemn the stupid ones and forgive the smart ones, that I should be able to feel more of the good will toward all of them than I do. □

**The perfect
inexpensive
Christmas gift
that will be enjoyed
throughout the year**

*A gift subscription
to the
NEWS OF POLONIA*



***May your heart be filled with joy
at the wonderful news
that Christ, our Lord, is born.***

Martin Krawiec, Attorney

Celebrate the season from 1

it impatiently on the linoleum floor. We children tried not to giggle too loud as we waited for him to relate some fascinating bit of history.

"You all know the Chinese invented pierogi," he began speaking in the scholarly tone he used when imparting information gleaned from years of reading. "They called them won tons. Marco Polo introduced them to the courts of Italian nobles when he returned from his travels in the East. Cooks of these prestigious households transformed them into raviolis, altering the fillings to please the Italian palate. When Bona Sforza traveled to Poland to become the wife of King Zygmunt the Old and our Queen, she brought Italian chefs along in her retinue," he explained. At this point grandfather noticed Annie furiously kneading the dough, her back as stiff as a board and with a look that could have soured the pitcher of milk on the kitchen counter. "It was Polish cooks, however, who raised this simple food to the highest of culinary achievements. What a pity the emperor of China never had the supreme pleasure of tasting one of your Great Aunt Annie's creations," he affirmed triumphantly.

During the 1970's and 1980's my parents and other families carried forward the precedent of sharing their customs with neighbors and friends by having an Open House. Wigilia remained a family occasion, although the place reserved for the "uninvited guest" seldom remained empty. Sometimes the extra board had to be added to the table to accommodate a less fortunate family. An Open House, on the other hand, was an occasion to invite friends, coworkers, acquaintances, a favorite teacher, hairdresser or anyone to whom a gesture of friendship, appreciation or gratitude was owed. Polish delicacies mingled on the table with the latest Ladies Home Journal magazine festive entertaining suggestions. Guests never brought food for the occasion. The gesture might be misinterpreted by these survivors of the Great Depression who took pride in providing the best hospitality they could afford. Instead, guests proffered enticing invitations to their homes.

My favorite Open House took place in the apartment of Mr. Youtsos, the

patriarch of an extended Greek family who owned several restaurants in the area. We children were taken by the hand, introduced around like honored guests and expected to eat like starved orphans. The food, although mysterious looking and different from what we were accustomed to, tasted wonderful! Stunning, full figured, Greek women with black hair and milk white skin danced through the guest filled rooms, moving sinuously with a natural grace I had never seen at my Saturday dance class. I fondly remember the patriarch noticing I had nothing to drink. He summoned a young relative and ordered him to go down to the basement of the restaurant and bring up a bottle of Mavrodaphne, a gentle sweet Greek wine. I felt like a Greek Goddess when I realized it was opened and poured just for me!

Not only did people open their homes but their hearts. It wasn't about showing off their wealth or an attempt to convert others to their style of life. The one quality all these ethnic people had in common was their sense of self worth. They remind me of a passage in Danaan Parry's Essene Book of Meditations and Blessings: "It is my natural state to be filled with joy, a joy that knows from whence I came and who I truly am...." Let us approach the coming holiday time with the same strength of character and mutually share our beautiful, colorful heritages. Down through the ages the hospitality of the Polish people has become legendary. The "uninvited guest" has no specific nationality, ethnicity, religion or race. Perhaps that was the lesson Grandfather Andrzej was trying to teach us grandchildren with his "tall tales" of ancient peoples. □

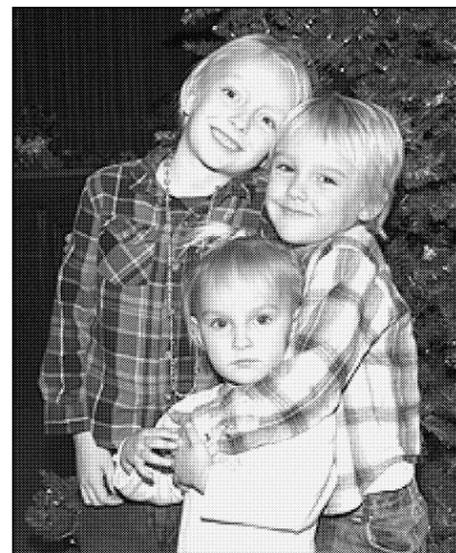
**Joseph L. Drociak,
Attorney**

Over 44 years experience

*Personal Injury, Wrongful Death,
Workers Compensation, Medical
Malpractice, Wrongful Termination,
Sexual Harassment, Nursing Home abuse*
7627 S. Western Ave. (323) 971-3981
12400 Wilshire Blvd. (213) 384-7900

Los Angeles

Merry Christmas
and a
Happy New Year



Teya, Chaz and Edyn Cepielik - Weeks

Mom

Kristy (Cepielik)

Dad

Todd (Weeks)