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WP

What would you do if your father were one of the most reviled men in history?

A SECRET LIFE

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The Kommandant's Daughter

From the heart of evil to a quiet life of forgetting in Washington

by Thomas Harding

Brigitte Höss lives quietly on a leafy side street in Northern Virginia. She is retired now, having worked in a Washington fashion salon for more than 30 years. She recently was diagnosed with cancer and spends much of her days dealing with the medical consequences.

Brigitte also has a secret that not even her grandchildren know. Her father was Rudolf Höss, the Kommandant of Auschwitz.

It was Rudolf Höss who designed and built Auschwitz from an old army barracks in Poland to a killing machine capable of murdering 2,000 people an hour. By the end of the war, 1.1 million Jews had been killed in the camp, along with 20,000 gypsies and tens of thousands of Polish and Russian political prisoners. As such, Brigitte's father was one of the biggest mass murderers in history.

Far left: **Rudolf Höss, foreground, at Auschwitz.** ***This photo:*** **Hans Jürgen, Inge-Brigitt (Brigitte) and Annegret Höss at the Auschwitz villa.**

For nearly 40 years she has kept her past out of public view, unexamined, not even sharing her story with her closest family members.

I discovered where she lived while doing research for "Hanns and Rudolf," a book on how Höss was captured after the war by my great-uncle, Hanns Alexander, a German Jew who had fled Berlin in the 1930s. It took three years to find her. She would be interviewed only on the condition that neither her married name be revealed nor any details that would disclose her identity.

"There are crazy people out there. They might burn my house down or shoot somebody," she says in a thick German accent.

If the subject of the Holocaust comes up, she steers the conversation in another direction. "If somebody asks about my dad," she says, "I tell them that he died in the war."

But she has just turned 80 and wonders if it's time to tell her grandchildren her story. She was a young girl caught in epic historic forces she could little understand, much less be responsible for. Is now the time to process her family history? Does she pass on the fear of discovery that she has lived with all her life? Or does she take her story to her grave?

"It was a long time ago," she says. "I didn't do what was done. I never talk about it — it is something within me. It stays with me."

According to SS personnel records — held in the National Archives in College Park — Inge-Brigitt Höss was born on Aug. 18, 1933, on a farm near the Baltic Sea. Her father, Rudolf, and mother, Hedwig, met on this farm, which was a haven for German youths obsessed with ideas of racial purity and rural utopia. Brigitte was the third of five children, three girls and two boys.

Brigitte had an extraordinary childhood, moving from the farm to one concentration camp after another as her father scaled the ranks of the SS: Dachau from ages 1 through 5; Sachsenhausen from 5 to 7; and from 7 to 11, in perhaps the most notorious death camp, Auschwitz.

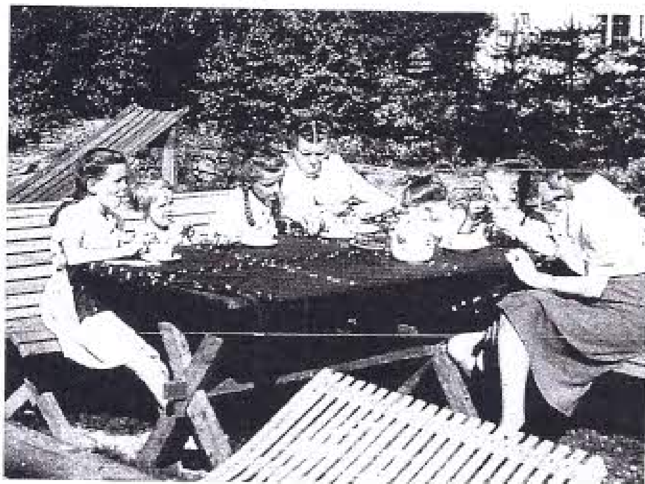
From 1940 to 1944, the Höss family lived in a two-story gray stucco villa on the edge of Auschwitz — so close you could see the prisoner blocks and old crematorium from the upstairs window. Brigitte's mother described the place as "paradise": They had cooks, nannies, gardeners, chauffeurs, seamstresses, haircutters and cleaners, some of whom were prisoners.

The family decorated their home with furniture and artwork stolen from prisoners as they were selected for the gas chambers. It was a life of luxury taking place only a few short steps from horror and torment. Most Sundays the kommandant drove the children to see the horses in the stables. They loved to visit the kennels to pet the German shepherds.

Photographs show a pond in the garden and a large table for picnics. The prisoners made giant toy airplanes for the boys, big enough for them to sit in and push around the garden. The girls liked to flirt with the handsome soldiers who guarded the camp entrance.

The children were aware that their father ran a prison camp. Men with black-and-white striped uniforms worked in their garden. Once the Höss

For four years, the Höss family lived in a villa — so close you could see the prisoner blocks



From left: **Hedwig Höss (woman in center) with, from left: Inge-Brigitt (Brigitte) Höss, Joachim Caesar's daughter, Heidetraud Höss, Caesar's son, Hans Jürgen Höss and the wife of Caesar. Rudolf Höss with his children on the Sola River near the villa. Jews from Hungary walk toward gas chambers in Auschwitz.**

PAGES 12 AND 13: CHILDREN PHOTOGRAPH AND PHOTOGRAPHS THIS PAGE COURTESY OF INSTITUT FÜR ZEITGESCHICHTE IN MUNICH/RAINER HÖSS

children dressed up as prisoners, pinning black triangles and yellow stars to their shirts, then chased each other until their father saw them and told them to stop the game.

In April 1945, as the end of the war appeared in sight, Rudolf Höss and his family fled north. They split up. His wife took the children and found refuge above an old sugar factory in St. Michaelisdonn, a village near the coast. The kommandant took on the identity of a laborer and hid on a farm four miles from the Danish border. The Höss family waited for the right moment to escape to South America.

on the edge of Auschwitz

PAGE 12 AND THIS PAGE: HÖSS AND JEWS PHOTOGRAPH FROM THE U.S. HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM, COURTESY OF THE AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU MUSEUM

from the upstairs window.

We sit in a small, dark den to the side of her house. Brigitte lies on an old couch, complaining that her feet hurt. I sit on a plump loveseat next to a Christmas tree, upon which hangs a star knitted by her mother, Hedwig, the kommandant's wife.

I start by asking about the time she spent living next to Auschwitz. "It is best not to remember all those things," Brigitte says.

She is more willing to talk about when the British captured her father. One cold evening in March 1946, Hanns Alexander, my great-uncle — a German-born Jew but by then a British captain — banged on the family's door.

"I remember when they came to our house to ask questions," she says, her voice tight. "I was sitting on the table with my sister. I was about 13 years old. The British soldiers were screaming: 'Where is your father? Where is your father?' over and over again. I got a very bad headache. I went outside and cried under a tree. I made myself calm down. I made myself stop crying, and my headache went away. But I have had migraines for years after that. These migraines stopped a few years ago, but since I received your letter, they have started again."

The story continues. "My older brother Klaus was taken with my mother. He was beaten badly by the British. My mother heard him scream in pain from the room next door. Just like any mother, she wanted to protect her son, so she told them where my father was."

Alexander assembled a team and headed to the barn in the night. Höss was awakened. He denied he was the kommandant. Certain he had his man, Alexander demanded to see his wedding ring. When Höss claimed it was stuck, Alexander threatened to cut his finger off until the kommandant passed the ring over. Inside was inscribed "Rudolf" and "Hedwig."

The kommandant was the first person at such a senior level to admit the extent of the slaughter at Auschwitz. He was handed over to the Americans, who made him testify at Nuremberg. Then Höss was passed to the Poles, who prosecuted him, then hanged him on a gallows next to the Auschwitz crematorium.

Hedwig and the children scraped by. They stole coal from a train to heat their home. Shoeless, they tied rags around their feet. As a family connected to the Nazi regime, they were shunned. It was only when Klaus found a job in Stuttgart that the family's fortunes improved.

In the 1950s Brigitte managed to leave Germany and make a new life in Spain. She was a stunning young lady, with long blond hair, a slender figure and a "don't mess with me" attitude. She worked as a model for three years with the up-and-coming Balenciaga fashion house. And she met an Irish American engineer working in Madrid for a Washington-based communications company.

The couple married in 1961. They had a daughter and a son. His work took them to Liberia, then Greece, Iran and Vietnam.

The engineer says Brigitte told him about her father and her life in Auschwitz while they were dating. "I was at first a little bit shocked," he says. "But then as I discussed more and more with her, I realized that she was as much a victim as anybody else. She was just a child while this all happened. She went from having everything to having nothing."

He says they had an "unspoken and unwritten agreement" not to talk about her family background. He remembers telling her: "It was a terrible thing — let's not carry it any further. Let's get on with our lives, live happily and leave it all behind. It is not your responsibility. There is no reason to carry the guilt of your father."

In 1972 they moved to Washington. Brigitte's husband took a senior job with a transportation company, and they bought a house in Georgetown. It was a chance for Brigitte to start over.

Brigitte struggled — she didn't know

how to write a check, spoke little English and was without friends or family. After some searching, she found a part-time job in a fashion boutique.

One day a short Jewish lady visited the boutique. She liked Brigitte's style and asked her to come work in her fashion salon in the District.

Soon after she was hired, Brigitte says, she got drunk with her manager and confessed that her father was Rudolf Höss. The manager told the store's owner. The owner told Brigitte that she could stay, that she had not committed any crime herself. What Brigitte did not know, at least not until later, was that the store owner and her husband were Jewish and had fled Nazi Germany after the Kristallnacht attacks of 1938.

Brigitte was thankful for being seen as a person, rather than her father's daughter. She worked at the store for 35 years, serving prominent Washingtonians, including the wives of senators and congressmen.

The store owner returned Brigitte's loyalty and hard work by keeping her secret. With the exception of one other manager, none of the other staff knew the truth about Brigitte's family history.

After Brigitte retired a few years ago, the store owner called every month to see how she was doing. "She is very nice," Brigitte says. Then about a year ago, she stopped calling. Brigitte knew the store owner had visited Israel and wondered if she had, after all the years, become angry. "People do change," she said.

That Rudolf Höss's daughter lives in Northern Virginia is not the only family story kept secret. Starting in the 1960s, Hedwig visited her daughter in Washington every few years.

By this time, Hedwig had moved to a small house near Stuttgart, where she lived with one of her daughters. Unlike other widows of German soldiers, she was not granted a state pension, nor did she receive any other income from the government.

Although Hedwig had played a prominent role in Auschwitz, even appearing as a witness at the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial in 1965, there were no travel restrictions on the spouses of Nazi war criminals. While in Washington, Hedwig spent her time watching the grandchildren while her daughter worked. They didn't talk about the past.

Hedwig's last visit was in September 1989. She was 81 and frail. She was due to fly back to Germany but told her daughter it was too cold and she preferred to remain longer. After dinner on Sept. 15, Hedwig said she was tired and headed for bed. The next day Brigitte knocked on her mother's door and, after no answer, went in. Hedwig had died in her sleep.

Brigitte found a local crematorium to take care of the body. She didn't want anyone to find her mother's remains — least of all neo-Nazis who might pay homage — so she gave a modified version of her mother's name to the cemetery administrator. She delayed the memorial service to allow family members from Germany to attend.

At 11 a.m. on March 3, 1990, to coincide with her mother's birthday, a short service was held in a small stone cloister in an interdenominational cemetery. Prayers were said, then the urn was interred.

Hedwig's final resting place was among the graves of Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Brigitte's life is now full of doctors, hospitals and pills. She and her husband divorced in 1983. He has since married twice and lives in Florida.

Her son lives with her. He knows about his grandfather but has not expressed much interest in looking into his family's history. Her daughter has died. Brigitte is visited often by her grandchildren.

Once a year she flies to Florida to spend time with her sister Annegret, who flies in from Germany. Klaus died in the 1980s in Australia. Her other brother, Hans Jürgen, and elder sister, Heidetraud, both live in Germany.

None of the siblings talks about their childhood — it's as if their history started in 1947, after Rudolf Höss was executed.

Brigitte's nephew, Rainer Höss, son of Hans Jürgen, is the one family member who has asked questions about the past. In 2009 I traveled with him to Auschwitz. At one point he turned to me and said matter-of-factly, "If I knew where my grandfather was buried, I would piss on his grave."

Brigitte kept her husband's last name after they divorced. She doesn't talk about the past to friends, has steered clear of other German families, and doesn't talk about her background to her family.

She has not spoken to her grandchildren about her father (though her ex-husband says he has given Höss's autobiography to the older two). She doesn't want to "upset them," she says, and she is worried that they might tell people, which could put the family at risk. "I am still scared here in Washington," she says. "There are a lot Jewish people, and they still hate the Germans. It never ends."

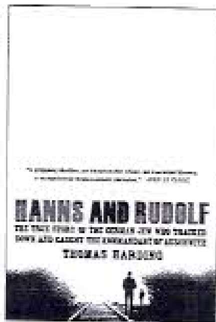
Yet, she thinks about it, about sharing her story with her family. "I will eventually, maybe when I read your book," she tells me.

About "Hanns and Rudolf"

Thomas Harding discovered that his great-uncle Hanns Alexander had been a Nazi hunter at his eulogy in 2006.

The revelation set Harding off on his own search. For six years, the journalist (a British and U.S. citizen) researched archives and interviewed survivors. The result, "Hanns and Rudolf: The True Story of the German Jew Who Tracked Down and Caught the Kommandant of Auschwitz," is being published this month by Simon & Schuster.

Harding, who lives in Hampshire, England, until recently co-owned the WV Observer in Shepherdstown, W.Va.



PHOTOGRAPH FROM SIMON & SCHUSTER