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'Justice Matters': Coming to terms with the legacy of the Holocaust



CAPTION: Mona Sue Weissmark and her daughter, Brittany.

By CINDY SHER
Associate Managing Editor

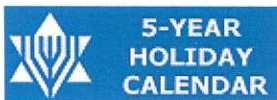
Mona Sue Weissmark strives to teach her 7-year-old daughter, Brittany, more about human compassion in this world than about evil. She knows that she has her work cut out for her, because almost their entire family was wiped out during the Holocaust.

Weissmark still resents her family's sad fate, but hopes not to transmit her feelings of pain and resentment to her daughter. Her new book, *Justice Matters: Legacies of the Holocaust and World War II* (Oxford; 2004), recounts a meeting she facilitated the first assembly of its kind between children of Nazis and children of Holocaust survivors, which aimed to foster understanding between the two groups. Although Weissmark's book is not about her own family history, her research for the book triggered intense soul-searching about her personal story. As she writes in *Justice Matters*, Resentment against all Germans belonged to my generation; maybe gratitude toward some Germans can belong to my daughter's.

Those feelings of gratitude should come a little easier for Weissmark an Evanston resident and a visiting psychology professor at Northwestern University when she thinks about the closing days of the Holocaust for her father, Brittany's grandfather, Adolph Weissmark. In 1945, just weeks before the Allied victory in Europe and after undergoing the horrors of the Holocaust, Adolph and his friend Rudolph Klepfisz were greeted with unparalleled compassion on the doorstep of a German pastor's family in a small town in Germany.

Sixty years later, the pastor and his family were awarded the world's highest honors for their heroism. The Yad Vashem Commission for the Designation of the Righteous named the late Pastor Julius Seebass, his late wife, Hertha Seebass, and their children Righteous Among the Nations, an honor bestowed upon non-Jews who risked their lives in order to rescue Jews during the Holocaust. The Yad Vashem naming was marked with a ceremony

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at Israel's London Embassy last November.

During the week of Feb. 20-27, Pastor Seebass's daughter, Sister Renate Seebass, and her brother, Professor Stephan Seebass, will participate in a series of events in the Chicago area, including one at the Goethe Institute, a German cultural institute in downtown Chicago. At that event, the Consulate General of Israel will award the Seebass family a certificate in honor of having received the Righteous Among the Nations title, and the Seebasses will tell the story of how Adolph and Rudolph became like members of their family.

The story begins in April of 1945, when the two young men, both in their 20s at the time, fled the Langenstein-Zwieberge concentration camp, a Buchenwald sub-camp, just as the SS were rounding up prisoners to be shot at a nearby mine. The two fugitives wound up in a village called Bornecke, in north-central Germany. Weighing all of 70 pounds each and ill with typhus and dysentery, covered in lice, and starving, Adolph and Rudolph stumbled upon the Seebass family's home, where they collapsed on their front stoop. Despite the risk to their own lives, the family took the men in and cared for them as if they were their own blood. The pastor's wife and his daughters, Renate and Ricarda, bathed, clothed, and nursed the young Holocaust survivors back to health and humanity. Weissmark says she believes it was less the food and more the love and affection that revived the two men: Love and affection is a very powerful medicine.

A generation later and an ocean away, having grown up in a community with many other survivor families in Forest Hills, N.Y., but with no other relatives besides her immediate family, Weissmark has strung together the story through bits and pieces an anecdote here and there from her father about his experience living in the Seebass home. Weissmark's father used to tell his daughter that he would call the pastor and his wife Papa and Mama. And when he and Rudolph had recuperated a little, Ricarda got them out of bed, took them out for some fresh air, and escorted them to see the cherry trees in their neighborhood. Weissmark says she always loved hearing that story. There's something about that story, the notion that they needed a little fresh air, she said, her voice trailing off.

About eight months into their stay with the Seebasses, faced with news that the Russians were coming, the men were forced to leave. Adolph traveled to a displaced persons camp in Germany, where he met Weissmark's mother, who had survived the Holocaust herself, spending years in Auschwitz. The couple soon immigrated to the U.S. East Coast where, having survived the Holocaust, Weissmark's father and mother lived long lives until passing away 10 and four years ago, respectively.

It was only while writing Justice Matters that Weissmark discovered how great the heroism of the Seebass family had been that they had risked their own lives and ultimately sacrificed their own daughter to save her father's life when they easily could have turned a blind eye, as so many others did. The Seebasses made the biggest sacrifice of all when Ricarda affectionately called Ricala by her family died of typhus, which she had most likely contracted from the men while they were in her care. Yet, despite Ricarda's death, Weissmark says she has never noticed any sign that this

extraordinary family harbored resentment for sacrificing their daughter to save my father's life.

Justice Matters doesn't directly relate to Weissmark's own family tree, however. Rather, the book documents her work as a psychologist chronicling the meeting she had facilitated between children of Nazis and children of Holocaust victims in a social experiment in the 1990s. In the early stages of researching the book, Weissmark never thought much about her own family's history during the war. She had grown up with the knowledge of what the Nazis did to her family, and said she felt hatred for the German people into her adulthood. Even though she knew who the Seebasses were from an early age, Weissmark had trouble distinguishing the good Germans from the bad.

It's very hard to make exceptions in the mind, she said. We tend to draw generalizations that all Germans are bad. The notion that there was this guiltless, kind wonderful German family just didn't fit.

After an Internet search by Weissmark's husband, psychiatrist Daniel Giacomo, Weissmark recently tracked down Sister Renate Seebass, the pastor's surviving daughter, at the Convent of the Holy Name, in Derby, England. Weissmark and Sister Renate talked over the phone for the first time about a year ago. They have been friends ever since, but have never seen each other in person until now. They look forward to meeting one another when Sister Renate visits in February. To see her in reality after hearing her on the telephone is something quite different, said Sister Renate. We are friends now, but it will be deeper.

Today, Weissmark doesn't dwell on the horrors of the Holocaust with her daughter. I'm a typical mother. I don't want to burden my daughter with sadness, she said. When she gets older, she'll encounter that all by herself and I need not add to that. But Weissmark does talk to Brittany about the Seebass family's kindness. She'll bring her daughter to witness the Seebasses being honored this month in Chicago. I'm bringing my daughter, she said, because I want her to see that good is sometimes rewarded and recognized in this world.

The Seebasses will be visiting the Chicago area from Feb. 20-27:

On Feb. 21, Sister Renate Seebass and Mona Sue Weissmark will speak at Skokie Library. For info, call (847) 324-3126.

On Feb. 22, Prof. Stephan Seebass will perform a piano concert at Mather Place at The Georgian in Evanston. For info, call (847) 492-5000.

On Feb. 24, the Consulate General of Israel will honor the Seebass family at the Goethe Institute in Chicago, Mona Sue Weissmark will read excerpts from her book Justice Matters, and Harvard Prof. Brendan Maher will join the discussion as well.

For info, call (312) 263-0472.

All events are free and open to the public.