

UWE & GABI VON SELTMANN

# How Love Can Heal the Past



Foundation Art, History & Apfelstrudel

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Even the uncovering of a single fact, such as my father's liberation day, can alter the way one relates to the past. The perfect metaphor for me is *tikkun olam* - the mystical idea that to repair the world we have to gather the sparks of light that were shattered at the time of Creation and hidden throughout the world.

Gathering facts that bring clarity to my parents' Shoah stories has allowed me to remove haunting memories from the firmament of emotion and place them within the realm of knowledge and understanding, bringing me comfort and *tikkun*.

*Aron Hirt-Manheimer*

The Hebrew scriptures say that the sins of the fathers will be visited upon the children to the third and fourth generations. For German writer and film maker Uwe von Seltsmann, this has proven to be painfully true. After being approached by an unknown Jewish man at a synagogue in Kraków, he began to research his grandfather's past, and discovered that he had been an SS officer in Kraków and that he had participated in one of the largest atrocities in modern history. How has Uwe dealt with the guilt and shame handed down to him by his grandfather?

After publishing a book about his research, Uwe went to Kraków and happened upon Gabriela, the Polish granddaughter of Michał Pazdanowski, who was killed at Auschwitz concentration camp in 1944.

Uwe and Gabriela fell in love, got married and are currently living together in Kraków, the city where Uwe's father was born. In 2007, they began to investigate the life and death of Michał Pazdanowski. A subject that was – just like Uwe's grandfather – held taboo within the family. They spent several years meeting Poles, Germans, and Jews, discussing what it's like for the families of victims and perpetrators to coexist in today's world. Together, they asked: How does the third post-war generation relate to the family's difficult past which overshadows their present? And how can we shape the future in order to secure a peaceful coexistence?

The search for answers lead the couple across half of Europe: the Ukrainian Hutsulshchyna and the French Basque country, Vienna and Lublin, Majdanek and Auschwitz. In each of these places, they met people who broke their lifelong silence and told their incredible stories. They discovered deeply moving testimonies of friendship. Their journey through remote areas and repressed pasts gradually became more and more introspective in nature: Uwe and Gabriela realized that those they spoke to weren't the only ones who needed to learn to deal with the ghosts of the past, and that knowing the past would

help build a better future. In the words of Hermann Hesse: “Anything that has not been suffered and solved to the end will return.”

The goal of Uwe’s and Gabriela’s project *Two Families, Two Pasts – One Future* is to demonstrate that it is possible for members of victims’ and perpetrators’ families to live together, even with the past continuing to have an impact on their daily life. To many people below the age of forty, war, destruction, and the Holocaust are nothing more than history-book material. However, to the descendants of victims, the consequences of the Nazi atrocities linger on – even more than 75 years after the invasion of Poland – in the form of emotional trauma.

The couple’s project tackles a challenge of social and political importance on an international scale. Whether it be in Rwanda, the Balkan states, or Germany and Poland, families of perpetrators and victims will continue to cross paths again and again. The Seltmann and Pazdanowski families are an example for countless other families who hold a burdening past.

Former Chancellor of Germany Helmut Schmidt once said it was better to speak of the “future of the past” rather than the “presence of the past.” The project is future-orientated in this very sense. Only by openly talking about the past can we establish a mutual understanding, thus bringing about peaceful interaction in the present and the future – a substantial challenge for the third generation after the Second World War.

For many years now, Gabi and Uwe von Seltmann have been giving lectures at both academic and non-academic institutions. They are available for speaking engagements at schools, universities, Jewish Community Centers, synagogues, churches, museums, libraries and other venues. They organize workshops and author sessions, and share their knowledge on such topics as the repercussions of war for the third generation after Shoah, transgenerational transmission of trauma, the value of family research and the paths to healing, reconciliation and mutual understanding. Their endeavor is a sort of *tikkun olam*: they try to make the world a better place by relaying knowledge of the past and building peaceful coexistence.

Jason Francisco, Associate Professor in the Film and Media Studies department at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia

“Without memory, there is no culture.  
Without memory, there would be no  
civilization, no society, no future.”

Elie Wiesel