

## PERSPECTIVE



Georg and Anna Rothgiesser, Howard Witt's father's grandparents, in an undated photo. They were killed in the Holocaust.



Heinrich and Edith Rothgiesser, Howard Witt's father's parents, circa 1930. Edith escaped to the U.S. and Heinrich was killed.

WITT FAMILY PHOTOS

## The Nazis murdered my ancestors. So why do I want to become a German citizen?

BY HOWARD WITT

August 1942 was a catastrophic month for my German ancestors.

On Aug. 5, the Nazis herded my great-grandfather onto a train in Berlin bound for the Theresienstadt concentration camp. Five days later and 650 miles away in Paris, they rounded up my grandfather, who had tried to escape to France, and forced him onto a transport headed to Auschwitz.

Both were exterminated at their final destinations, along with my great-grandmother, great-aunt and a distant cousin.

I am a Jewish American. And on Jan. 21, my 60th birthday, I plan to visit the German Embassy in Washington, D.C., to be naturalized as a German citizen, along with my three African American children.

Why am I making this unlikely choice, a Jew coming full circle on a bitter German history?

Therein lies a story about Germany's terrible past, America's troubling present and what I hope will be my children's promising future.

My father was born in Berlin in September 1932. His German father, Heinrich Rothgiesser, was a prosperous Jewish businessman who owned a printing company; his mother, Edith, was a Jewish American citizen of German descent who was living in Germany at the time.

As Hitler rose to power during the first months of my father's life, my grandmother Edith grew increasingly concerned about the safety of Jews in Germany. With her American perspective, she perceived the threat more clearly than my grandfather Heinrich, who, like so many German Jews at the time, believed that Adolf Hitler surely couldn't last in the enlightened society of Germany's Weimar Republic.

In the spring of 1933, after the Reichstag burned and the Nazis opened the first concentration camp at Dachau, my grandmother made a brave and momentous decision. Unable to persuade her husband to flee Germany, she boarded a ship bound

for America with her infant son. She never saw Heinrich again.

Three years ago, I happened across an article about a unique provision in Germany's constitution that was included as part of the nation's efforts to make restitution to victims of the Holocaust. This provision, known as Article 116 (2), allows Germans (and their descendants) who "were deprived of their German citizenship on political, racial or religious grounds" during the Nazi era from 1933-45 to apply to have their German citizenship restored. The ultimate deprivation of citizenship, of course, was being murdered in a concentration camp.

So I put in an application for myself and my children (unfortunately, spouses of descendants are not eligible). That meant gathering evidence about my ancestors and finding proof of their persecution. Because the Nazis kept meticulous records of the Jews who were sent to the camps — records that can be accessed at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington — I was able to find evidence of the actual transport that carried my grandfather to Auschwitz (Train No. D 901/12), the date my great-grandfather's corpse was shoved into a furnace at Theresienstadt (April 18, 1943), and many other grim details.

My decision to apply for German citizenship was not a political statement: I submitted the paperwork at the German Embassy in Washington four days before the November 2016 presidential election. But it was a decision borne, at least in part, of my growing unease about the racism that feels like it's been steadily worsening in our country ever since Barack Obama was elected in 2008 and the reactionary backlash against our first African American president began.

Certainly racism is nothing new in America; it's our original sin. Slavery is a living memory for my wife's family. She is as close to it as her late grandmother, whose own great-grandparents were enslaved.

That bitter legacy of white supremacy

infests our legal, social, and commercial institutions to this day, although for much of my life, social norms at least suppressed the most public expressions of hatred in our civic dialogues. But lately that racism has come roaring back into the open. The Charleston, South Carolina, church massacre in 2015, the August 2017 attacks in Charlottesville, Virginia, the Pittsburgh synagogue massacre, repeated police killings of black men — these are only a few of the most headline-grabbing examples.

I understand that Germany is hardly immune from these trends. Racist and neo-Nazi attacks on Muslim immigrants and German Jews have risen in recent years, especially in cities in the former East Germany.

Yet it seems to me, from my occasional visits to the country, that Germany is at least attempting to forthrightly confront these exposed veins of illiberal, white supremacist, and nationalist sentiments. Which is more, alas, than I can say for my own country today.

Our family is not actually intending to move to Germany. We are first and foremost Americans, committed to trying to make our nation a better place. But I would be lying if I did not admit that we can now take some comfort in knowing we have a place to go if our democracy, lately wobbling under profound strains, were ever to actually collapse — a prospect that no longer seems so unimaginable.

And on a much brighter note, now that my kids are citizens of the European Union, the doors are wide open for them to choose someday to live and work in Germany or any one of the other EU nations.

That's a rare privilege, one we will never forget, that we now enjoy only because my ancestors were forced into cattle cars during a terrifying week in August 78 years ago.

Howard Witt is a former Chicago Tribune foreign correspondent.

### VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

#### Impeachment trial and the rule of law

I woke up one morning recently looking at the picture of my 9-year-old granddaughter taken on her first day of third grade. Looking at her smiling, trusting face, I just knew I had to write this letter in the hope of protecting her and our nation's future.

In this upcoming impeachment trial, the potential removal of a president is not the most critical issue. What is at stake is our very democracy. Democracy is a system of rule by laws, not by individuals. The "rule of law" is concerned with how power is exercised and implies that everyone in society is bound by the law, including all of government. If the rule of law is allowed to be broken, then so our democracy will be because they must coexist.

Just why is the rule of law so critical? Organized sports is a instructive example. It, too, only exists if the four principles of rule of law (clear, publicized, stable, applied evenly) are enforced. Can you imagine the home team being able to change rules at will?

Many of our senators apparently have decided that the rule of law does not apply to this president. The result of this decision is that witnesses and documents deliberately withheld directly by the president will not be allowed at trial. We, as the ultimate jury, will never be able to learn all the pertinent facts that are being deliberately withheld.

The potential loss of our democracy is not a Republican, Democratic or independent party issue, it's universal. Decisions made for this trial will affect the future of our country. Call your senators, both Republicans and Democrats. Tell them the rule of law is critical to the survival of our democracy. Withholding the testimony of key witnesses and supporting documentation can not be allowed to stand.

— John Wolaver, Glen Ellyn

#### Red-light cameras increase rear-enders

Regarding the editorial "Politicians exploit red-light cameras. But the cams do make travel safer" (Jan. 13): The truth is that red-light cameras do tend to reduce right angle crashes, but they tend to increase rear-enders, and those rear-enders tend to increase the overall crash rates.

The editorial's opening paragraph describes yellow-light moments of stress very well, but so much has changed in that scenario since the good old days. Decades ago, yellow meant stop unless it's too late to do so safely without entering the intersection. Today, a combination of factors has resulted in the common belief that yellow means cruise on through. Quick stops at yellow lights nowadays are rare, so when they do occur, there is a crash. It seems that red-light cameras increase the number of quick stops, thus increasing the number of rear-enders.

In the end, it is all about human nature. We have longer yellow-light durations, four-way red signals, protected left turns and even cameras to reduce intersection crashes, yet the problem is far from solved.

There is an answer — driving! That, however, requires a major paradigm shift and real driver education.

— Kenneth L. Zuber, Homewood

#### Tickets for right turn on red

The editorial extolling the virtues of red-light cameras spoke only of citing motorists who drive through red lights. The 1,000-pound elephant in the room that the editorial ignored was right-turn-on-red violations. Suburban municipalities are making millions of dollars citing drivers who do not come to a 100% perfect stop for "failing to stop before turning right on red." On my most recent "violation," I put a magnifying glass up to the computer screen to see that my wheels were just barely moving at the intersection before I turned right on red. The hearing officer ruled against me, and I was fined \$100. This type of violation, especially on a first offense, is appalling.

I urge the Tribune to ask each suburb for a breakdown of red-light camera violations. I'm guessing that failure to make a 100% complete stop before turning right at a red light would make up the majority of tickets issued. The suburbs that do this are stealing money from hardworking citizens.

I urge all drivers to do what I now do: Stop and do not make your right turn until the light turns green.

— Mark Renz, Oak Lawn

## I'm trying to declutter, but my husband wants to save too much stuff — and none of it 'sparks joy'

BY JULIE OWSIK ACKERMAN

Marie Kondo and her now-familiar theories of tidying up have introduced some conflict into my marriage. I can't be the only one. Her idea is simple: First, pick a category, like clothes; next, put all of them into the middle of the room; finally, pick out and keep only the ones that "spark joy."

Setting aside the fact that making time for such a project is enough to make me want to bury my head under one of my many unnecessary pillows, what I want to ask Marie is: What about all of my husband's things that don't spark joy? That instead spark intense, dark, brooding hatred? What to do with those?

My husband feels sentimental attachment for things he has no business being attached to. Case in point: My grandmother lived for 60 years in a house on our block, and when it was time to sell her house, I managed to avoid taking almost anything, even the silver, which had an "O" engraved on it. After her 10 children had a chance to choose items they wanted, what remained went to the dumpster.

Except for the things my husband insisted on keeping.

Like a globe from circa 1960. "It has the USSR on it!" he said.

Or the series of decorative tin plates

from states my grandparents visited. "Under no circumstance are those plates coming into my home," I said.

"I'll bring them to school," he said, his frequent rejoinder to my objection about keeping things.

Several great-aunts have died in the last 15 years, leaving behind lives of accumulated stuff. Aunt Adelaide gifted us her gigantic ceramic Nativity set, which I swear I will give away this year, so help me baby Jesus. Aunt Maureen left us a series of five drawings, framed in gold, with instructions that the collection remain together. Although they could be valuable, I don't see an "Antiques Roadshow" trip in my future. Can't I just put them on the curb?

Finally, there is Aunt Minnie. We bought Aunt Minnie's house 14 years ago. Because we had little furniture, I agreed to keep the dining room set even though I detested it, until we got something else. Twelve years later, I managed to give the table and chairs to our neighbor's daughter, but the hulking china cabinet remained until this year, taunting me.

But of all the hand-me-down objects, perhaps my least favorite was the bull-fighter painting that hung in Aunt Minnie's red wallpapered bedroom. My husband loved it. Why did my aunt have such a painting? She had no connection to Spain or to bullfighting that I knew about.

And neither do we. Yet it hung in my living room until last year, when I had a full-blown tantrum about it, and my husband, unable to part with it, moved it to the basement.

My recent discovery of the Buy Nothing Project has helped us let go of things more easily. Buy Nothing is a website for hyperlocal Facebook groups with the purpose of keeping things out of landfills and building community through meeting neighbors. Members post items they want to pass along, and people who want them respond, no money exchanged. Through Buy Nothing, I have gifted desks, bureaus, china, clothes, shoes, a rug, dog costumes. I have also received a bassinet, a crib, a baby swing and a baby wrap. It feels great to give people things they want and need, and to receive the same.

But I'm still confounded when it comes to deciding with a spouse what stays and what goes. It seems fair that each partner should have a few things they love displayed in the house, so maybe the trick is to look for the things you can agree on and find hidden spaces for the rest. We may need a professional referee. I wonder if Marie Kondo does consultations.

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