

A lesson in humanity

“My broken doll” of Bea Karp, a memoir of survival of the Vichy Regime, written down and illustrated by her daughter Deborah Pappenheimer

The title creates the desire to repair what can't be repaired, or at least to offer consolation. To bend one's knees in order to speak to the girl who had owned the doll with the face made of porcelain. To the six year old whom the Gestapo man had told at the day of her deportation: “Where you are going, you won't need this!” Who had thereupon threw her doll to the ground, held on to a leg of the kitchen table and screamed.

“My Broken Doll: A memoir of survival of the Vichy Regime” is unique, like the interviews Bea Karp and her sister Susie Philipp have given to the Shoah Foundation, and at the same time it stands for all those who have suffered in the Holocaust, for the end of their world as known, for a damaged childhood, for loss and for new beginnings. Love and life shine through the pain, the fear and the death.

It must have taken great courage and enormous strength to look back and into that mirror. By giving this eyewitness report, Bea Karp, nee Beate Stern, and her daughter Deborah Pappenheimer did not only describe the horrors of the NS reality, but they also enable the readers of “My Broken Doll” to see this through the eyes of a child. The story is combined with paintings and photos, and there is even a play that is based on the book being performed in schools, thanks to the Institute of Holocaust Education in Nebraska.

Bea Karp was born in the small town Lauterbach in 1932, her sister in Fulda in 1935. Their parents owned a textile shop, Am Wörth 16. Two Stolpersteine, laid by Gunter Demnig in 2010, remind everyone of what happened to the family. The Sterns had moved to Karlsruhe in 1936 where a brother and sister of Moritz (Moses) Stern lived already. From there, they were deported, together with their relatives and many others, to Gurs. This primitive camp near the Pyrenees had been built for those who came back from the fight against Franco in Spain, became a camp for Jewish adults and children after the Wehrmacht had invaded the North of France. The South belonged until November 1942 to the Vichy Regime of General Petain.

Charlotte Salomon from Berlin had also been in Gurs. Though the young painter managed to get out of the camp, she was taken to Auschwitz later and was murdered there. In a little room in a guesthouse, she had painted her whole life. Her work has become world famous.

Deborah Pappenheimer, one of the four daughters of Bea Karp, has written down the memories of her mother and painted her wartime diary. In these paintings, the artist combines many different aspects, creating a harmony inside a chaos, warmth in the cold. One longed to read what her grandparents had written to their daughters, to see Deborah Pappenheimer's work in an exhibition in France and Germany, to meet her and her mother at a book presentation. A French and a German translation are overdue and the play is waiting for its German premiere in a school or on a theater stage in Karlsruhe, Lauterbach, Berlin or Frankfurt.

The childhood memoir offers facts that are not widely known in Germany, as for example information about the deportation of the Jews of Baden to the South of France and about the Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants (OSE), Jewish doctors and intellectuals had founded in 1912. Albert Einstein had been its honorary president since 1922. In WWII, men and women working for the OSE rescued thousands of Jewish children, among them Beate who became Béatrice and Susie. The sisters had been hidden by the OSE in France. Their parents have been murdered by the Nazis and their helpers in Auschwitz.

The way Bea Karp sees life and sees herself is admirable, but sometimes she seems to be a bit too strict judging herself. It is never easy to write an autobiography and be fair to oneself. Bea Karp – who had given interviews to her daughter Deborah and goes as a time witness into

schools for decades now – has managed that bravely. And she takes us by the hand when it gets dark and frightening.

One feels the strong will of a child that wanted to stay alive and free, the family bonds that hold forever, the help of uncounted others, her wonderful ability to stay a loving being, even under horrible circumstances. Bea Karp, the daughter of Moritz (Moses) Stern who had been born in Oberbreidenbach near Romrod and his wife Rosa nee Gottlieb from Grebenau, teaches us lessons that we can learn without having suffered ourselves, by showing empathy, and we realize once more that we all should be grateful for every joyful moment, for peace and democracy, and that nothing good can be taken for granted. And that we all can do something about it. Now.

Vivette Samuel (1919-2006) was an OSE social worker in the camp Rivesaltes. She saw to it that Rosa Stern could stay in contact with her daughters. About her activities, she has published the book "Rescuing the Children. A Holocaust Memoir" in 2002 at the University of Wisconsin. Beate had been a flower girl on her wedding in October 1942. A photo of the event is in the book.

In Lauterbach, Bea's and Susie's hometown, there also have been people who have helped others. Elfriede Roth for example has been the Christian "Schabbesmädchen" (shabbes girl, see archive of www.monikafelsing.de) of Rosa Weinberg in Lauterbach, working in the orthodox household on Sabbath. Elfriede's family had helped Jewish neighbours and friends as long as they were in reach, first in Lauterbach and then in Frankfurt. And she has done a lot to keep the Jewish families of Lauterbach remembered. Her story is a proof for the existence of free will, the choice that we all have, even if we are scared to death or not aware of our possibilities. It is our responsibility to keep this in mind and to act. In "My Broken Doll", Bea Karp and Deborah Pappenheimer make a point of it. A very strong point. For our future.

The memoir shows that big crimes start small. Teasing becomes bullying, prejudice and hate. Arrogance meets ignorance, and it defines who is different and could be treated like an outsider and become a victim. This is only possible if others look away or don't help even though they could do something about it easily before it is too late.

The book also reminds us about the stories of time witnesses from the Ober-Gleen project of the historical society Lastoria, Bremen (see www.monikafelsing.de and www.lastoria-bremen.de). These childhood memoirs connect people from the countryside, people of several generations, even the last pre-digital generation. Childhood memory is precious, like a beloved doll, like a fairy tale told by a grandmother, a good night song, a sourdough bread with apple jelly. And then there is the hardship. The teachers hitting pupils don't only exist in "My Broken Doll" – some still did so in the early seventies, not to forget the adults who never listened to what children had to tell them.

Bea Karp lives in the USA today, her sister Susie Philipp in Israel. Bea has chosen to share her memories to many, while Susie has been more reluctant to share her childhood. The photos of the album of family Stern are sad and vivid at the same time. One can spend a lot of time looking at them, to remember them, to listen to silently told stories. They are talking as the paintings do.

Minor changes would be recommended if there is a second edition or a German or French translation of the book. That the chapter about the Kristallnacht comes before the chapter about Karlsruhe is puzzling as the family had already been in Karlsruhe when the Synagogues were on fire. It was a very good idea to have some of the Hebrew words, other expressions and locations explained in the appendix. Only Lauterbach is not placed in the Black Forrest, close to Karlsruhe, as one should have thought, but in the Vogelsberg in Upper Hesse. There are several

towns called Lauterbach in Germany as Bea Karp and her family know by now. Theirs is the head of the Vogelsbergkreis today.

In the time witness group of another survivor from Upper Hesse, Ruth Stern Gasten from Nieder-Ohmen, now Livermore, California, there is someone who had been a child in Vietnam at the time of the Vietnam war, and another one who had been in Yugoslavia, visiting relatives, when WWII began. How good it would be to collect stories of war children from different times and continents, to show what war means to those who have not started it, who have no chance to end it, who are hostages in a way and who need shelter the most: children. It is about time that adults listen to them.

“My Broken Doll” is a fine, important part of the memorial culture. It is very personal, heartfelt, partially told with justified rage – and yet objective and free from hatred, a lesson in humanity.

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