

My Grandfather was a Nazi Commander

By Staff Writer

Jennifer Teege is a Black German woman, and her grandfather was Amon Goeth, also known as "the butcher of the Plaszow concentration camp in Poland" portrayed in Steven Spielberg's film Schindler's List. Jennifer said that "Schindler crossed limits that he didn't need to cross, Amon Goeth and Oskar Schindler, they both had power, one used it to kill, the other to save lives. Their example shows that everyone has a choice."

Bill Tinglin, President and CEO of Tour for Tolerance brought Jennifer Teege from Germany to New York to share her story of her being the granddaughter of Amon Goeth, a Nazi Concentration Camp Commander. It was indeed an inspiring learning experience for educators, students, Holocaust survivors, and guests. The moderators for the evening were Cheryl Wills, News Anchor for New York 1 News, and Jeffrey Wiesenfeld, Political Strategist, and principal with Alliance Bernstein LLP New York.

The discovery came like a bolt from the blue in the summer of 2008, when she was 38 years old, as she relates in the memoir "Amon".

In the mid-1990's, as an undergraduate student in Israel, she watched Steven Spielberg's film Schindler's List. She hadn't seen the movie in a movie theater and watched it on her TV set in her rented room in Tel Aviv.

It was not until years later that Teege, who was given up for adoption as a child, discovered that one of the central characters in the film, Amon Goeth was her grandfather. Many viewers recall the figure of Goeth, the brutal Commander of the Plaszow Concentration Camp - played in the film by Ralph Fiennes - from the scenes in which Goeth shoots Jewish inmates from the porch of his home. But Teege, who had not been in touch with either her biological mother or biological grandmother for years, had no idea about the identity of her grandfather.

When Jennifer discovered that Amon Goeth was her grandfather, she entered psychotherapy. The therapist himself burst into tears when he heard her story at their first meeting but afterward helped her to cope with the questions that hounded her:

Do we look alike?
Do we have the same trademarks?
Will I be like him?
Will my children be like him?
* * *

MY GRANDFATHER WOULD HAVE SHOT ME

Teege opens her book by describing the 2008 visit to a library in Hamburg to look for material on coping with depression. While there, she happened



Jennifer Teege (left) and her Nazi grandfather, Amon Goeth (right), known as "The Butcher of Plaszow", the cruel commander of the Plaszow camp Birnhack in Poland. Goeth was tried in Krakov, Poland after the end of the war and executed. He never expressed any remorse. His last words were "Heil Hitler".

to notice a book with a cover photograph of a familiar figure: her biological mother, Monika Hertwig (née Goeth). She immediately withdrew the book, titled "I Have to Love My Father, Right?," which was based on an interview with her mother.

"The first shock was the sheer discovery of a book about my mother and my family, which had information about me and my identity that had been kept hidden from me," Teege says. "I knew almost nothing about the life of my biological mother, nor did my adoptive family. I hoped to find answers to questions that had disturbed me and to the depression I had suffered from. The second shock was the information about my grandfather's deeds.

Teege was born on June 29, 1970, in Munich, the offspring of a brief affair between her mother and a Nigerian man. At the age of one month, she was placed in a Catholic children's home, and when she was three, she was transferred to a foster family, which adopted her formally when she was seven. That also marked the end of the loose ties she had had until then with her mother and her grandmother.

The only black girl in the Munich neighborhood where she grew up, she was often the butt of insulting remarks about her skin color. In 1990, after graduating from high school, Teege went to Paris, where she became friends with a young Israeli woman, Noa Berman Herzberg, now a screenwriter. Teege arrived in Israel the following year, toured around, worked on a tourist boat in Eilat and had a brief affair with an Israeli man. After they broke up, she decided to remain in Tel Aviv. She studied Hebrew, received a BA degree from the Middle Eastern and African Studies Department of Tel Aviv University, and worked in the city's Goethe Institute.

Teege left Israel in 1995. "Germans who come to Israel never know what kind of reception they will get," she says. "I was welcomed with open arms. My German origin generated interest not because of the Holocaust or Nazism, but mainly because of then recent events, such as the toppling of the Berlin Wall and the unification of Germany. In any event, Teege didn't represent the German stereotype." Her skin color served as camouflage, even

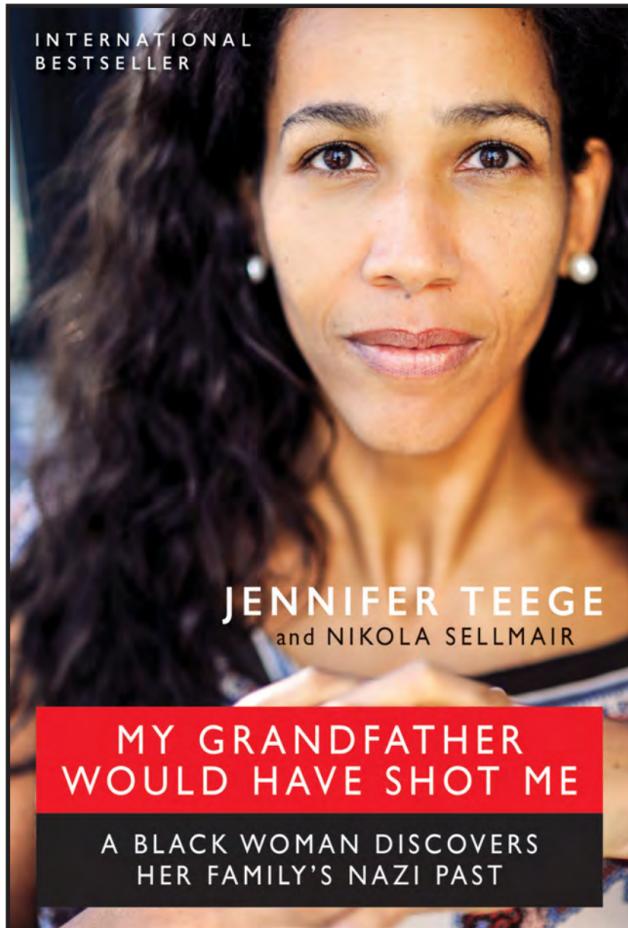
if Teege didn't yet know for what. Years later, when she discovered her actual roots, she recalled the many Holocaust survivors she had met at the Goethe Institute. They came because they wanted to speak and hear German, the language of their old homeland, she notes in her book.

When she saw the numbers tattooed on their arms in the camps, she felt for the first time that there was something disadvantageous about belonging to the German nation something that demanded an apology. Teege shared her rented apartment in Tel Aviv with the actor and director Tzachi Grad, then at the start of his professional career. "Jennifer seemed to me special and beautiful, a woman with European class," he recalls now. "We got along very well in the apartment, we became friends and talked about many different subjects.

The fact that it turned out years later that her grandfather Amon Goeth was a sadistic Nazi officer is no reflection on her, even if some of the genetic matter and traits came from him. I do not attribute to the Nazis' descendants the wrongs perpetrated by their

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"Teege's grandmother, Ruth Irene Kalder: 'It was a beautiful time. We enjoyed being together. My Goeth was the king, and I was the queen. Who wouldn't have traded places with us?'"



Left: Jennifer Teege's book "My Grandfather would have Killed Me". Photo: TV generated. Right: Jennifer Teege interviewed on Beyond TV on her family's history discoveries. Photo: TV generated.

forebearers", said her therapist. After leaving Israel, Teege moved to Hamburg to work in an ad agency, where she met her partner, Goetz Teege. They have two children.

When she found out that Amon Goeth was her grandfather, she entered psychotherapy. The therapist himself burst into tears when he heard her story at their first meeting, but afterward helped her cope with the questions that hounded her. Digging into the past brought her face to face with many of the atrocities perpetrated by her grandfather, who was known as the "Butcher of Plaszow." He shot inmates from his porch every morning and had two dogs that were trained to attack prisoners at his command.

After the war, Goeth faced trial in Krakow after being accused of genocide, including responsibility for the death of 8,000 people in Plaszow and the murder of some 2,000 more during the evacuation of the Krakow Ghetto. He denied responsibility for the crimes and said he had only been following orders. He was hanged in September 1946. His last words were "Heil Hitler."

Goeth never saw Monika, the daughter he had fathered a year earlier during an extramarital affair he had with Ruth Irene Kalder, a young German woman who worked as a secretary in the Wehrmacht; Goeth's wife had remained behind in Austria. The couple were introduced by Oskar Schindler who needed to have good ties with Goeth so as to obtain Jewish workers for his factory at a dinner in Goeth's villa. Kalder became Goeth's lover, moved in, raised two dogs of her own and lived a life of wanton luxury. His plan to divorce his wife and marry her was dashed when he was arrested and executed.

Teege, who remembers her grandmother as a central figure in her early childhood, who showed her more warmth and love than her mother, also delves into her grandmother's attitude toward Goeth's deeds. For years Kalder denied his crimes and she and Teege never discussed the subject. In a conversation in 1975 with the Israeli journalist and historian Tom Segev (who spoke to her while he was reporting his 1988 book "Soldiers of

Evil"), she said, "It was a beautiful time. We enjoyed being together. My Goeth was the king, and I was the queen. Who wouldn't have traded places with us?"

In 1983, when Teege was 13, her adoptive parents told her they had seen mourning notices in the paper for her biological grandmother. They did not know that Ruth Irene Goeth (she had changed her surname after the war) had committed suicide in the wake of a serious illness and also, apparently, because of belated regret for her moral blindness during the Holocaust.

After learning about her grandfather Goeth's deeds and the life her grandmother Ruth Irene Kalder led in Krakow during the war, Teege decided to go see the place where her grandfather had murdered people to get very close to him in order to distance herself from him afterward, as she writes in the book. Who wouldn't have traded places with us? After the beginning I didn't know that it was important to be close to Amon," she replies. "I felt a powerful need to be done with this part, and I decided to visit Krakow and the memorial monument for the

Plaszow camp, to place flowers there and honor the victims, so that I could resume a normal life. When I returned to Germany after the visit, I felt a certain release. I wanted to let go of the past but not to make it disappear. I didn't want to be like my mother, who felt so tied to the family past and couldn't disconnect herself from it. I managed to achieve distance."

Closing the circle In her book, Teege describes her quest to learn about her grandparents, mother and biological father (whom she did not meet until adulthood). She also talks about the difficulty she had sharing her life story with her Israeli girlfriends. She remembered that relatives of two of her friends had perished in the Holocaust, although she did not know whether they had relatives in the ghettos and camps where her grandfather had served. One of the survivors who contacted Teege was Rena Birnhack, 88, from Haifa, one of the Schindler's list survivors. She expects to meet with the younger woman during her visit here next week. "Goeth was even worse than he is described in Teege's book, but it was important for me to contact her, because I am perhaps the only Jew who was left alive and survived because of her grandfather," Birnhack says, in an interview with Haaretz.

She was born in Krakow and sent to the city's ghetto with her family as a girl. She relates that she took the family's dog with her to the ghetto. The dog gave birth to two puppies, and when the ghetto was liquidated, in March 1943, and the residents were summoned for a "selection" process to decide who would be deported to Auschwitz and Belzec, and who would do forced labor in the Plaszow camp Birnhack had to abandon the older dog but took the two puppies, wrapped in a small coat. "It was the first time I saw Amon, a huge, frightening person," Birnhack recalls. "In the selection he indicated with a finger movement who should go to which side. When he saw me holding the coat, he shouted, 'What do you have there?' But when he saw the two puppies, a drop of humanity came into his eyes for a few seconds. He asked me what I intended to do with them, and I offered them to him as a present. He ordered one of the soldiers to take the puppies, and sent me to the side with those who would remain alive."

From reading Teege's book, Birnhack learned that Goeth gave the puppies to Irene, who raised them in the villa. During her time in Plaszow, Birnhack saw Goeth only at camp roll calls or when he shot inmates from the porch. She, her sister and her parents were among the Schindler survivors.