



Haunted by fears of the past

IN HER BOOK *Prisoners of Childhood* (republished as *The Drama of the Gifted Child*), the Swiss psychoanalyst Alice Miller writes about the way children tailor their emotional development to correspond to their parents' often unconscious needs. Narcissistically deprived parents will use their children to compensate for their own

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feelings of inadequacy; the children, who quickly learn that certain emotions threaten their parents' shaky sense of identity, develop a kind of false self based on the repression of feeling. But at some level they know that their true self has been lost. One result is that no matter how successful they become as adults, they are haunted by depression.

Watching *Dark Lullabies*, a feature-length documentary about the

children of holocaust survivors, I couldn't get Dr. Miller's "prisoners" out of my mind. It, too, is about the power of the past, one in which the repression of feeling plays a pivotal role. Because they want to protect their children from the horror of their experience — to have them grow up as "normal" kids — the survivors suppress the past. Sensing forbidden territory, and wanting to shield their parents from reliving the pain, the children muzzle their questions.

Yet the more we consciously try to repress an area of human experience, the stronger its grip on our unconscious. "(We are) a generation possessed by a history in which we played no part," comments filmmaker Irene Lilienheim Angelico, a child of holocaust survivors who spent the first 30 years of her life trying to avoid the subject. *Dark Lullabies* provides an often touching record of her eventual confrontation with the past.

The film, a National Film Board co-production, will be screened publicly across Canada beginning this week. The winner of three awards at the Manheim film festival, it was recently shown at the Berlin film festival by special invitation. In addition, Ms Angelico has just returned from Germany where she took part in a cultural exchange sponsored by the German government.

Initially, this apparent German interest in the holocaust seems intriguing. And yet, a second look suggests obvious parallels between the children of the survivors and Germans of the same generation. Both are the products of families who want to forget the past.

Certainly, many Germans still want to deny their history. For instance, Mrs. Fabritius, the publisher of a tourist brochure called *The Biography of the Third Reich*. She

agreed to be interviewed for the film on the condition that nothing negative about Germany's history be asked. Queried about why she avoids what she calls "the bad," Mrs. Fabritius chillingly reflects on "the banality of evil."

But Ms Angelico met other Germans who recognized that however much they loathed their heritage, they were profoundly shaped by it. One of the most interesting was Siegfried Gauch. His father, Herman Gauch, was a prominent Nazi and the author of the book, *The New Basics of Racial Theory*.

Mr. Gauch has written a book about his relationship with his father, who, when questioned about the past, refused to answer and denied that the holocaust had happened. The son's development depended upon coming to terms with the burden of having loved his father as a child and being incapable of understanding his role in the Third Reich.

This conflict can pre-occupy the children of Nazis. How could their fathers, who were frequently kind, generous, and humorous men within the family, be responsible for such atrocities? One German says he envies the children of survivors; their search bring them closer to their people. For Germans the opposite is true.

Yet the search can only be avoided at great psychic cost. People who don't understand how they have been influenced by their past are destined, like Alice Miller's prisoners, to be trapped in a kind of false self. The true self is only free to emerge when it understands how it has been shaped by history. Asked what the knowledge of her parents' experience during the holocaust gave her, one of the women interviewed for the film said: "It gave me a lot of happiness."