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Scene

Sometimes roots are things to be left buried

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CELEBRATING ONE'S ETHNIC heritage is just another step in self-definition, for by knowing and taking pride in one's ancestors, one is able to know and take pride in oneself. Patriotism and pride, manifested in cultural celebrations and such TV programs as "Roots," give individuals an extra measure of identity and sense of belonging, or so the theory goes.

Certain Americans cannot run fast enough to escape their past, however. Many former citizens of Germany — proud, hard-working, honest people — continue to be plagued by the horrors of World War II and the Nazi reign of terror. They are not Jewish, nor did they have close friends or relatives murdered, but they live each day with the truth that their countrymen perpetrated the inhuman violence of the gas chambers and mass annihilation. All feelings of patriotism give way to pain, shame, and guilt.

The pride that Germans would like to feel for their native country falls before the stark reality of Auschwitz, Dachau, and Buchenwald. Many Germans alive today can never forgive their own Germany. The land they love is also the land they hate.

MAX AND ALICE CELEBRATED their 50th wedding anniversary this week in their two-story house in a small Indiana town. Forty-six years ago, with their young son and a trunk full of belongings, they fled Germany and Hitler's government even though they were not Jewish and probably would have lived through the war years.

They came to America, having been labeled "politically unreliable" by the German government. Max worked with anti-Nazi organizers in Hamburg; Alice sheltered dissidents in her basement. They had heard through underground connections of the concentration camps and knew that the worst was yet to come.

"It's hard to think how life would have been different if we'd remained," Alice says. "My sister stayed through it all, but she never said much about the war years. It's something she doesn't like to think about."

Neither do Max and Alice like to think about what they left behind. The memories are long buried and intentionally smothered by the intervening years. They do not speak fondly of their childhoods or the early days of their marriage. Germany is still Hitler, and they are Germans. The less said about that, the better.

FOR A FEW YEARS, they spoke their native language at home. After all, they were 28 years old when they took the boat across the Atlantic and spoke English only as they had learned it in school. Their son can speak clear, fluent German, but their daughter, born in America, hardly knows the language. Today, Max and Alice would rather speak English with an accent, even to each other.

When their son was in high school in the '40s, anti-German sentiment was high. He anglicized his name "Jens" to "Jim" and didn't switch back for almost 20 years. "Jim" has been back to Germany, and seems comfortable with his heritage, but then again he never saw the horrors or knew the shame of being directly linked with perhaps the greatest mass murder the world has ever known. To him, like to so many young people, the Holocaust is just an ugly fact of history, and not something to live with.

But Max and Alice can't really escape the truth. Neither one has been back home since 1934, and wouldn't go back if they could afford to. Everything is different back there now, they say. Their parents are dead, their friends are scattered, and the buildings are all changed. The only memories would be those of why they left.

THE TV PROGRAM "Playing for Time" did not interest them. "Too many bad memories with that," Alice says simply. She watched the Steve Martin special that was airing simultaneously on another network.

Max nods. "I don't need to be reminded of those days."

Things German do not clutter the house. Many of their old books — leather-bound versions of Goethe and Thomas Mann — they gave to their grandson when he was learning German in school. He wrote them letters in the mother tongue, but they answered in English. Ethnic pride, such a fashionable thing for others, is a peculiar idea to Max and Alice:

They'd rather just be thought of as Americans.

"Americans are by and large pretty nice," Alice says. "The bad Germans I know are about the most God-awful people I can imagine."

With a single stroke, Max and Alice would like to do away with the first 30 years of their lives. They have no use for what they were and for that part of their past that is inextricably bound to the Holocaust. They still feel shame that they did not do more to stop Hitler's ascension to power, even though to have done so would have placed them in extreme danger.

"SHOULD I HAVE stayed?" Max asks. "Would it have been nobler for me to remain and throw a few bricks through windows and end up getting shot?"

His daughter corrects him. "You don't want to be a martyr."

"Well. . . ." He changes the subject.

In fact, Max ceaselessly changes the subject in conversation, no matter what the topic. The change of subject is a metaphor for his life. He will talk of the early years briefly, but soon the subject changes to American politics, which he follows closely, or times in Los Angeles or New Haven, Conn., where he worked when first settling in this country, when he made the one great change of his life — from being German to being American.

That's all Max and Alice want to be in their last few years: Americans. They know as well as anyone what social and political freedom are all about. They know the value of freedom of speech and justice for all far better than most Americans.

What they do not know is what it means to have a home.