

THE CAMPS ■ HANK QUESTIONS A GERMAN OFFICER

Born in a Polish village in 1925, Hank Brodt was 16 when the Nazis occupied his region in 1941. He endured forced labor and the brutality of several concentration camps before liberation in May 1945. He recounts this interchange with a Nazi officer while in the Melk labor camp.

One day, a German officer stopped me to ask a question. I immediately took off my hat, my eyes cast down.

“Who are you?” he asked me.

“I am a Polish Jew,” I replied.

“Where were you born?”

“I was born in Poland.”

“So, you are Polish?” he said.

“No, sir, I am a Polish Jew.”

We went back and forth like this for a while, and I could feel my ire building, though I was, of course, careful to maintain my composure. Finally, I asked him if I could ask him a question of my own.

To this he responded angrily, “How dare you ask a question of a German officer of the Third Reich!” Nevertheless, he granted me a question.

I tried to choose my words carefully, but there was something I had been longing to understand from the beginning of this ordeal, and I saw this as a chance to articulate the essential question. “I am Polish,” I said. “I have committed no crime other than being Jewish. Why am I here?”

There it was, at last. Out of my heart, out of my mouth, and into the open. Why was I here? Why were any of us here? Why was this happening to us?

There was an awkward silence, and then a moment passed between us. The officer turned and walked away without uttering a single word.

I considered this a triumph, and I knew that this brief conversation was enough to get me killed. Maybe it was my imagination, but I like to think that he had some internal struggle with what Germany was doing, and his part in that cause.

I came to realize that not all Germans were Nazis. People were afraid. A German soldier never knew who was around him. Who was a true follower? Who swore allegiance to Hitler? Perhaps that German officer believed the propaganda, perhaps not. However, for the length of a conversation, this German officer was perhaps trying to make sense of the insanity in his own way.



In 1953, Hank testified in the war crimes trial of Fritz Hildebrand, the SS commander of one forced labor camp that Hank had endured. Hildebrand was sentenced to eight years and released after two years. With new evidence, Hildebrand was tried again in 1967 and, with the testimony of Hank and others, was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Hank's mother and sister were murdered by the Nazis (his father had died when Hank was an infant). His brother had been drafted into the Soviet army, survived the war, and lived in the Soviet Union and Israel until his death in 1986. Hank was unable to locate him until 2007, when his daughter made contact with his brother's family in Israel through JewishGen Family Finder. Hank immediately visited his brother's family and honored his brother at his grave.

Hank emigrated to the United States in 1949 with the help of an American soldier he met after being liberated. Drafted into the army during the Korean War, he served in Germany for two years (1950-1952), where he married his wife Kathe (whom he had met soon after liberation). They settled in New Jersey and raised their two daughters. In 2005 Hank moved with his second wife Aida (Kathe had died in 1978) to High Point, North Carolina. He has two grandchildren. With his daughter, Hank wrote his memoir, *A Candle and a Promise*, in 2016. He continues to speak to audiences about his Holocaust experience.

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Oral testimony of Hank Brodt, 2006 (1½ hrs., U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum)
collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn126323
- Presentation of Hank Brodt, High Point University, NC, 2015 (1 hr. 13 min., HPU: YouTube) youtu.be/k73HYDPWtbY

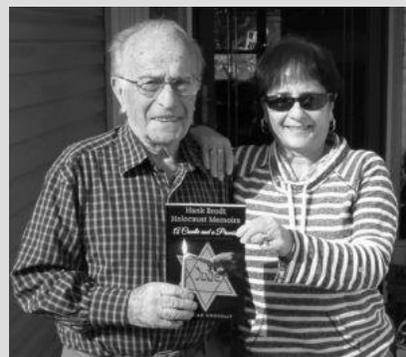
"Conversation with a German Officer," ch. 23 in Deborah Donnelly, *Hank Brodt Holocaust Memoirs: A Candle and a Promise*, The Netherlands: Amsterdam Publishers, 2016, amsterdampublishers.com/books/candle-and-a-promise/. Reproduced by permission of Amsterdam Publishers. 1945 photograph from the U.S. Natl. Archives in the public domain; access courtesy of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Family photographs reproduced by permission of Deborah Donnelly.



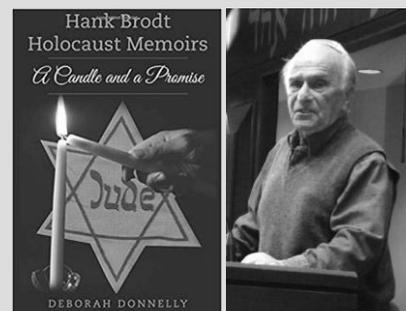
Hank and Kathe Brodt on their marriage in Germany, August 1952



Hank speaks with a North Carolina teacher at a Holocaust workshop, 2010.



Hank with his daughter, Deborah Donnelly, with whom he wrote his memoir



The yellow star with "Jude" (Jew) on the cover of Hank's memoir is the one worn by his wife's mother in then Czechoslovakia.