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Hiltgunt Zassenhaus

## War is the destruction of the human soul

Editor's Note: In the Sun Magazine of this past Sunday, an article by Patrick Ercolano described the exploits of Dr. Hiltgunt Zassenhaus, now a Baltimore resident who, as a Nazi functionary, risked her life to aid prisoners of the Germans during World War II. During the past summer Maryland Public Television broadcast a documentary on Zassenhaus, made in Britain in 1980. The Baltimore showing of the documentary was followed by a live interview of Zassenhaus by Stephen H. Kimatian, executive director of the Maryland Center for Public Broadcasting. Following is a transcript of the interview.

**Kimatian:** We're here with Dr. Hiltgunt Zassenhaus, a Baltimore physician and author of the book "Walls." Dr. Zassenhaus was knighted by three countries for her efforts during the Second World War, and she was also a nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1974.

**Dr. Zassenhaus:** how do we prevent such a tragic occurrence as happened in World War II?

**Zassenhaus:** Some time ago, a 10-year-old boy asked me, "Dr. Zassenhaus, do you think Hitler is really dead? My dad says he's still alive. What do you think?" I looked at him and wondered whether I could give him the answer I wanted to give. Then he said, "Oh, I know what you wanted to say. As long as Hitler is alive in our minds that is what counts." I had hope. I thought: a 10-year-old boy can tell us that, and yet how much still can be seen around us of Hitler. He comes in many shapes and forms; he is a man who built walls, the walls of the mind and the heart, the walls of prejudice, the walls of hate, and most of all, the walls of indifference.

You see, all this could happen in Germany. That was not really because there were that many evil persons. Yes, there were many evil people, but there were many, many more indifferent people, who turned their heads aside, who didn't want to hear or know what was happening, as long as their own interests were not at stake.

**Kimatian:** How do you change that indifference, then? How do you take down the barriers and the walls?

**Zassenhaus:** Steve, that is just the problem of today because the cold war really is going on still. Hitler's defeat really did not resolve the issue, even though he was beaten. The main problem is how to live peacefully with each other and how to come close to this country and change it.

I think the parents should be much more role models for their children. You cannot preach; you have to give examples of how to live with each other. You see, our way of life now, the people take it very lightheartedly. The fact that they are free people, that they can vote — they take that very lightheartedly. If there are 52 percent who come to vote, that is wonderful, but that is not enough.

I think violence in this country is a way of life. We take our country very much for granted even while continuously talking about nuclear warfare. That bothers me the most, because in the last wars millions and millions of people died, but this time, if we really would get a nuclear war, it would mean the end of our globe. It would mean the end of human life. We would return to nothingness and it bothers me that so many people just block out this possibility and do not even want to hear about it.

**Kimatian:** How do you get the message across then? How do you convince people to think otherwise?

**Zassenhaus:** Many people just do not want to listen. We have to tell them over and over. I have been in the war, I'm one of the last survivors who has seen what war really means. If you have been there then you will know that this is not only destruction of people and lives but also of the human soul. It's the end and we cannot repeat this.

It bothers me greatly that people will not understand that you cannot leave the solution to governments. As a physician, in



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my daily work, I everyday sense the problems — of life. I see how important it is that you learn reverence for life.

**Kimatian:** And where does that come about, though. As you said, with the parents?

**Zassenhaus:** I think it comes by the good example — that parents should realize, that we all must understand — that nurturing life that means the real life, we must understand the priority is to live and not to think and speculate about how we can destroy each other. Our hope must be that we can find somehow a peaceful coexistence.

We have to see... what genocide really meant. Six million people were killed in the Holocaust and even many, many more. This time, with nuclear war, our own lives are at stake, yours and mine, if you would only understand that. Then we will come to the idea that war never can be the answer.

**Kimatian:** But then what do you do if defenses must be built to prevent war? You don't agree with that?

**Zassenhaus:** I don't agree with that because whether we have one nuclear bomb or 30,000 nuclear bombs, we do not understand the technique of it or the high technology of nuclear warfare. One is really enough.

**Kimatian:** Well then what will prevent war?

**Zassenhaus:** What we must do is change our attitudes.

**Kimatian:** How do you change attitudes?

**Zassenhaus:** To begin really to understand we must learn to respect each other's opinion; we must learn to live with each other.

**Kimatian:** How do you learn that?

**Zassenhaus:** We must teach our children. We must give them examples, how we can tolerate each other. We must teach more humanism in schools. You must understand that it is not only enough to know technology but also to master it. If we do not begin to master technology, if we do not close the gap in our minds between understanding what modern warfare or high technology means and what it means to be a human being, then God help us all.

**Kimatian:** You place a lot of emphasis on the responsibility of parents. What do you do when the family unit is in many ways disintegrating?

**Zassenhaus:** That is right. The modern structure is falling apart — the family structure. And this is what we have to rebuild. We have to do this ourselves. We cannot leave it to governments.

**Kimatian:** Dr. Zassenhaus, what would be the one message that you would give to our viewers?

**Zassenhaus:** I would say we should really live as the Bible says so beautifully: Do not do unto others what you do not want to be done to yourself.