

'Life is what you put into it'

By JOHN DORSEY

Dr. Hiltgunt Zassenhaus is a slim, capable-looking woman with a slightly crooked smile which never quite disappears, even when she is talking about what it was like to live in Nazi Germany, and a touching, convincing faith in human possibilities even though she realizes most people never bother to explore them. One of the principal reasons she has been teaching a course in human growth at Roland Park Country School for three years is because, as she says, "So few people know what to do with their lives.

"Most people don't want to grow and develop. They stop living at 19 or 21 and they never realize how much they punish themselves. That is the true poverty of life. People say that they are manipulated, that they have no control over their lives, that technology is making numbers of us all. I think that is nonsense, a very superficial excuse for not developing a set of values for ourselves and learning to live according to our own convictions. SUN

"In the course I like to have response from people. And when I say things like that some man will say, 'Well, that is all right for you, you are a physician, you can do as you like, but I work for a company, I have to do what I'm told. I have no freedom.' SEP 25 1977

"And I say no. You are still free to live by your own convictions, freer than people have ever been. As little as a century ago there was a thin veneer of the fortunate and everyone else was poor. There were no public libraries, very few people got an education, the only source of ideas for most people was the church and that was dogma.

The enemies of life

"Today all of this has changed — no, not for everybody but for many, many people, in this country and in Europe and other places, too. People have more access to books, they have more opportunity for education, and technology is not a hindrance to freedom, it is a help. The possibilities of life have expanded almost infinitely within living memory, until today it seems that we have before us a huge table piled with Christmas presents, if we would only open them. And so few people do.

"The worst enemies of life are indifference and prejudice. They are the things that block life and overcome our ability to see, feel and sense what is around us. They are the things that brought Hitler to power, and they are what prevent us from seeing the basic good in every human being. My feelings are that the real borders in life are not those between cities, nations, religions or races but those that attitudes create. SUN

"If we could only learn to care for people and show we care in our daily actions. This matters. If we could only learn to see ourselves in the context of the universe, instead of as the centerpiece around which all else must revolve. SEP 25 1977

"We must learn that there is nothing wrong with the world. What is wrong with the world is all our own actions. And not just the actions of leaders and lawmakers. I truly believe that history is made by the individual, that what we are and what we do is reflected in what our leaders do and in what happens to the world.

"That is what I mean by seeing ourselves in the context of the universe. The United States has a great opportunity to put the priorities of the human being above such priorities as going to the moon and bringing back a handful of dust — and to export, not just by talking but by example, the concept of human rights instead of exporting weapons and war.

Conviction adds force

"If we do the wrong things, if our priorities are the wrong ones, it is partly because the individual father comes home at night and sits in front of the television set instead of talking to his children and taking them on a picnic and to the museum and trying to give them a set of values for the future, trying to teach them that happiness comes from inside not from outside, that life owes us nothing but we owe life a great deal. SUN

"The course at Roland Park is named 'Life — What's in It for Me?: The Dynamics and Fallacies of Human Growth' and one of my points is that what's in life is what you put into it and not what you can get out of it." SEP 25 1977

Dr. Zassenhaus talks just like that, a mile a minute, and if some of the things she has to say read like the trite truisms of a Pollyanna, that is only because they are presented without the depth of conviction and force of intelligence her own presence adds. No one has a better right to such convictions than Dr. Zassenhaus, who is one of the few heroes of our time. Thanks to her book, "Walls," published in 1974 (and just out in Beacon paperback), an increasing number of people all over the world know of her career of resistance to the Third Reich during World War II, when at great personal peril she gave aid and comfort to hundreds upon hundreds of Norwegians in German prison camps and finally helped save more than 1,200 of them from death. She has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for her work. SEP 25 1977

Fewer know that after the war, in a period when she herself was near starvation and when there was great hatred of Germany throughout Europe and not excluding Scandinavia, she yet managed to es-

tablish a series of homes for German orphans of the war and persuaded Scandinavians, many of whom she had aided, to contribute to these homes, thus providing the first opportunity for turning hatred into friendship.

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Not many know that she was the first German to be allowed into Scandinavia after World War II, that she had to be smuggled across the border into Denmark in a fish truck, that the Danish parliament had to pass a special law allowing her to immigrate and providing her with a passport because there was a prohibition against Germans in Denmark. She went there in 1947 and completed her medical education in Copenhagen five years later.

In was the same year, 1952, that she came to the United States. Not many know that she came to this country half because she was such a celebrity in Scandinavia that she felt if she continued to live there she could never be sure whether her accomplishments were genuine or were being handed to her because of her past. If almost anybody else said that it would be possible to shrug it off as so much posturing, but Dr. Zassenhaus doesn't posture.

She lived quietly in Baltimore as a physician for 20 years, until her horror over the Vietnam war and her admiration for those speaking out against it — especially the young people — led her to write "Walls" to "show what one small, insignificant person can do. To show how much difference the individual can make when it is possible to rise above one's own needs and help — and to show that when I needed help in my work it came to me in ways that cannot be explained on a rational basis, but that it really was this way."

It was to try and show how the values by which she has lived can be of universal use, not just in times of upheaval and misery but to the individual in his everyday life, that Dr. Zassenhaus began teaching her course in what she calls human ethics at Roland Park. It is open to the public as one of Roland Park's seven fall term evening school courses, it begins on October 4, and if the past is any prologue it will be enormously popular. Planning for 30 people, Dr. Zassenhaus found herself confronted by 70 the first year and 105 the second. SEP 25 1977

The course is actually taught by three people, each of whom gives two lectures with all three participating in panel discussions at the beginning and end. It might best be described as a course designed to make the individual grow up, realize his potential and learn how to live with others. The other teachers are Dr. William A. Richards, a psychologist who has specialized in the field of death and dying, and the Rev. Joseph Gallagher, a teacher, poet and Catholic priest. SUN

"Bill Richards," Dr. Zassenhaus says, "approaches human development from the point of view of psychology; Joe Gallagher approaches it from a religious point of view; and I — well, it is a pretentious word but I suppose I would have to say I approach it from the humanitarian point of view.

Living on in touched lives

"I am not a religious person. I do not go to church in order to secure for myself a little place Up There. I believe in God as the guiding force behind the universe but I do not know whether there is an afterlife in the traditional religious sense. Of course I believe that it could be possible — the first time I saw a drop of water under a microscope I discovered a whole new world that I could not see with my eyes or perceive with my mind and heart, and so why not another whole world of which we are also not conscious? But for me that is not the most important question, because for me, heaven, if there is such a thing, must be here.

"I believe in an afterlife in the sense that I believe nothing dies, ever. My parents live on in me and I will live on in the people whose lives I have touched and so on in an ever-widening circle. I believe that nothing is added to the universe and nothing is taken away. When our bodies are put in the ground and become dust we still live, always, somewhere, in the lives that we have touched and the lives that those lives are touching, will touch.

"That is why I believe that what we do, how we lead our lives, our values and the way we translate them into all of our relationships is terribly important not only for ourselves but far beyond ourselves. That is why I believe that the right time and place to begin to realize our unlimited potential is right now, right here, today, this minute. That is what the course is all about."

Dr. Hiligant Zassenhaus, the Rev. Joseph Gallagher and Dr. William Richards.

