BEYOND WALLS

Zassenhaus still fights Nazi tactics

By Gerri Kobren

It was early, she remembers, 8:30 in the morning on an April day in 1980 at Gilman School. JAN 31 1983

"I look out in the audience," she says, "and I see some of them are like this."

Margret Zassenhaus—Dr. Hiltgunt Margret Zassenhaus—flops back in her chair, yawns, drops her head toward her right shoulder, and becomes, for the moment, a snoozing high-school student. SUN

She straightens.

"So I point at a boy in the third row, and I say, 'You there, you in the red sweater, yes, I mean you, I don't like what you are wearing. Come up here on the stage!' The headmaster and the teachers are half out of their chairs, they think I have gone crazy. Then I say it again, 'You, in the red sweater in the eighth row, I don't like what you are wearing either, and you with the red sweater in the tenth row! Come up here!"

She projects authority, this small, 60-ish physician with the quick smile. People who know her history of opposition to the Nazis "expect I am going to look like Brunhilde," she's found. She laughs, dismissing any equation between moral strength and physical stature, and then, completely serious, also dismisses any suggestion that power is perceived in the unmistakable Germanic accent that still clings to her speech after nearly 30 years in Baltimore. It would be the kind of arbitrary labeling she has been fighting for most of her life. JAN 31 1983

So then it must be her intensity that grabs people's attention. SUN

She is committed—she says it over and over again—to life, to serving and preserving life.

"It is a *privilege* that I am a physician, that I can *do* something, that I have every day the occasion and possibility of serving life," she repeats. For her the decision to serve through medicine came during the Hitler years, when she had already graduated from the University of Hamburg with a degree in Scandinavian languages and had to squeeze classes in science into a schedule of official duties to the Reich and clandestine activities in behalf of its prisoners. JAN 31 1983

"I think we all, deep within ourselves, have something that tells us right from wrong," she says. "But it gets numbed by the voices of destruction at all levels, by the talk of nuclear war and recession. Fantastic murders, violence, rapes and robberies are written about in the paper; what do we hear about good things in everyday life? I think we have to expose people to the fact that there are options."

She is at home now, in Towson. Her sleek Danish furnishings reflect her love of that tiny country north of her native Hamburg; the little flags of Maryland and Denmark are marks of respect for the places she had been happiest. Her attention to unself-conscious beauty appears in the American Indian wall-hangings. Love of a different sort stands out in the tiny statue of St. Francis on the dining room buffet, and in the framed poster, in her living room, with the words from First Corinthians: "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." JAN 31 1983

In the here and now she is so intense on these points, so earnest, that you can picture her as she must have been 40 years ago in Germany—a mere slip of a girl who defied the Gestapo even as she marched through their offices with her gun in her pocket, officially a servant of the Third Reich's Department of Justice, unofficially the guardian angel of 1,200 political prisoners from the Scandinavian countries. SUN

The Gilman boys at that April assembly must have felt her insistence, too: they did as she ordered. The red-sweatered pariahs lined up in front of her, while she berated them for the inner decadence revealed by their choice of clothing. They were such a disagreeable lot, she told them, she doubted very seriously that any of them had any friends, but if such there were in the audience she would be willing to hear some statement in their behalf.

There were few offers. Perhaps, as Redmond Finney, headmaster at Gilman, believes, the tension had left the situation as the boys recognized the points she was making about arbitrary discrimination against the few and the inertia or embarrassment of the many.

She recalls their attentiveness. No one was napping any more. "I had them in my hand," she remembers. "And then I said to them, 'OK, boys, you can sit down now.' And I said to the others, 'That's the way it was,' "

And is. In her speaking engagements in general, in the talk she will be giving at the Meeting House in Oakland Mills Village in Columbia at 8 p.m. Wednesday, Dr. Zassenhaus stresses the importance of personal commitment to truth and honor and ethical purpose, and the absolute necessity that individuals take upon themselves the obligation to fight back the darkness. SUN

"I learned in my life that really, most of the time, you should ask what should you do yourself. We should expect something of ourselves. We believe too much in what organizations can do, and not what individuals can do." JAN 31 1983

Dr. Zassenhaus grew up in Hamburg, Germany. Her father, a historian and educator, was forced out of his job in the early 1930s because of his moral objections to the New Order; at the same time he began the long dying of Parkinson's disease, which was still untreatable at the time. Her mother somehow held the family together, the teenage Hiltgunt and her three brothers; at the same time she was helping Jewish friends flee the country.

From the beginning, young Hiltgunt followed her parents' example: she would not give the Nazi salute. She would not shout "Heil Hitler." When, with her expertise in Scandinavian languages, she was assigned as postal censor, she refused to stop the pitiful letters to Denmark and Sweden from Polish Jews, asking for food; instead, she added her pleas for urgency, and hand-carried this now-private mail to a friendly ship's captain who took them on to their destination. JAN 31 1983

For most of the war years, however, her work was more direct. Ordered to monitor all meetings of the Scandinavian chaplain with political prisoners, she encouraged prayer instead of preventing it; she brought messages of hope and love, as dangerous a contraband as the bread and vitamins she also smuggled in.

When her prisoners were moved, she tracked them down; she kept her own records of their whereabouts. Near the war's end the message came down that all political prisoners would be executed; forewarned, the Swedish government was able to negotiate their release. The Zassenhaus list allowed the rescue of men who had been scattered in prisons throughout the country. SUN

Almost unmasked by informers and Gestapo watchdogs a number of times, she herself may well have been saved by the Allied bombing of Dresden in 1945. Arrest had been threatened when her activities came to light at an institution near the ancient city, but the orders were apparently lost or forgotten in the general chaos.

The story is told in her own book, "Walls," published in 1974, reiterated in a more recent documentary film produced in England and broadcast in Europe, attested to by the documents and medals on her living-room wall, the knighthoods conferred by the governments of Norway and Denmark, and West Germany's highest civilian decoration. In 1974, the government of Norway also nominated her for the Nobel Peace Prize. SUN

"There are relatively few really evil people in the world," she believes. "But the broad masses let it happen." JAN 31 1983

The Zassenhauses were not the only Germans who defied the Nazis, but the fact remains that the broad masses of her countrymen let the

madness happen there, and she could not make her native land her permanent home. At war's end she was invited to study in Denmark. She graduated in 1952 from the medical school of the University of Copenhagen.

But she could not stay there either. "They saw me still as I was in the war. I felt I needed a new start, so I could build something without building on the old role," she remembers. A chance encounter with a professor of physiology from the University of Maryland impelled her to come to Baltimore. She began her residency in internal medicine at City Hospitals as Senator Joseph McCarthy was escalating his own brand of witch-hunting in America. The madness, she realized, could have its seeds anywhere.

So she does the speeches. "People say to me, 'Why do you bother?' It is because I am one of the last survivors. I want people to know what the alternatives can be if we don't watch out. One step can lead to the next.

"Students say, 'But you were at the right time and the right place. What can we do?' "

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At Gilman, she showed them.

"They say to me, 'How did you know Hitler wasn't right?' I say, 'I think we all, deep within ourselves, have something that tells us right from wrong.' For me, as a child, my mother read to us from Albert Schweitzer. She taught us reverence for life, for serving life. If you grow up hearing that, you couldn't be for a man who wanted to kill people."

She worries that children do not learn that reverence today. A free press publicizes crime and violence; why, she asks, aren't the good things in the news, too?

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Freedom of religion is, for some, freedom from religion. What happens in the ethical development of those without moral instruction? "In this country," she points out, "the teaching of ethics falls between the cracks."

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She would therefore emphasize the subject in the public schools. "It is important that from the first grade we expose children to what is right and wrong," she maintains.

She is also a proponent of nuclear-arms control, though she is not opposed to nuclear power per se. Our dilemma, as she sees it, is, "How can we use nuclear power to serve life?" rather than "How can we package it for global annihilation?"

A visit to the Maryland Penitentiary to give a speech turned her into an advocate of prison reform as well. "I felt ashamed," she says, shuddering at conditions she likens to "Dante's Hell. If a person is an animal when he goes in, he is a monster when he comes out."

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A victim of a robbery in her own office, Dr. Zassenhaus maintains she is "not one of these 'goody brothers' who say, 'Let them all out.' " On the other hand, she would like to see real efforts at rehabilitation, and has suggested, in a letter to the governor, turning the prisons into self-supporting institutions where inmates learn and then labor at the necessary occupations.

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Besides all that, she serves on the Maryland Committee for the Humanities, the volunteer board that funnels federal monies into local projects in literature, history, philosophy, languages and related disciplines. She is also on the board of directors of the Baltimore Federal Savings and Loan Association, and of the Baltimore Actors Theatre. She is especially devoted to the work of the associated drama school in emphasizing the creative abilities of children.

"So little of our potential is tapped," she says. "You don't have to be Joan of Arc. History is really made of all the little things we do everyday. It is very comfortable to look at someone and say, 'She was a hero.' But there are no heroes. There are only people who do good deeds."

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Dr. Zassenhaus's speech, a part of the Distinguished Speakers of Columbia series, begins at 8 p.m. Wednesday, February 2. Tickets, at $6 for adults and $4.50 for students and senior citizens, may be purchased at the door. For more information, call 730-3804 in Columbia.

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MARGRET ZASSENHAUS