MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

Now Show Me the Opposite: *Ilona Kuphal, the daughter of a Nazi, can't – and won't – forget all the voices inside her. Also, a conversation with playwright Jon Lipsky, a Jew, who many years after WWII, visited Dachau with Ilona*

TONY KAHN:
Hi, Everybody. This is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories* from WGBH in Boston. And welcome to our 100th podcast. For almost two years now we have been bringing you stories of extraordinary moments in people's lives that hopefully remind us of what it's like to be the other guy. And time and again you've written us to say that it *does* work that way for you, that no matter how different the storyteller might seem to *you*, something he or she has said has touched a kindred chord. Seeing what's human in ourselves and others, though, is only half the story. Sometimes we also have to acknowledge the *in*human side of us, the dark part. So maybe it's fitting that today's storyteller is someone who has been looking hard for both the good and the bad in herself most of her life. Her name is Ilona Kuphal and we call her story, *Now, Show Me the Opposite*. It's deeply personal, I promise you, in maybe the biggest sense of all. It touches on one of those historical periods where the darkness nearly overcame the world.

ILONA KUPHAL:
When I found out about the Holocaust I was fifteen years old. I saw this picture of this little girl and her brother. This little girl, you know, was kind of holding her brother -- I mean I still feel like crying now – and incredible forlorn ,ah, in her eyes. Scared, forlorn.

[train car door slides shut]

And she was on the transport.

[Train sounds begin]

It's like this was like beyond belief, for me. I couldn't forget that. Everybody said, you know, "Why are <u>you</u> even thinking about it? You weren't even born then; so just forget about it." But I couldn't. I couldn't forget that. And whenever I asked him, my father would go, "You don't understand anything." And he would blow up. I could not reach him. And my mother would be very mad at me, too, because she said it Oh, it was like I was hating Germany.

[Sounds of train ceases]

When I first came to this country, I was twenty-one, twenty-two. I rejected Germany. When I saw somebody, you know, a German, heard German on the street, I would go to the other side. I was at NYU School of the Arts in Drama and a professor had us create a character, and then we had to do some improvs and so on, so I created Olga, who was a

resistance fighter. So she was in Berlin and she was smuggling arms and helping Jewish people to escape and all of that. And my professor said, "Very good. Looks good. Now I want to see the opposite. I want to see the opposite."

[Cello music]
And so I created Helga, and Helga was a Nazi. Married to a Nazi and a believer. And what I realized was I could play her just as well as I could play Olga. I have Olga and I have Helga. I have to acknowledge that. I have to see it inside of me.

Yes. My father was a Nazi, an officer in the Waffen SS. Yeah. And my grandfather was an official in the Nazi party. Yes. I felt sometimes like I had this ton of guilt on my shoulders. It was like *so* heavy, you know. For a long time I hated my father. I mean I remember being eighteen and feeling like, "I hate him *so* much, so much." What I wanted was to reach out to the other side, to the children of survivors. I realized that we had something in common. Although our experiences had been very different, the shadow of the Holocaust was, you know, hanging over both of us. You know, it's not just black and white. And once, once I was able to see that, I could take a kind of a step back and see more clearly and even talk about the unspeakables, about the love I also felt for my father.

He died of cancer and my mother told me that the last few weeks, he was thinking about it a lot and it was very painful. That there had been some things that he felt very, very guilty about, and that he was just, at the end, you know, just really in it, the enormity of it all. Yeah. What I would have wished, I think, is for him to perhaps cry about it himself. I think...hmmm...in some ways, as Olga, I protected myself very much. I was an ideal person. It was like, it's all good. In some ways, Helga was more real, insofar as she was more honest about her feelings at times. I mean, Helga was not all evil and Olga wasn't all good. You would hope that both had gone the journey of starting to see that what they were doing was not being connected.

I think my, my granddaughter is helping me a lot with that. I can be open and loving with her without fear. I just love her so much that I want to be connected with her all the time. Hmmm. It's been a long, long, long journey to, to being a real human being.

[Sound of train wheels on track]

TONY KAHN:
That was Ilona Kuphal with today's 100th *Morning Story* podcast, *Now Show Me the Opposite*. Ilona has devoted much of her life to an organization called "One by One," encouraging dialog between people of seemingly irreconcilably opposite sides in world conflicts. She continues to have an influence on all sorts of people including a person that I called up just the other day. His name is Jon Lipsky. He has a story of his own to tell about an unforgettable moment with Ilona.

JON LIPSKY:
I don't remember exactly when I learned that Ilona's father had been in the SS, but I

remember one summer when we found ourselves in Europe together. We went to Dachau together. I had never been to a concentration camp and neither had she, as far as I know. We arrived at Dachau and outside the camp were ordinary houses and it gave me a sense that ordinary people lived there now and ordinary people lived there then and life was just going on while this concentration camp burned! So, sort of the ordinariness was very weird to me. I had a feeling then, and I can recreate it now, almost a bodily sensation that we were children, that the generations who had gone before were hovering over us. The weight of time, of the generations that had gone before were sort of dissolving in us and that the war was over and we could start coming out of the rubble. So for her to show up with me, a Jew, in the concentration camp was like sort of rolling back the clock and saying "You know, we really have to talk about these things."

To tell you the truth, the Holocaust was not my favorite thing to look at. This is really the first time that *I* was forced to look at it and I can't tell you how moving it was to be there with someone who I could feel, we were making some sort of repair.

TONY KAHN:
Repair.

JON LIPSKY:
That we were able to come together was ...IS... a kind of hopeful statement that even one generation past, people could not only look one another in the eye, but care for one another. And I find that, you know, very hopeful for other situations that are going on as we speak, where people *hate* one another right now and yet in one generation you can hope, at least, they could be standing on battlefields or on places of enormous, grotesque catastrophe and look at one another with affection.

TONY KAHN:
Thanks a lot.

JON LIPSKY:
We'll talk again soon.

TONY KAHN:
OK, Jon. Take care.

JON LIPSKY:
Bye-bye.

TONY KAHN:
'Bye.

[Piano music begins]

That's it for today's podcast. As always I'm here with Gary Mott and let me just express my appreciation to Ipswitch, a leader in file transfer software and our sponsor for nearly

two years now of podcasting. <ipswitch.com> Check ‘em out.

GARY MOTT:
Check ‘em out and then check us out: <wgbh.org/morningstories> and get in touch, please: morningstories@wgbh.org. Tony? Thanks a lot.

TONY KAHN:
Thank you, Gar. See you next Friday.

[Piano music ends.]

[End of Recording]

Transcribed by Bev Sykes